

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Antinomies of Alignment: Kuwait and the United States

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Abstract

Kuwait has forged a strong bilateral security alignment with the United States over the past three decades. But it has also pursued foreign policies that run counter to expressed American objectives and priorities in the Gulf and the broader Middle East. Why this happens can best be explained in terms of a combination of shifts in the overt US commitment to the partnership and changes in the level of threat in the region.

In the years following the 1990–91 Gulf War, Kuwait and the United States forged a strong bilateral security alignment. This partnership has nevertheless accompanied Kuwaiti foreign-policy initiatives that run counter to expressed American objectives and priorities, not only in the Gulf but also in the broader Middle East. Relations between the two states consequently exhibit a degree of incompatibility that seems incongruous given the strength of the underlying connection. The paradox that arises between Kuwait's firm alignment with the United States and its evident proclivity to challenge American preferences can best be explicated in terms of the conjunction between shifts in the level of overt US commitment to the partnership and changes in the regional environment in which it operates.

EMERGENCE OF THE ALIGNMENT, 1991–2003

Prior to 1990, US-Kuwaiti relations fluctuated between indifference and nonchalance. Washington made no effort to step into the United Kingdom's shoes after London announced in January 1968 that it was going to pull its armed forces out of the Gulf. Not until May 1973 did Kuwait conclude a substantial arms deal with the United States, which included F-8 fighter-bombers, M60

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main battle tanks, and HAWK anti-aircraft missile batteries.¹ Two years later, Kuwait attempted to acquire A-4 ground-attack aircraft and additional HAWK missiles, but the prospective purchase ran afoul of the oil embargo against the United States that had accompanied the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Kuwait's refusal to allow the United States to set up a Military Assistance Advisory Group inside the country to oversee delivery of the weapons, and intense Israeli opposition to the deal.²

Kuwait pointedly kept the United States at arm's length as the war between Iraq and Iran escalated during the winter of 1982–83. The Kuwaiti foreign minister asked reporters that January, "What are these US naval ships doing in the Gulf? Are they here for tourism or fishing? They are waiting for an excuse to intervene in our affairs, and we should prevent them from doing so."³ But when the fighting started to endanger shipping in the Gulf during the spring of 1987, the Kuwaiti government abruptly changed course and suggested that Washington might facilitate the uninterrupted flow of hydrocarbons to world markets if it took charge of a handful of oil tankers and assigned US Navy warships to escort them as far as the Arabian Sea. US officials hesitated to take up the task but agreed to hoist US flags on and provide American masters for 11 Kuwaiti-owned vessels after the Soviet Union expressed interest in undertaking the operation.⁴ At the same time, Kuwait asked to buy 40 F/A-18 fighter-bombers, the newest and most potent warplane flown by the US Navy, along with 120 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles and other advanced munitions.⁵ This request was granted, but only after the Kuwaiti authorities intimated that they intended to approach Moscow with a similar proposition.

Bilateral relations shifted dramatically in the aftermath of Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait. As soon as the 1990–91 Gulf War ended, the US armed forces took steps to protect and solidify the foothold they had gained in the country during the course of the fighting. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney announced in May 1991 that Washington was going to maintain an armored infantry brigade in Kuwait for an indefinite period. Startled by the prospect that American troops might be deployed in the Gulf in perpetuity, Oman proposed that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) set up a collective-defense force consisting of units drawn exclusively from the militaries of its six member states.⁶ Kuwait ignored the proposal and that September signed a 10-year bilateral defense pact that provided for the pre-positioning of US weaponry and equipment, the construction of a network of "interoperable" air bases and a series of joint military exercises.⁷ Kuwait's armed forces carried out three sets of maneuvers with the US Army and Marine Corps during the last quarter of 1991: two in May 1992, two in August 1992, another in June 1993, and one more in April 1994.

