

# Shared sacrifices, common goals

By RT HON TONY BLAIR

FORMER PRIME MINISTER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND QUARTET REPRESENTATIVE TO THE MIDDLE EAST



**TONY BLAIR** served as Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from May 1997 to June 2007. He was also the leader of Britain's Labour Party (1994 to 2007) and the Member of Parliament for Sedgefield, England (1983 to 2007). Tony Blair continues to be active in public life. Since leaving Downing Street, Mr Blair has served as the Quartet Representative to the Middle East. He represents the United States of America, United Nations, Russia and the European Union, working with the Palestinians to prepare for statehood as part of the international community's effort to secure peace.

Britain is fortunate to enjoy good relations with many countries around the world. But few can match the warmth and longevity of our friendship with Kuwait. Ties which began with the casual visits of British ships over two centuries ago have developed into a unique relationship which has evolved to meet changing times and challenges.

It may seem difficult to explain this closeness. After all, our two countries could hardly be more different in many ways – something of which I am all too aware as I write these words on a cold and wet November day in the United Kingdom. But the formal links between our two countries, which go back to 1899, are strengthened by warm personal ties at many levels and, of course, by memories of shared sacrifices.

It is this history which is being celebrated by the State Visit of His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to the United Kingdom this week. The visit comes close after the Golden Jubilee of Kuwait's independence from the UK. Importantly, it also, of course, comes 21 years after Britain helped free the country from Iraqi forces.

I know from my time as Prime Minister that Kuwait and its people will never forget the role, bravery and personal sacrifice that British forces played in ending the Iraqi occupation. This was the darkest period in Kuwait's history. Hundreds of lives were

lost, including British servicemen, and the deliberate destruction caused by the fleeing forces was on an almost unimaginable scale.

Nothing better underlines the determination and vision of Kuwait than the speed at which this damage was repaired. It was a colossal effort and also important because of the key role that Kuwait's oil production – and industry, which UK companies first help develop – plays in the world economy.

Oil, of course, remains the foundation of Kuwait's financial and economic strength. But the country is also wisely looking to the future. An ambitious development plan is underway to diversify the economy, modernise its infrastructure, create a thriving private sector and provide high-quality services to its people. The blueprint also provides major new investment in Kuwait's oil industry.

British companies are already playing a major role in driving through these plans, adding to the thousands of nationals of the United Kingdom who work and live in Kuwait. In turn, Kuwait is a major investor in the UK. The State Visit provides an important opportunity to strengthen these commercial links and meet both governments' targets of doubling bilateral trade and investment to £4 billion by 2015. The visit will also help already strong co-operation in the political, defence, cultural and educational sectors.

Kuwait's determination to develop its economy is one major reason for the country to have confidence in its future. So is its tradition of tolerance and openness, an outlook our two countries share and which is more important than ever for success in the modern world.

Women, for example, enjoy more freedom than almost anywhere else in the region. They play an increasingly major role across economic and public life, serving both as government ministers and as MPs in Kuwait's freely-elected Parliament. Kuwait was among the very first countries in the region to enable and encourage women to enter politics.

The country is also blessed with a young population which is well-educated and talented. Their energy and creativity makes a big impression on all who meet them and shows that Kuwait's future is in good hands.

It is over 30 years since the Queen made a State Visit to Kuwait. A great deal has changed since 1979. But the close friendship between our two countries remains as strong as ever.



Tony Blair meets the Amir of Kuwait, His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah