

# 120 years of friendship

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In January 1899, as the European powers, Russia and the Ottomans competed to expand their empires, Kuwait's ruler, Mubarak the Great, discreetly signed an agreement with Britain laying the basis for a relationship that would help both nations withstand future global and regional conflicts. 120 years later Kuwait and the United Kingdom continue to enjoy very close and friendly relations.

Kuwait and Britain were already long-standing allies, thanks to the efforts of the East India Company, which in the mid 17th century had established a presence throughout the Arabian Gulf to help Britain protect its maritime lines of communications from India. In 1775, recognising Kuwait's wish to remain entirely independent of the Ottoman empire, the East India Company negotiated a deal to route British mail through the port of Kuwait.

The British had helped to stop piracy endangering sea trade in the Arabian Gulf, but could not do much to deter Turkish incursions, until a crucial figure in

Kuwait's modern history stepped forward. Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah, known as Mubarak the Great, had led a palace coup in 1896, in response to concerns that his brother was about to let the Ottomans appropriate Kuwait.

Initially fearful of diplomatic problems with other powers, Britain's then Foreign Secretary, Lord Salisbury, became convinced that influence over Kuwait would be necessary to thwart Russian and German expansionist intentions in the region.

Colonel M.J. Meade, Britain's political representative in the Gulf, was asked to conclude an agreement based on the treaty he had negotiated with the Sultan of Muscat in 1891. Meade and Mubarak concluded the agreement on January 23, 1899. The Sheikh, for a consideration of £1,000, bound "*himself, his heirs and successors not to cede, sell, lease, mortgage, or give for occupation or for any other purpose any portion of his territory to the government or subjects of any other power without the previous consent of Her Majesty's Government for these purposes.*"

Lord Curzon had been appointed Viceroy of India three weeks before the treaty signing in 1899. In the following years, based in his palace in Calcutta, he implemented a policy that treated the Arabian Gulf States in much the same way as the Indian princely States. This approach, symbolised by his State Tour of the Gulf in 1903, did much to consolidate and strengthen Britain's position in the region.

## The creation of a modern state

Until his death in 1915, Mubarak would lay the foundations for a modern state in Kuwait. Government welfare programmes provided for public schools and medical services, along with postal and telegraphic services. Estimates put the population of Kuwait City at around 50,000 people at this time, with 3,000 permanent residents, 500 shops and three schools, while the economy depended heavily on the 700 strong fleet of pearling boats, employing 10,000 men.

When Mubarak died in 1915, he was replaced by his son Jaber. When Jaber, in turn, died in 1917, Salem became ruler. On Salem's death in 1921, Sheikh Ahmad al Jaber assumed the leadership and ruled until his death in 1950. This was an important period of stability and prosperity amid Kuwait's tumultuous 20th century history.

Kuwait would remain a British protectorate until



This page: Lord Curzon, as Viceroy of India (1899-1905) was a signatory to the Friendship Agreement

Opposite: A copy of the Friendship Agreement

full independence in 1961, giving Britain substantial influence over Kuwait's economic and international affairs. In 1909, Britain obtained Sheikh Mubarak's agreement that he would offer no oil exploration concessions to anyone without prior approval from the government of Great Britain.

In 1913, Britain negotiated the *Anglo-Ottoman Convention* with Constantinople, extending Sheikh Mubarak's authority over the major Kuwaiti islands of Bubiyan, Faylakha, and Warbah. Mubarak could collect tariffs and taxes within a 60-mile radius, a considerable financial advantage to the Al-Sabah fortunes. Moreover, Kuwait's status as an *autonomous district* under Ottoman *suzerainty* meant that the Ottomans would not interfere in Kuwait's affairs.

A year later, in 1914, Britain moved to seal its relationship with Kuwait, recognising Kuwait as "*an independent government under British protection.*"

Even when the Ottoman Empire sided with Germany in late 1914, Mubarak remained pro-British during the First World War and made generous donations to the British Red Cross. Kuwait also provided logistical support to British forces operating in Iraq, while providing protection to British hospital ships.

However, when Jaber II took over following the death of his father in November 1915, he increased the caravan trade from Kuwait to Syria, helping break the British blockade on Turkish forces in the eastern Mediterranean.

Salem's concern when he became Sheikh in 1917 was focused on the claims of Arabia's de facto ruler, Ibn Saud regarding Kuwaiti territory. London was supporting the Saudis' anti-Ottoman campaign and Salem feared the British would back Ibn Saud if Kuwait did not distance itself from the Turks.

In the event, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire meant the *Anglo-Ottoman Convention* was never ratified. However, when the new Kingdom of Iraq rose from the Mesopotamian ashes of the fallen Ottoman Empire, disputes over Kuwait's borders were not long in emerging and required definition.

With the war over, Britain recognised Kuwait as an independent Sheikdom, reiterating its commitment to Kuwait's national defence. The first need to protect Kuwait came in 1919 as Ibn Saud tried to consolidate control of the Arabian Peninsula using the ikhwan (brotherhood), fearsome Bedouin warriors from the Najd, the interior of Arabia.

After a number of low level incursions, in September 1920 Ibn Saud claimed that Salem's authority was limited to Kuwait City. The following month, Ibn Saud sent his Ikhwan warriors to conquer Kuwait, but they were stopped at the Red Fort, some 35 miles west of Kuwait City. There, Salem dug in for a siege. The British sent in a detachment of Royal Marines backed by British warships and the siege was soon lifted, with

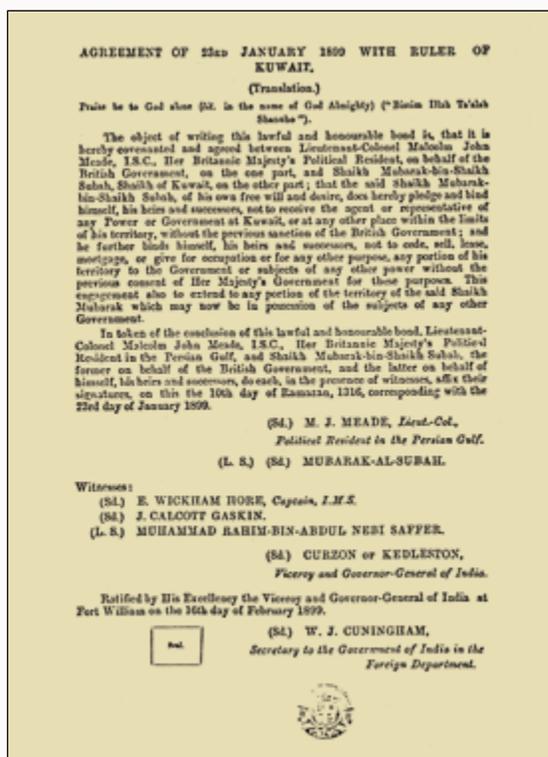
the Ikhwan withdrawing from Kuwaiti territory.

Britain decided to convene talks on the boundaries of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the newly created Kingdom of Iraq. In November 1922, a meeting was held at Uqair, on Saudi Arabia's Gulf coast, some 300 miles south of Kuwait. The *Uqair Protocol* established the boundary between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Kuwait lost almost two-thirds of its territory to the Saudi ruler. It was a bitter pill, but the new Sheikh, Ahmad, had no option but to accept. The Kuwaitis understandably resented the delineation of their southern border, which was now more than a hundred miles closer to the capital city. However, at least the boundaries with Saudi Arabia were finally fixed and this treaty has governed Kuwaiti-Saudi Arabian foreign relations to the present day.

But it would take until 1923 for the British to accede to Sheikh Ahmad's request for Kuwait's border with Iraq to be defined in line with the *Anglo-Ottoman Convention*. Kuwait and Iraq formally accepted the British findings in August 1923, and again in 1927.

In 1932, Iraq became completely independent from post-Ottoman Turkey and applied for membership of the *League of Nations* based on its new boundaries, but while the issue was now closed for the Kuwaitis, later Iraqi leaders, including Saddam Hussein, would be unwilling to concede Iraq's claim to Kuwait, particularly after Kuwait began exploring the vast oil reserves.

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**The willingness of Kuwait's sheikhs to spend oil revenue wisely would shape Kuwaiti strategy for the rest of the century**

This page: The Late Sheikh Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah in front of a spitfire that Kuwait helped to purchase for the Royal Air Force during WW2

Opposite Left: Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and HM The Queen during the folklore concert held on the occasion of Her Majesty's visit to Kuwait in 1979

Opposite Right: The Late Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Sheikh Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, HM The Queen and the HRH Duke of Edinburgh in 1979

**Kuwait emerges as a global oil producer**

In the first years of the 20th century, Kuwait's economy depended largely on the pearl industry. However, the global depression of the 1920s and the advent of Japan's cultured pearl industry had a negative impact on the economy. But within a few years, Kuwait would enter a new era. In 1936, the first oil well was established by the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC), a British and US petroleum enterprise. Within two years, one of the largest deposits on the planet had been discovered.

The willingness of Kuwait's Sheikhs to spend oil revenue wisely would shape Kuwaiti strategy for the rest of the century. Additionally, the Al-Sabah family insisted on ever-greater Kuwaiti participation in the management of joint oil ventures, setting the stage for the nationalisation of all Kuwaiti oil production in 1976. By 1946, pipelines and other petroleum-handling facilities had been built and exports commenced in earnest. That year, 5.9 million barrels were produced, rising to 16 million barrels in 1947, and production continued to increase until 1972.

Offshore exploration and production was initially awarded to a number of smaller Western oil companies, which in turn fed royalties back into Kuwait's rapidly expanding treasury. In 1950, Abdullah III replaced Ahmad as Sheikh, ruling Kuwait until 1965. It would be his responsibility to prepare Kuwait for full independence, with oil revenue profits preparing the way for these significant developments.

By 1953, Kuwait was the largest oil producer in the Arabian Gulf, but a lack of water, electricity, and natural resources hampered development. Work began on port facilities for oil tankers, along with a modern

road network, power plants and distribution grids and desalination plants. Kuwait soon concluded that additional revenues could be created by refining its own oil, and in 1960 joined Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran and Venezuela in founding OPEC.

Kuwait's leaders also knew that the oil would not last forever. British financiers helped the Kuwaiti government make long-term investment choices and by the 1960s, Kuwaiti investors would begin to invest their money in overseas real estate. Kuwait also channelled foreign aid to friendly nations and entities.

At the same time, Sheikh Abdullah, who would rule until 1965, started to create a welfare state, spending on health care and education. The Al-Sabah family had always been willing to use personal funds to address social needs, but domestic spending bankrolled by oil wealth increased to new levels.

**Independence brings new challenges**

On 19 June, 1961, Kuwait became an independent country, ending the defence and foreign policy guarantees Britain had provided since 1899. Kuwait was a fabulously wealthy new nation sitting atop vast oil reserves, attracting the attention of powerful and covetous neighbours.

Independence also meant the fledgling nation had to give up what it most needed, protection. Britain had made a conscious decision to let Kuwait go after India and Pakistan become independent in 1947.

The period from the mid-1950s to 1961 was one in which the military and political bonds connecting Kuwait and Britain may have loosened, but as the role of institutions such as the British Council demonstrate,



the advent of an independent Kuwait in 1961 cannot be characterised as a cultural or a political rejection of Britain. On the contrary, beneath the surface of the march to independence lay an important undercurrent of cultural and educational engagement with Britain that actually intensified during this period. The British Council performed much unacknowledged work liaising between the Kuwait government and various international agencies. Given that Kuwait desired an independent but aligned relationship with the British government, such mediation was extremely useful and illustrates the ways in which UK-Kuwaiti relations have functioned at a multitude of different levels, typically behind the scenes.

