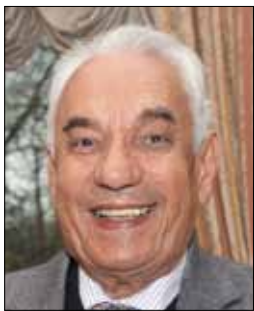


The best of friends

INTERVIEW WITH DR ABDULLAH BISHARA

FORMER GCC SECRETARY GENERAL AND COORDINATOR OF THE BRITISH-KUWAIT FRIENDSHIP SOCIETY



ABDULLAH BISHARA attended Cairo, Oxford, and St John's Universities before entering his country's diplomatic service. He was director of the Office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, before being named Kuwait's permanent representative to the United Nations between 1971 and 1981. While serving as Kuwait's representative at the UN, he became President of the Security Council in the month of February, 1979. He was unanimously selected by the GCC leaders to be the first Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council. A former Ambassador to both Brazil and Argentina, Dr Bishara is President of the Diplomatic Centre for Strategic Studies in Kuwait and Chairman of the North Africa Investment Company.

Britain and Kuwait enjoy a long-standing friendship. How would you characterise that relationship over the years, and where does it stand today?

If there is one country in the world for which support and respect in Kuwait is unanimous, that country is the United Kingdom. Our two countries have been allies since 1899; from that point we have shared the same path, never diverging, and always acting in consultation. Whenever Kuwait has been in need of assistance, protection, or advice, Britain has always been there. That said, Britain's legacy in Kuwait is not easy to define; it is something in our veins, in the marrow of the nation.

In my capacity as coordinator of the British-Kuwait Friendship Society I would highlight Britain's steadfast commitment to our relationship, which has been characterised by loyalty, efficiency, and integrity. What's more, Britain has never asked for any reward or demonstration of appreciation in fulfilling its pledge. Britain came to Kuwait's aid in 1899 to stave off the advances of the Ottoman Empire; she showed her mettle again in repelling the incursions of tribal raiders in the early 1920s; and then again in 1961 when Iraq claimed our territory. And of course, in 1991 she served with great distinction.

What are your hopes and expectations for the State Visit of His Highness The Amir?

This visit has to be seen in the light of our two countries' historic relationship. Within that context, we are always keen to deepen political contact, to enhance trade, and to promote mutual investment. We would like to send more Kuwaiti students to the UK, and in particular we hope that we can address the issue of the UK's visa requirements in this regard.

His Highness has vast experience in diplomacy and politics, and handles tough issues with wisdom, tolerance and accommodation. Britain and Kuwait are strategic partners, and work together in many spheres, for example the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Britain was one of the first countries to see the potential of the GCC. During my time as Secretary General of the GCC, I was invited by your then Foreign Minister, Douglas Hurd, to discuss ways of bringing an end to the Iran-Iraq war.

On regional issues, as with most others, Kuwait and Britain share the same views; we always seek peaceful

solutions, we agree on the need to combat terrorism and extremism, and always look for consensus and accommodation. His Highness' visit to the United Kingdom will not only inject new life into our relationship, it also represents our countries' profound commitment to working together to achieve our common goals.

How would you characterise UK-Kuwaiti diplomatic cooperation in respect of Syria, Palestine, and Iran?

Kuwait is concerned about Iran's nuclear ambitions. The GCC is an important channel of communication and offers a means of avoiding conflict in resolving the issue. Regarding Syria, I am surprised that the regime has not fallen already, but it will fall over the course of next year, of that I am certain. There is widespread agreement on the need for a new government. But we need a binding resolution from the United Nations to bring about a peaceful conclusion to what is effectively a civil war, and, of course, regime change.

Given the changes taking place throughout the region, and the acceptance of the need for change – even by Hamas – it is incredible that the Assad regime remains in place in Syria. The regime is trying to resist the tide of history, but it will not succeed. On the issue of Palestine, the problems continue. Hamas, whatever you might think about it, is a manifestation of the need for talks to resume between Israel and the Palestinians.

Last year marked the 20th Anniversary of Kuwait's liberation from Iraqi occupation. How do you see relations with Iraq developing, and what is your view of the country's prospects in the longer term? Are you worried that history may repeat itself?

