

A strengthening partnership

By HIS EXCELLENCY KHALED AL-DUWAISAN GCVO

AMBASSADOR OF THE STATE OF KUWAIT TO THE UNITED KINGDOM



KHALED AL-DUWAISAN has a postgraduate diploma in public administration from the University of Kuwait. He joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1970 and served in a variety of positions including that of Diplomatic Attaché. He joined the Kuwait Embassy in Washington DC from 1975. After serving as Ambassador to Romania and the Netherlands he was appointed Ambassador to the United Kingdom in 1993.

The arrival of HH the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al Sabah, at Windsor Castle on Tuesday 27 November 2012 will mark a special moment in the history of Kuwait's bilateral relations with the United Kingdom. Although a frequent visitor to the UK in the past, on this occasion His Highness the Amir will be welcomed in Windsor by Her Majesty The Queen and His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh, before proceeding to the Castle where he will be their guest during his stay. So will begin the Amir's first State Visit to Great Britain.

This particular honour is the greater because it takes place amid the continuing celebrations of Her Majesty The Queen's Diamond Jubilee. To those in the UK, in her other Realms and in the Commonwealth, The Queen has been a constant and reassuring figure. Her people have travelled the last 60 years with her – through the good times and through periods of difficulty and challenge.

For those of us from outside the UK, however, we can only marvel. We see a Head of State whose dedication and service to her people are extraordinary. We see a global ambassador whose experience of international affairs and skilled touch are the envy of

diplomats the world over. No wonder she is so admired and loved – and why this Official Visit provides His Highness The Amir with an opportunity to pay his own particular tribute to Her Majesty.

The Amir's visit also represents a high point in the friendly relations which Kuwait enjoys with the United Kingdom. Britain's links with Kuwait stretch back over two centuries. In part, the relationship had a political and security basis; and the Anglo-Kuwaiti Treaty of Friendship, of 1899, marked the beginning of a political relationship which deepened with the onset of the First World War. Kuwait was no less vulnerable to more powerful neighbours than as it has been in more recent times, and Kuwait benefited from the protection of Britain until independence in 1961.

In the fifty years since Kuwait's independence – a Golden Anniversary joyfully celebrated last year – there have been many challenges. As a small and vulnerable nation, the path of sovereignty and independence has not been easy. We were threatened with invasion at our birth; and then, nearly thirty years later, we were attacked, despoiled and occupied. It is now 21 years since Coalition forces brought about our liberation from the darkness of subjugation. But the memory of the sacrifices made on our behalf will never be forgotten; and we remain eternally grateful to the Coalition forces, among them the British forces, which helped us regain our freedom.

Of course, the bilateral relationship between Kuwait and the United Kingdom is multi-faceted, rather than one-dimensional. In terms of economics and commerce, our mutual interest in open trade and global communication can be traced back to 1793, and the first British trading post in Kuwait. The first treaty between the two countries, the Anglo-Kuwaiti Maritime Truce of 1841, was aimed at co-operation to rid the gulf of piracy so that long-distance trade could flourish.

For many years, Kuwaitis were known as seafarers, merchants and pearl divers. Up until the 1930s, pearls were Kuwait's most precious commodity, and the mainstay of its economy. Around 800 pearling dhows, the Ghawas, constituted a substantial fleet that harvested pearls across the waters of the Arabian Gulf.

All that changed, just before the Second World War, with the discovery of Kuwait's oil reserves. Although the conflict caused commercial operations to cease,



Kuwait pearling vessels ready for the start of the 1924 pearling session

the first shipments of Kuwaiti crude oil began in 1946. It was the start of a process which would transform Kuwait's national development, resulting in the wealthy and advanced nation it is today.

Notwithstanding the global slowdown, and the crisis in the eurozone, between 2005 and 2011 the countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) averaged annual growth of 6.8 per cent. This year, Kuwait's growth rate is estimated to be 4.5 per cent, with a projected budget surplus of £24.2 billion. This has brought high levels of prosperity to the country, with one of the highest GDP per capita ratios in the world.

At the same time, Kuwait has embarked on an ambitious £70 billion National Development Plan. Launched by His Highness The Amir in 2010, and approved by Kuwait's National Assembly last year, the plan aims to renew and diversify Kuwait's economy. Its vision is to make Kuwait a logistics, finance and trading hub by 2035, with major infrastructure development and increased capacity. The plan is to extend ports and create a new airport; improve and build hospitals; construct a Metro system; and put in place railway links to our Gulf neighbours. It also seeks to diversify the economy, increase the size of the private sector and boost opportunities for Foreign Direct Investment.


British businesses have already won substantial contracts for projects in Kuwait's oil, gas and construction sectors and there are around 6,000 British ex-pats currently working in the country. The Gulf as a whole is the UK's seventh largest export market. We hope that this partnership in development is one which will grow in the coming years, to the benefit of both nations.

At the same time, Kuwaiti investment in the United Kingdom is substantial. Billions of pounds are likely to be available for investment through the Kuwait Investment authority (KIA), much of it administered through its London offices. The scale of personal investment by Kuwaiti citizens in the UK is also significant, especially in property.

Crucial to the future of both countries are education and health. In the Arab world as a whole, more than half its 350 million people are under the age of 25. By 2020, the vast majority of the GCC's population will be within this age bracket. This will drive investment in education and skills, and should mean more Kuwaiti students in the UK – more than 2,000 enrolled in UK tertiary institutions in 2011– and greater British educational investment in Kuwait. A similar story is true of medical investment and advanced healthcare.

The friendship between two nations is, however, not just a matter of trade and commerce and good bilateral relations between governments. It is also about a growing meeting of hearts and minds among its two peoples.

That was certainly my aim seventeen years ago when I helped set up the British-Kuwait Friendship Society. In the years that have followed – particularly in its meetings and its exchange visits – the Society has achieved much and has helped cement relations at the most human – and important – of levels.

It is for all these reasons that I believe that the State Visit of His Highness The Amir will not be seen as a point of conclusion – but, rather, as the beginning of a yet closer and more productive partnership between Kuwait and the United Kingdom. 

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His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah arrives at Heathrow Airport to begin his State Visit to the United Kingdom