In November 1962, Kuwait's new constitution was ratified by an ad hoc constituent assembly. Full elections were held, and the first National Assembly of the new Kuwaiti nation convened at the end of January 1963. Kuwait joined the United Nations that year, completing the process of nationhood, but the question of national defence was still unresolved.

That said, Britain had taken steps to help Kuwait defend itself: a police force of around 600 men had been converted into a defence force of 2,500 troops and naval and air forces were established.

Within a week of Kuwait becoming independent, Iraq's leader, Abdul Karim Qasim, who had seized power in a coup in 1958, announced that his country was incorporating Kuwait. In response, Britain launched *Operation Vantage*, sending a naval task force and ground forces to Kuwait. By October, British forces had been replaced by Arab League troops. Qasim was killed in a coup in 1963 but, while Iraq recognised Kuwaiti

independence and the military threat was reduced, Britain continued to monitor the situation and kept forces available to protect Kuwait until 1971.

Abdullah III was replaced by his chosen successor, Sabah al-Salem, or Sabah III in 1965. The country handled the transition smoothly and Sabah III's domestic and foreign policy approach was generally consistent with that of his predecessor.

Sabah III ruled until 1977, naming Jaber III his successor. The new constitution provided for the Crown Prince to assume the position of Emir upon the Emir's death, but it was the family's responsibility to choose the Crown Prince, although the selection was subject to ratification by the popular assembly. Jaber III's accession in 1977 was uneventful and with each smooth transition, Kuwait's peaceful political traditions have become ever stronger.

In 1982, the government created the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA). The first-ever sovereign wealth fund, the KIA's roots date back to 1953, when the Kuwait Investment Board was established with an account at the Bank of England to collect oil revenues. After Kuwait gained independence from the UK in 1961, the investment board was renamed the Kuwait Investment Office (KIO) and given specific responsibility to manage what became known as *The Future Generation Fund*.

Since 1976, 10 per cent of the country's annual income has been allocated to the fund, which assumed considerable importance after liberation from Saddam Hussein's invasion. Rebuilding the country cost more than US\$85 billion, according to official figures. *The Future Generation Fund* funded the reconstruction.

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**Britain had taken a special role in the 1991 intervention: Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had been closely involved in building the strong international consensus over the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait**

**Invasion and reconstruction**

Kuwait’s military was not prepared for war or invasion, although it had used its oil wealth on national defence spending. By 1989 Kuwait was sixth in the world in per capita military spending, with most of that equipment coming from Great Britain.

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi forces invaded, overrunning Kuwait City within 24 hours. The UN Security Council immediately passed a series of resolutions, the first of which demanded Iraq’s immediate and unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait. Economic sanctions against Iraq were instituted.

The United States and Great Britain understood that no further Iraqi gains could be allowed and rallied more than 30 countries to join a military coalition, with some 7,000 Kuwaiti troops participating in the liberation of their country under *Operation Desert Storm*.

As well as playing a key diplomatic role behind the scenes in the six months that led up to *Operation Desert Storm*, Britain was the second-largest contributor to the operation to remove Iraqi forces. *Operation Granby*, the code name given to the UK role in the Gulf War, involved more than 53,000 British personnel on land, air and sea.

On the morning of February 27, 1991, the Kuwaiti flag was officially raised in central Kuwait City. Following 42 days of allied military operations, the Kuwaiti people had survived the nightmare of invasion and occupation and Kuwait was liberated.

Britain had played a vital role in the 1991 intervention. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had been central to building the strong international

consensus against the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait: in August 1990 she and her Cabinet embarked on the deployment of British troops to the Middle East in order to deter any further Iraqi aggression. The unambiguous support of the United Nations Security Council and the fact that Iraq had clearly violated international agreements helped to convince many MPs to support the military operation.

Great Britain worked with Kuwaiti military officials to assess the continued threat posed by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and to formulate both short- and long-term defence strategies to deter that threat. Defence agreements were quickly signed with the United States, Great Britain, and France. While the Kuwaiti army, naval force, air force, and coast guard had all fought bravely in the liberation of their country, they required outside assistance to maintain Kuwait’s security. Training of Kuwaiti military forces by teams of American and British officers began almost immediately under new defence agreements. More recently, in 2018, Michael Davenport, British Ambassador to Kuwait, said Britain was considering establishing a permanent military presence in Kuwait at the request of its government.