Two decades on from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, I am not optimistic about Iraq. It will not be a normal country for many years. There is no consensus there: the Prime Minister interprets the Constitution one way, while the Sunnis see it another, and the Kurds have their own take on things. They may all end up colliding over this. I think the only way for Iraq to be stable is through a federal structure. At the moment, the Sunnis feel marginalised, while the Kurds are jealous of their independence and will not be intimidated by the central government. It is a difficult situation, and Iran is also stoking tension. But I do not think that Iraq would launch another invasion. We have a very

privileged position within NATO, and the US and Britain would support us in the event of conflict.

What is your assessment of the current political situation in Kuwait, and what do you hope the elections on December 1st will achieve?

The presence of the Amir in London demonstrates the reliability of the elections and the electoral process. Kuwait is a consensus-based society, and we have long-established traditions of working together. Our approach is that the country's interests come before all. The country's traditional values must be defended and kept intact by all political convictions and persuasions: Kuwait is a country worth fighting for.

Kuwait is entering a new phase of growth. For a long time the coalition opposition in Parliament – which is mainly made up of fundamentalists and clannish groups – have played a major role in restricting progress. They have managed to paralyse the government's five-year plan, introduced laws to muzzle the media, and introduced alien restrictions on the lives of ordinary people. Kuwait is a liberal country and I believe that the next phase of its political life will be free from the rigidity of the parliamentary opposition.

As the first Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, how do you see the role of the organisation developing? Is enthusiasm for monetary union waning in the light of the eurozone crisis?

The organisation has learned from the EU's experience. Many member states are glad that they didn't press ahead with monetary union as they view the present chaotic state of the euro.

The GCC mechanism is different to the EU in that its decisions are based on consensus – it is collective acceptance or nothing. The UK didn't join the Schengen area or the single currency, for example; this could not happen in the GCC, because that would mean different agendas. We want the GCC to move from cooperation to union, but a union of all. We cannot have a two-track system.

The good thing about the GCC is that it enjoys international credibility, in terms of finance, oil, and politics. We are a major contributor to the global economy, its prosperity and stability.

The GCC includes many of the world's leading oil producers, including Kuwait. To what extent does 'energy diplomacy' strengthen the Council's hand in international affairs?


Kuwait and the GCC have made it clear that oil cannot be used as a bargaining tool. Oil is energy, it must remain that. Some countries use oil as a political weapon to extract advantages and advance their own interests. In the view of the GCC states, oil should

not be dragged into the theatre of political bargaining. Our goal is to moderate prices and ensure production. We do not want to upset the global harmony or to interrupt the flow of energy to consumers. We want a solid understanding between producers and consumers based on mutual confidence.

Lastly, in your capacity as president of the British-Kuwait Friendship Society, how would you describe the society's aims and its achievements?

The Society strives to strengthen understanding between our two countries in all fields. Established in 1995 in response to a Kuwaiti desire for the consolidation of the relationship between Great Britain and Kuwait, its aims remain to expand the volume of trade through establishment of institutionalised relations between the business communities in the two countries.

Another objective of the Society is the expansion of cultural activities, the organisation of programmes and lectures with a view to offering an accurate image of Kuwait. It organises round-table seminars on issues related to Kuwait and the Gulf, as well as an annual banquet in London and an annual British exhibition which presents a showcase for British industry and technology in Kuwait. The Society also offers an annual prize of £10,000 to the two best books published in the UK on Arabic culture and Islamic thought. We are grateful to the family of the Late Sheikh Abdullah Mubarak Al-Sabah, who are the benefactors of this prize.

Lastly, I would like to say that I want to see a bigger British community in Kuwait; I would encourage British retirees to think about moving here. It's not Italy or the south of France, but it is tax free, has modern infrastructure, leisure facilities, free electricity, and of course, subsidised petrol. The British people whom I know who chose retirement in Kuwait demonstrate with sincerity their appreciation and receptiveness to the values of Kuwaiti culture: they enjoy the safety, the security, the freedom, the predictability of life. 

If there is one country in the world for which support and respect in Kuwait is unanimous, that country is the United Kingdom

HE Khaled Al-Duwaisan, Kuwait's Ambassador to the United Kingdom, welcomes Dr Abdullah Bishara to the Kuwaiti Embassy in London

