

The modern Kuwait emerges

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The story of modern Kuwait begins in the early eighteenth century when several families of the Bani Utub clan within the Anaizah tribe migrated from central Arabia, settling in Kuwait. Once there, they established a self-governing political entity. Historians generally agree on 1756 as the year when the settlers elected as their leader Sabah, an Al Sabah sheikh. He was succeeded by his son Abd Allah, and was in turn succeeded by his son Jabir. Since then, all rulers have come from the Al Sabah line.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Al Sabah family oversaw the growing trade and pearling settlement in Kuwait. This was the period that saw the first contacts with Britain, starting with the British East India Company in 1775. As members of a small, vulnerable settlement, Kuwait's rulers maintained diplomatic but neutral ties with the British, the Wahhabis of Arabia, and the Ottomans. But under Abd Allah Al Sabah II, who ruled from 1866 to 1892, Kuwait developed close ties with the Ottomans, even taking the Ottoman title, albeit largely as a formality, of provincial governor (qaimaqam) in 1871. Then, following the four-year rule of Muhammad Al Sabah, in 1896, Mubarak the Great, uneasy about Ottoman intentions, sought a formal alliance with Britain.

Britain, concerned with growing interest from its European rivals, and notably with an Ottoman

concession to Germany for construction of a Berlin-to-Baghdad railroad—with a proposed spur line to Kuwait—readily agreed. Britain signed a treaty with Kuwait in 1899 that promised Mubarak British support and, in return, gave Britain control of Kuwait's foreign policy. This treaty governed relations between the two states until Kuwait's independence in 1961.

After Mubarak's death in 1915, Kuwait was ruled by two of his sons, Jabir Al Sabah (1915-17) and Salim Al Sabah (1917-21). Subsequently, with one exception, only descendants of Mubarak through these two sons would rule Kuwait. After Salim's death in 1921, Kuwait was ruled for nearly three decades by Ahmad Al Jabir Al Sabah.

During Sheikh Ahmed Al Jabir Al Sabah's rule, until his death in 1950, a period during which oil was discovered and in which the government attempted to establish the country's first internationally recognized boundaries; the 1922 Treaty of Uqair set Kuwait's border with Saudi Arabia and also established the Kuwait-Saudi Arabia Neutral Zone, an area of about 5,180 sq. km. (2,000 sq. miles) adjoining Kuwait's southern border.

Ahmad al Jabir also made serious attempts to constrain the ruling family's power. But in 1938 the Majlis Movement staged a rebellion in response to the new challenges facing Kuwait: the country was hit by a serious recession due to the decline of the pearling

industry; the wider repercussions of the Great Depression; and a trade dispute with Saudi Arabia that resulted in a Saudi embargo.

Following the discovery of oil in 1931 and the agreement signed with the Anglo American Kuwait Oil Company in 1938, better times beckoned. Ahmad al Jabir was succeeded by his cousin Abd Allah Al Salim Al Sabah (1950-65), who oversaw the distribution of now substantial oil revenues,



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as well as the creation of a large bureaucratic state, and the transformation of Kuwait into a wealthy oil-producing sheikhdom.

Abd Allah Al Salim also oversaw Kuwait's formal transformation into an independent state on June 19, 1961, when he and British representatives signed new letters of friendship to replace the treaty of 1899. Abd Allah Al Salim also made two transforming political decisions. The first was to distribute new revenues broadly throughout the population, primarily through wide-ranging social services, notably education and health care. The second was to introduce political participation to Kuwait in the form of the newly elected National Assembly. This body held its first elections in 1963.

When Abd Allah Al Salim died in 1965, he was succeeded by his brother Sabah Al Salim Al Sabah—an unusual choice in that he, like Abd Allah Al Salim, came from the Salim line rather than the Jabir line of the family, breaking the alternation between the two sides of the family that had existed since the rule of Mubarak's sons Jabir and Salim. Nonetheless, Sabah Al Salim consolidated the policies begun by Abd Allah Al Salim. When Sabah Al Salim died in December 1977, he was succeeded by Sheikh Jabir al Ahmad al Jabir Al Sabah, a succession that returned the former pattern of alternation between the lines of Jabir and Salim.

External events dominated Jabir Al Ahmad's rule. The first was the Iran-Iraq War between 1980 and 1988, which caused political violence in this historically relatively peaceful sheikhdom. This period saw the 1983 bombing of the United States embassy and the dramatic public assassination attempt on the Amir in 1985. The tension associated with the war between Kuwait's powerful neighbours also heightened divisions within Kuwaiti society.

Then came the Iraqi invasion in August 1990, which for the first time in Kuwait's history placed the state under direct foreign rule, forcing the Amir and his family to leave the country along with more than half the population. The invasion and occupation changed every aspect of Kuwaiti life. Iraqi troops plundered and looted the city of Kuwait. Iraqi occupation forces, according to reports of human rights monitoring groups, tortured and summarily executed those suspected of involvement in the underground opposition movement that had quickly emerged.

After the reestablishment of Kuwaiti sovereignty in February 1991, and the restoration of basic services soon afterward, the population began to return. In May 1991, the government opened the doors to all Kuwaiti citizens who wished to return. One of the first policy decisions the government made on returning to Kuwait was to reduce Kuwait's dependence on foreign labour in an effort to ensure that Kuwaitis would henceforth remain a majority in their country. A National Bank of

Kuwait report estimated the total population of Kuwait in March 1992 at 1,175,000 people, 53 per cent of whom were Kuwaitis, compared with an estimated 27 per cent Kuwaitis of the 2,155,000 population on the eve of the Iraqi invasion in 1990.

Despite the devastation of the Kuwaiti economy during the invasion and occupation, recovery was carried out with surprising speed. This was partly because some damage, particularly of the infrastructure, was not as serious as first feared and partly because the government, anxious to restore the population's weakened confidence, made reconstruction and recovery of basic services a high priority.

The oil industry, which was badly damaged, was a top priority. The most dramatic economic reconstruction effort went towards capping the more than 700 oil wells set alight by retreating Iraqi forces. In addition to an estimated 2 per cent of the country's 100 billion barrels of reserves lost in the oil fires, Kuwait had to pay for putting out fires and repairing damaged refineries, pipelines, and other oil infrastructure.

Next to Lebanon's parliament, Kuwait's is the longest-serving all-elected legislative body in the Arab world. Up to 15 legislators may serve as both lawmakers and ministers. The Amir appoints cabinet members. Parliament does not confirm them, but it can vote no confidence in ministers and veto government decrees.

There are no officially recognized parties in the 50-seat Parliament, which has its benefits and drawbacks. On the positive side, alliances can be more fluid than in a rigid party system. So an Islamist might join forces with a liberal on any given issue quite easily. But lack of parties also makes it difficult to build strong coalitions.

Women were given the right to vote and run for office in 2005. (In the 2009 parliamentary election, 19 women were among the 280 candidates.)

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Kuwaiti pearling vessels ready for the start of the 1924 pearling season