As 1991 drew to a close, more than seven hundred oil fires, set alight by the Iraqis, were finally extinguished. Kuwaitis were finally able to make decisions about their country’s future. Oil pipelines had been cut, pumping stations had been demolished, refineries stripped of machinery and almost every petroleum-related physical asset had been damaged.

Rebuilding Kuwait was not only one of the largest and most rapid construction programs in history, but was also an opportunity to overhaul the nation’s economy, streamline its bureaucracy and reshape its work force.

**A solid foundation for UK-Kuwait relations**

Britain and Kuwait’s solid relationship has been further cemented over the last 120 years by the strong ties between the two countries’ royal families. Twenty years after the Treaty of Friendship was concluded in 1899, George V welcomed Sheikh Ahmad Al Jaber as the first official Kuwaiti visitor to Britain.

In 1979, Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Phillip visited Kuwait, and in 1995, HH Sheikh Jaber Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah visited Britain. HRH The Prince of Wales has made seven visits to Kuwait.



The late Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah with HM Queen Elizabeth II and HRH Duke of Edinburgh at Buckingham Palace in 1995

A key outcome of the State Visit to Britain by Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah in 2012, the first since 1995, was the creation of a new framework for UK-Kuwaiti bilateral relations: the *Joint Steering Group*, aimed at broadening and deepening the two countries' long-standing relationship.

Since then the Group has taken action in many areas such as defence, migration, healthcare, education, higher education, trade and investment and energy. Defence talks have established a clear goal of strengthening Kuwait-British ties on military equipment and training, with a particular focus on tackling terrorism.

Discussions on migration have focused on improving information exchange on people trafficking. On healthcare, a range of British public and private sector organisations are supporting Kuwait's ambitious plans to revolutionise its own healthcare sector while continuing to provide top quality care for the thousands of Kuwaitis who receive private medical treatment in Britain each year.

On education, representatives from the British Council and the Department of Education continue to provide advice and support to reforms in Kuwait's education system, including in English language teaching and special needs education. At the same time, cooperation in higher education and research has increased substantially.

On trade, Kuwait has done much to reduce barriers to market entry to UK companies and investors, while there have been further increases to the Kuwait Investment Office's multi-billion pound

investment portfolio in the UK. The UK is also supporting Kuwait's ambitious plans on transportation infrastructure in the rail, airport and port sectors.

The two countries are now increasingly working together on energy policy by cooperating on managing global energy markets, Kuwaiti involvement in the UK energy sector, and on the potential for further technical cooperation in this field.

#### Looking to the future

Several key developments occurred during the first two decades of the 21st century that have had, and will continue to exert, a powerful, long-term impact on Kuwait and the Kuwaiti people. One was external and one was internal. First was the forceful removal of Saddam Hussein from power in 2003. Overall, the long-standing Iraqi threat to reinvade Kuwait was reduced, though ongoing instability in Iraq, including sectarian violence, is cause for concern.

Located in the geopolitical heart of the Middle East, Kuwait understands the importance of *realpolitik* better than most: it is intricately and irrevocably linked to regional events. Kuwait will maintain its pragmatic foreign policy and continue mediating with all its neighbours. At the same time, Kuwait will be focused on its quest to remain a strong, prosperous and unified state with a leading influence in Gulf politics and economics.

Britain will continue to support Kuwait in its ability to serve as a neutral state that provides regional players with assistance to resolve conflicts through diplomacy, maintaining Kuwait's vital interest in regional stability. 

## On trade, Kuwait has done much to reduce barriers to market entry to UK companies and investors

Left: Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah with of the HRH Duke of York at Bayan Palace in Kuwait 2003

Right: Rupert Goodman, Chairman and Founder of FIRST, and HH Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of Kuwait

