

Enlightened Leadership

PROFILE OF HIS HIGHNESS SHEIKH SABAH AL-AHMAD AL-SABAH

AMIR OF KUWAIT

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There are few figures in Kuwaiti political life able to match the depth and breadth of experience in international and domestic affairs of Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah.

In 2006, before he was unanimously elected Kuwait's Amir by the National Assembly, Sheikh Sabah had, over the course of his more than 40 years as Kuwait's Foreign Minister, played a key role around the world and at home, handling delicate diplomatic issues while pushing a reformist agenda in Kuwait.

The fourth son of Amir Ahmed I, Sheikh Sabah was born on 6 June 1929 and was educated at the Mubarakiya School in Kuwait City, completing his education with private tutors before he joined the Royal Court of his father, who ruled between 1921 and 1950.

Sheikh Sabah took up official duties in 1954, under the late Amir, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, as a member of the Higher Executive Committee assigned with regulating operations in governmental departments and placing plans for their activities.

Sheikh Sabah was then appointed Chairman of the Department of Social Affairs and Chairman of the Department of Press and Publications in 1957, and after Kuwait's declaration of independence on June 19, 1961, he was appointed director of both the Department of Press and Publications and the Department of Social Affairs and Labor.

In 1961, following independence, the Higher Executive Committee - which carried out the duties of today's cabinet - was formed and Sheikh Sabah became a member as chairman of the two departments, and later became member of the Constituent Assembly assigned with drafting the Kuwaiti Constitution.

Then, in 1963, at the age of 34, Sheikh Sabah was appointed foreign minister, a post he would hold for a remarkable four decades. That year also saw the establishment of the National Assembly. As Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah became a member of the Parliament playing an important role in the many constitutional events that took place during that period.

Over the years Sheikh Sabah has gained a reputation as a skilled diplomat, heading Kuwait's inaugural delegation to the United Nations General Assembly.

As Foreign Minister, and now as Amir, much of Sheikh Sabah's energy and diplomatic skills have been taken up handling the challenges constantly posed

by Kuwait's geostrategic position between its larger neighbours, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran.

Kuwaiti-Iranian relations have been difficult since Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, a situation further exacerbated by Kuwait's support of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988. Since the end of the war more than two decades ago, however, Sheikh Sabah has worked hard to improve the two countries' political relationship. Relations have advanced considerably since 2005, as greater bilateral economic cooperation has helped improve the political atmosphere between the two countries, even as Kuwait has complied with the UN Security Council against Iran's nuclear enrichment programme.

Following the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990, Sheikh Sabah used his considerable diplomatic skills and international popularity to lobby for an international response. After Saddam was overthrown, Sheikh Sabah has done much to improve relations with its neighbour, culminating in the visit by the Kuwaiti Prime Minister, Sheikh Nasser Mohammed al Sabah, to Baghdad in January this year. This was followed a month later by a visit by Iraqi President Nuri Al Maliki to Kuwait, and talks with Sheikh Sabah.

An Arab League Summit is planned for March 2012 in Iraq, at which Sheikh Sabah has said he hopes to be able to discuss outstanding issues such as the compensations to be provided by Iraq as a consequence of the 1991 invasion of Kuwait, Kuwait's position regarding Iraq's exit from Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the demarcation of borders between the two neighbouring countries and the return of the remains of missing Kuwaitis lost during the Iraqi invasion.

Then there is the question of Kuwait's substantial Shia majority, which makes up more than 25 percent of the population. Unlike in Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, members of the Shia minority are found in government posts in Kuwait at every level: two ministers in the previous cabinet were Shia. Meanwhile, nine of the 50 members of parliament are Shia, as are various senior advisers to the Amir.

The recent unrest in the Arab world has brought this issue to the fore. As a result of the Shia uprising in Bahrain, Sheikh Sabah's government faced a dilemma that illustrates the difficulties involved in balancing the interests of the Sunni and Shia communities.

Saudi Arabia, fearing the unrest would spread,

Opposite:
His Highness The
Amir of Kuwait

marshalled a military force from the Gulf's Sunni monarchies to help restore order and duly sent 1,000 troops to Bahrain – and the Kingdom made clear that it wanted Kuwait's armed forces to contribute.

Sheikh Sabah faced a dilemma: he did not want to be accused of abandoning his brother Sunni monarchy, but equally, many of Kuwait's Sunni citizens were fervent in their belief that a Shia revolt in the Gulf could not be allowed to succeed. This debate highlighted Shia-Sunni issues in Kuwaiti society for the first time since the early 1980s, when tensions ran high after the Iranian revolution.

Public rallies were held on both sides of this vital question of whether or not to intervene in Bahrain. In the end, Sheikh Sabah decided he would send help in the form of two warships as a token contribution.

Diplomats in Kuwait City have no doubt that Sheikh Sabah came to the right decision for the sake of his own country's domestic harmony. Had Kuwaiti soldiers taken part in the suppression of Shia demonstrators, the consequences at home could have been severe.

At the same time, Kuwait has been supportive of the pro-democracy uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and has contributed \$177 million to Libya's rebel council.

Kuwait has also developed into a key Western ally in the Gulf, even allowing US troops to launch the invasion of Iraq in 2003 from its territory.

Domestic reform

At home, in his position as Prime Minister, Sheikh Sabah played an important role implementing the reforms of Sheikh Jaber, the previous Amir.


In 2003, Sheikh Jaber issued a landmark decree, separating the posts of Crown Prince and Prime Minister, appointing Sheikh Sabah as premier. Delegated with considerable executive powers, after becoming Amir, Sheikh Sabah continued the reforms begun by Sheikh Jaber.

Between 2005 and 2007, women were given the right to vote and have been appointed to ministerial positions, a law banning public gatherings was overturned, restrictions on new media outlets were curbed, and a key election brought about important reforms to the electoral system. At the same time, there have been steps taken against Islamist militants, and the school curriculum changed to promote religious tolerance.

Since becoming Amir, Sheikh Sabah has taken an increasingly active role in mediating between the National Assembly and the government. The 50-member body has the right to question Cabinet ministers and to prevent the passage of legislation

proposed by the government. In recent years, opposition members of the National Assembly have exercised these rights and triggered the resignation of several governments by blocking important legislation and by calling for senior ministers, including the Prime Minister, to be cross-examined by Parliament.

Sheikh Sabah has acknowledged that Kuwaitis will not be able to rely forever on income from their nation's vast – but finite – energy resources. He has spoken about the need to transform Kuwait into a world-class financial and commercial center in order to ensure prosperity for its citizens in decades to come.

In its Fiftieth Anniversary year, Kuwait under the wise governance of Sheikh Sabah, stands out as an important model for democracy in the region. 

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