Reports in October 1994 that Iraq was moving two elite Republican Guard divisions toward the border with Kuwait prompted US commanders to dispatch additional troops, aircraft, and warships to the northern Gulf.⁸ Kuwaiti officials at that point agreed to permit 5,000 US Army

¹ Chookiat Panasornprasit, *US-Kuwaiti Relations, 1961-1992* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 56.

² *Ibid.*, 62.

³ Faisal Abu Sulaib, "Kuwaiti Policy toward the 'Qatar Crisis'," *Middle East Policy* 27 (2020): 50.

⁴ Panasornprasit, *US-Kuwaiti Relations*, 100.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁶ Robert Mason, "The Omani Pursuit of a Large Peninsula Shield Force," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41 (2014).

⁷ Fred H. Lawson, "Political Economy, Geopolitics and the Expanding US Military Presence in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 13 (Spring 2004): 9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1066992042000189698>.

⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, *Kuwait* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 12.

troops to remain stationed at a local facility known as Camp Doha. US reinforcements rushed to Kuwait in response to Iraqi activities in August 1995, and again in January 1996. Combined exercises involving the Kuwaiti and US armed forces took place from August to December 1996, during which Washington obtained permission to station a further 5,000 military personnel in Kuwait, along with a squadron of F-117 fighter-bombers. Joint maneuvers in May 1998 included the offloading of US M1A2 main battle tanks, heavy artillery pieces, and amphibious assault vehicles. The two states agreed in the fall of 1999 that Kuwait would cover the cost of upgrading three local facilities used by American troops: Camp Doha and the Ahmad al-Jaber and Ali al-Salem air bases.⁹

US commanders further augmented the American military presence in Kuwait in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks on New York and northern Virginia. The headquarters for all US Army units attached to the US Central Command relocated to the country that December, setting the stage for the February 2002 transfer of command and intelligence components of the US Third Army from Europe. To house these troops, the Kuwaiti government constructed a new base at Arifjan. A steady stream of US combat and support units flowed into Kuwait throughout 2002, and contingents of the US Marine Corps carried out field maneuvers on Failaka Island at the southern end of the Shatt al-Arab and along the border with Iraq. By March 2003, approximately 250,000 American troops had taken up positions in the country.

Meanwhile, Kuwait contracted with the United States to rebuild its decimated armed forces and add new varieties of armaments to its arsenal. Forty additional F/A-18 fighter-bombers and five MIM-104C Patriot PAC-2 anti-missile batteries were purchased from Washington in 1992, supplemented a year later by 200 M1A2 tanks, 16 AH-64 helicopter gunships, and a half-dozen HAWK batteries. Kuwaiti military spending doubled from 1990 to 1995, stayed relatively constant until the end of the 1990s, then doubled again from 2000 to 2001.¹⁰ The Kuwaiti army during these years added a second mechanized infantry brigade, an elite Emiri Guard brigade, a new artillery regiment, and a commando battalion. Still, the total size of the local military never exceeded 17,000 troops. Senior Kuwaiti commanders quietly acknowledged that the primary mission of the country's armed forces was to hold off any attacker just long enough for US troops to ride to the rescue.¹¹

Kuwait Restrains Itself

During the initial years of the bilateral security partnership, Kuwait pursued foreign policies that closely conformed to expressed US objectives and priorities. Kuwaiti officials raised no objection to Washington's repeated use of aerial bombardment to punish Iraq whenever the authorities in Baghdad tried to interfere with UN weapons inspections. In addition, "Kuwait was the most vociferous in refusing to [agree to] any rapid form of sanction lifting [on the part of the UN Security Council], an aim that was gaining a broad inter-Arab appeal" during the early 1990s.¹² More

⁹ Sami G. Hajjar, *US Military Presence in the Gulf* (Carlisle: US Army War College, 2002), 28.

¹⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman and Khalid Al-Rodhan, *The Gulf Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric War* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2006).

¹¹ Susan B. Glasser, "Kuwait Builds Up Arsenal, Confidence," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/02/08/kuwait-builds-up-arsenal-confidence/5b691200-077d-4361-9ea8-b1ab5803a6d3/>.

