

Celebrating 120 years of relations

INTERVIEW WITH H.E. SHEIKH MUBARAK ABDULLA AL-MUBARAK AL-SABAH

VICE CHAIRMAN OF ACTION GROUP HOLDINGS



SHEIKH MUBARAK ABDULLA AL-MUBARAK AL-SABAH is Non-Executive Chairman of Action Hotels and the Vice Chairman of Action Group Holdings. He is also Founder and Chairman of Action Real Estate and is the founding Chairman of Qurain Petrochemical Industries Company. He is actively involved in Kuwait-British relations. He holds an MPhil in International Relations from the University of Cambridge, is a graduate of The Royal Military Academy of Sandhurst and served in the Kuwaiti Armed Forces.

As the youngest grandson of Sheikh Mubarak the Great, who signed the bilateral Anglo-Kuwaiti Treaty, how is the late Sheikh remembered both by the Al-Sabah family and also the Kuwaiti people?

Mubarak the Great is regarded as the founder of modern Kuwait, a strong statesman who had the finest qualities of political leadership. He was a brave warrior and fought for the independence of Kuwait. He was known by his contemporaries as the “Lion of the Arabian Peninsula”. He laid the foundation of Kuwait’s political, diplomatic, and commercial ties with the world. By signing the bilateral Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty on November 23, 1899, he protected Kuwait’s sovereignty from foreign interventions thus securing his country a prominent place on the world map. The memory of my grandfather, “Mubarak the Great”, will remain forever in the hearts and minds of Al-Sabah family and the Kuwaiti people, for initiating the march of Kuwait toward progress and modernisation. His image will remain as a leader with unyielding determination who worked all his life for enhancing the prosperity of Kuwait and its relations with the world.

As a graduate of Sandhurst, and a previous ranking Captain of the Kuwait National Guard, what is your vision for the relationship in the coming years, particularly in terms of defence?

The UK and Kuwait have had a long and close relationship at all levels – a partnership which has contributed to the prosperity of both nations. Areas of cooperation range from bilateral trade and investment to supporting peace and stability in the region. The UK remains a strong ally of Kuwait, providing various kinds of diplomatic and military support. The strength of these relations was demonstrated in 1963 when the UK insisted that Iraq abandon its territorial claims on Kuwait and recognise its independence. The UK also played a key role in the international coalition which liberated Kuwait following the Iraqi invasion of 1990, and in the 1998 British-Kuwaiti collaboration during Operation Desert Fox for Iraq’s failure to comply with the United Nations Security Council resolutions.

The two countries’ governments are committed to maintaining this close alliance. In 2012, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Ahmed Al Sabah’s state visit to the UK led to the establishment of the Kuwait-UK bilateral Joint Steering Group (JSG), whose purpose

it is to promote cooperation. In 2017, Britain signed a new bilateral military cooperation agreement with Kuwait; this has seen the two countries work more closely together to address regional security challenges.

As somebody who transcends the Kuwaiti-British relationship, are there some common qualities in both the Kuwaiti and British people which have fostered and sustained the important relationship over the last 120 years?

Among the things we have in common are the desire to foster prosperity and development through strengthening democracy, and the goal of tackling the security challenges we face. Our 120-year alliance is defined by the values we share – not just those of our governments but of our citizens; these include the willingness to work hard, and a commitment to improving quality of life and social welfare through better education and health care, and greater cultural exchange. Above all, our relations are based on mutual respect.

Apart from the commercial success of your business ventures, please comment on the philosophy that drives you in your business dealings.

My philosophy can be summed up in the phrase “the right timing is key to success”. Importantly, when I talk about “success” it’s not just about celebrating business success but rather celebrating the hard work, the commitment, the entrepreneurship and the creativity that have seen Kuwait become one of the world’s most successful and prosperous nations. In my own business, Action Group Holdings, being focused and ambitious are both important; we have a team of employees who feel strongly affiliated to the company and are committed to building the business. As an entrepreneur, it is my job to chart the way ahead for the business, taking the right decisions at the right time.

How have your business activities helped position Kuwait as a global hub for the petrochemical industry and the development of the tourism sector?

Kuwait is committed to realising the vision of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah to transform Kuwait into an international trade and financial hub. The government has unveiled a new plan to transform the country into a regional financial, trading, logistics and cultural centre by 2035

through various strategic development programs. The *Kuwait National Development Plan* – also known as “*New Kuwait*” – sets out the nation’s long-term development priorities including positioning Kuwait as a global hub for the petrochemical industry and boosting direct foreign investment.

The petrochemical industry has played an important role in diversifying Kuwait’s economy and maximising the value of hydrocarbon resources through its diversified portfolio of fertilisers, olefins and aromatics. And to meet such a vision, the petrochemical sector has also partnered with several national and international companies such as Dow Chemicals to form joint ventures in order to diversify its product offerings, expand into global markets and increase local sector participation. As part of the *New Kuwait Plan 2035* we are also developing the tourism sector, with particular focus on the northern region and the ancient islands.

As somebody who has been credited with introducing mid-market hotels to Kuwait, and the Gulf in general, what is your vision for Kuwait as an “entrepreneurial society”?

Kuwait has always been a nation of entrepreneurs and traders, even before the discovery of oil and the prosperity which followed. We are now preparing for a “post-oil” era as part of which we will develop a knowledge and innovation-based economy. A key objective is increasing the role of the private sector, including encouraging young people to launch their own businesses and ventures. Kuwait has a relatively young population, more than fifty per cent of whom are under the age of thirty, so it is no surprise they are a key focus. Our vision is a new generation of well-educated, ambitious and hardworking people with their minds set on achieving big things on a global scale.

In 2013, the Kuwaiti government established a National Fund for SME Development worth US\$6 billion, making it one of the largest funds of its kind in the world. This fund is designed to support the endeavours of our young entrepreneurs, to combat unemployment, and to boost the role of the private sector. The overarching vision is to build an inclusive, collaborative and innovative ecosystem for entrepreneurs, and so lay the foundations for a new era of economic opportunity in Kuwait.

I have myself tried to inject this spirit of entrepreneurship into the hospitality sector. In 2004, for instance, I noticed that the proliferation of budget airlines and influx of cost-conscious foreign business travellers had created a new market for mid-market lodging. This meant an opportunity to open three- and four-star hotels at a time when most of the activity in the region was in the five-star and luxury markets. Action Hotels, the company we established, is today

part of Action Group Holdings, and has around three thousand rooms across Australia and the Middle East.

On being awarded the Legion d’Honneur by the French government you were reported as saying that “Making happiness everywhere is the utmost goal”. What did you mean?

Kuwait is a nation of giving. As a people, we strongly believe in improving the wellbeing of humanity. Throughout our history, Kuwaitis have been known for promoting charitable and philanthropic causes; it is enshrined in the values and principles of Kuwaiti society, and those of the Kuwaiti government.

This year my family celebrated the 20th anniversary of sponsoring a book prize in the name of my late father. The British-Kuwait Friendship Society Book Prize was founded thanks to an endowment by the Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah Foundation back in 1999. This annual prize has close links with the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge, and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies. The role of the foundation is to promote Kuwait-British ties, particularly those relating to educational, scientific and cultural initiatives. In Kuwait we strongly believe that promoting causes such as these helps to build bridges of cooperation, and support exchange and dialogue between different societies and cultures.

Earlier this year, the Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah Foundation and the Mansion House – the official residence of the Lord Mayor of the City of London – signed a memorandum of agreement for the Foundation to fund and collaborate in a scheme to provide partnership scholarships for the next three years. These scholarships will provide funding for two students each year from the Arab world to study for a Master’s degree in a finance-related subject at British universities.

How would you describe the importance of the Kuwaiti-British relationship and what is your vision for its future?

Looking forward, Kuwait believes that British companies have an important role to play as reliable partners in implementing the Kuwait 2035 plan. More than US\$70 billion have been allocated by the Kuwaiti government to diversify the country’s economy, upgrade infrastructure, and improve public services. There is no question this will provide huge opportunities to companies around the world, including those in the UK. At the same time, Kuwait is already one of the largest investors in the UK economy – be it through the government’s Kuwait Investment Authority or private Kuwaiti companies. I strongly believe that the alliance and partnership between Kuwait and the UK will remain close and strong for many years to come. **E**

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