¹² Uzi Rabi, "Kuwait's Changing Strategic Posture," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 27 (2004): 58.

important, the Kuwaiti government played a key role in persuading other GCC member states to take part in joint military exercises with US forces.

Kuwait at the same time compensated the Islamic Republic of Iran for acquiescing in the expansion of the US military presence in the Gulf. Kuwaiti officials initiated talks to apportion sovereignty over the oil and gas fields that straddle the two countries' maritime boundary. More important, the principality opened its domestic market to Iranian manufactures, and by the mid-1990s had run up a massive balance-of-trade deficit with Iran.¹³ Kuwait also proposed to expand the container port at al-Shuwaikh, in order to facilitate the transit of goods into and out of Iran. As US troops poured into Kuwait during the spring of 2002, Kuwaiti officials further mollified the Islamic Republic by supplementing economic links with rudimentary security connections. Iran's Minister of Defense Ali Shamkhani arrived in Kuwait that May to discuss bilateral cooperation against a wide range of common threats, the first visit to the country by a senior Iranian official since the 1978–79 revolution.

While taking conciliatory steps toward Iran, Kuwait distanced itself from Russia, with which it had maintained close ties since the mid-1970s. Kuwaiti officials made an attempt in August 1993 to counterbalance the country's newfound dependence on Washington by concluding a bilateral security agreement with Moscow. The deal set the stage for joint military exercises that December, as well as for the delivery of a Russian-made S-300 anti-missile battery. Kuwait purchased two dozen BM-30 Smerch ground-to-ground missile launchers, 1,700 Fagot and Bastion anti-tank missiles, and 200 BMP-2 and BMP-3 armored personnel carriers from Russia the following summer.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the agreement was shortly thereafter "frozen due to Russia's weak financial capabilities and Kuwaiti passivity toward its further implementation."¹⁵

Kuwait similarly pulled away from the People's Republic of China (PRC), with which it had an equally long history of engagement. PRC Prime Minister Li Peng arrived in Kuwait in July 1991 and negotiated a handful of protocols aimed at strengthening bilateral relations. As the initial wave of Kuwaiti postwar military spending crested during the mid-1990s, the government's Higher Defense Council explored the possibility of acquiring PRC-built, self-propelled heavy-artillery batteries. A proposal to purchase 72 of these long-range weapons in the spring of 1997 prompted an immediate reaction from Washington: US Vice President Al Gore appealed to the Kuwaiti leadership to buy US-made M109A6 Paladin batteries instead.¹⁶ This request was reiterated by Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen during a trip to the country that June, and the prospective deal with Beijing was quietly abandoned. Relations between Kuwait and the PRC thereafter descended into dormancy.

Kuwait's pursuit of foreign policies that closely conformed to US preferences during the initial years of the alignment reflected both the high level of overt commitment that Washington evinced to the alignment and the high level of threat that permeated the northern Gulf. The potential for Iraqi bellicosity remained elevated even after Iraq's defeat in the 1990–91 war. Baghdad's repeated attempts to expel UN weapons inspectors precipitated armed confrontations with US forces on

¹³ Cordesman, *Kuwait*, 15.

¹⁴ "Russia Clinches Kuwait Arms Sale," *United Press International*, August 8, 1994.

¹⁵ Elena Melkumyan, *A Political History of Relations between Russia and the Gulf States*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015, 8.

¹⁶ John Lancaster, "US Role as Arms Merchant to Kuwait Faces Challenge by China," *Washington Post*, July 15, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/07/15/us-role-as-arms-merchant-to-kuwait-faces-challenge-by-china/fla617a0-20b4-426e-b7c3-23df40862aa4/>.

four occasions between October 1997 and December 1998. US air strikes against Iraq became a routine feature of regional affairs during 1999–2000, and these attacks became more extensive during the first half of 2001. Despite these punitive measures, on the 10th anniversary of the 1990–91 war, the son of President Saddam Hussein proposed that the logo of the Iraqi National Assembly be redrawn to include the territory of Kuwait as an integral part of Iraq.¹⁷ In May 2001, the newspaper of Iraq's Baath Party charged that the United Nations was willfully ignoring Kuwait's ongoing "theft" of Iraqi oil from the fields that straddle the Kuwait-Iraq border—an allegation that echoed the rhetoric that had set the stage for Baghdad's August 1990 military offensive.¹⁸

At the same time, Iran embarked on an energetic campaign to develop domestically designed and manufactured medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs).¹⁹ A locally produced short-range missile had been tested as early as 1988, and a SCUD-C MRBM supplied by North Korea (DPRK) was test-fired in June 1991. These surface-to-surface weapons were complemented during the mid-1990s with Iranian versions of the PRC's potent C-801 Sardine and C-802 Saccade anti-ship missiles. November 1996 brought reports that an Iranian-built C-802 clone had been successfully launched from one of the Iranian navy's PRC-built fast-patrol boats. A year and a half later, a locally produced version of the DPRK's Nodong MRBM, designated the Shahab, was unveiled; it boasted an operational range of 1,300 kilometers, putting the entirety of the GCC within its reach. More alarmingly, an Iranian opposition movement announced in August 2002 that two previously undeclared uranium enrichment facilities were operating inside the Islamic Republic. The announcement prompted the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to censure Tehran for neglecting to disclose all of the components of its nuclear research program. Speculation quickly percolated throughout the region that Iran was planning to make an atomic bomb.

CONSOLIDATION OF THE ALIGNMENT, 2003–09

Washington maintained a sizable military presence in Kuwait in the aftermath of the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. The US Army's headquarters in the Gulf (ARCENT) remained in place, and the armaments that had been pre-positioned in the country prior to the invasion were returned to storage at Arifjan. American troops rotated in and out of Iraq by passing through Kuwaiti territory, putting some 50,000 US military personnel inside Kuwait at any given moment. In April 2004, the George W. Bush administration conferred on Kuwait the exceptional status of a "major ally" not affiliated with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), making it possible for the United States to transfer NATO-grade weaponry to the Kuwaiti armed forces. Even so, there were indications that the early vibrancy of the Kuwaiti-US partnership had started to plateau: Kuwaiti officials announced in March 2005 that US military vehicles would no longer be allowed to refuel at local gasoline stations without paying. Nine months later, US commanders abandoned Camp Doha and turned control of the facility over to the local authorities.

Meanwhile, deliveries of US-made tanks, artillery, and armored personnel carriers to the Kuwaiti military leveled off. Such tactical armaments were superseded by more technologically sophisticated weapons, the setup and maintenance of which entailed the active involvement of

¹⁷S. Kamal, "Iraq: Unmoved by Washington," *Middle East International*, no. 642 (January 26, 2001): 6.

¹⁸"Iraq: Confident Noises," *Middle East International*, no. 650 (May 18, 2001): 17.

¹⁹Riad Kahwaji, "Gulf Cooperation Council Threat Perceptions and Deterrence Objectives," *Comparative Strategy* 22 (2003).

American military advisers. Some 400 wire-guided anti-tank missiles were shipped to Kuwait during 2005–06, while upgraded Patriot PAC-3 batteries arrived at the end of 2007. In September 2008, Kuwait purchased 10 dozen US-made AIM-120 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM). These state-of-the-art weapons—which replaced Russian-made anti-aircraft missiles that had been put into service prior to the 1990–91 war—not only enhanced Kuwait’s capacity to protect itself against aerial attack, but also entrenched the US presence more deeply inside the local armed forces. In addition, the high-technology armaments transformed the Kuwaiti military into a major source of revenue for US-based arms manufacturers, particularly ones whose markets were restricted to the small number of buyers authorized to take delivery of advanced weapons systems.

Kuwait Shifts toward Assertiveness

Following the ouster of Iraq’s Baath Party-led regime, Kuwait provided financial and moral support to the new US-sponsored government in Baghdad. Kuwaiti officials acceded to prodding from Washington to host a regional conference in October 2004, at which the participants pledged to cultivate connections with the devastated Iraqi economy and refrain from undermining the territorial integrity of Iraq. Two months later, Kuwait agreed to supply Iraq with gasoline and diesel fuel in exchange for token shipments of Iraqi crude oil.²⁰ The Kuwaiti authorities in early 2005 granted permission for Iraq to open a temporary legation in the principality, despite lingering animosity arising from Baghdad’s failure to keep up payments on \$24 billion in reparations for damage resulting from the 1990–91 war. On the other hand, the Kuwaiti government announced plans in late 2004 to build a new container port on Bubiyan Island at the mouth of the Shatt al-Arab, which was likely to pose a serious challenge to Iraq’s southern port of Umm Qasr.

As the Kuwaiti-US partnership consolidated, the Kuwaiti government made a more concerted effort to strengthen connections with Tehran. Several bilateral agreements were drawn up to coordinate the two countries’ internal security and law-enforcement practices. Senior Kuwaiti officials started to criticize Washington’s threats to disrupt Iran’s nuclear research program, on the grounds that US actions constituted an infringement on Iranian sovereignty. Such statements prompted the Islamic Republic’s foreign minister to travel to Kuwait to express his government’s gratitude in person. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Kuwait in February 2006, and a month later the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding that boosted mutual cooperation with regard to internal and external security matters. As tensions escalated between Washington and Tehran during the spring of 2007, the Kuwaiti government announced that it would not permit US forces to launch attacks against the Islamic Republic from Kuwaiti territory.

In addition, Kuwait took steps to restore links to the PRC. Prime Minister Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah journeyed to Beijing in July 2004 and concluded an assortment of bilateral commercial and financial agreements that prepared the way for substantial Kuwaiti investments in the PRC’s hydrocarbon and petrochemical sectors. Sabah returned to Beijing after he became emir five years later and announced that he was “seeking to increase political coordination with China and create new horizons for boosting two-way trade.”²¹ Meanwhile, Kuwait forged connections to the DPRK:

²⁰ Hussein Moeh, Kamarulnizam Abdullah, and Amin Bin Yatiban, “Role of the US Interests in Iraq-Kuwait Relations after 2003,” *Journal of Legal and Political Sciences* 5 (2016): 316.

²¹ Khizar Niazi, *Kuwait Looks Towards the East*, Middle East Institute, 2009, 4, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/106361/No_26_Kuwait_looks_towards_the_east.pdf.

The Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED), for instance, agreed to finance three modern sewage-treatment plants in the DPRK's capital city of Pyongyang. In return, North Korea supplied thousands of manual laborers to work for Kuwaiti construction companies. Payments to these workers provided the DPRK with substantial injections of hard currency at a time when Washington was doing its best to enforce strict economic sanctions against Pyongyang.

Kuwait's turn toward a more assertive and self-interested foreign policy reflected the deepening of Washington's commitment to the bilateral alignment; yet, its renewed assertiveness continued to be constrained by the high level of threat that pervaded the northern Gulf. Even as danger of invasion from Iraq vanished with the ouster of the Baath leadership in Baghdad, the threat emanating from Iran grew more pronounced. Upgraded versions of Iran's Shahab were exhibited in September 2004, along with two new MRBMs—the Zilzal and the Naziat—and the Nur and Kawsar anti-ship missiles, which were modeled on the PRC's C-801 and C-802, respectively. All of these armaments, plus al-Fajr anti-aircraft batteries, were incorporated into the extensive Holy Prophet military exercises that were undertaken jointly by the Iranian armed forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in the spring of 2006 and resumed that November. A pair of extended-range MRBMs, the Qadr and Ashura, appeared in the autumn of 2007, supplemented by the Sejil in November 2008.

Equally worrying, Ahmadinejad in April 2006 celebrated the resumption of Iranian uranium enrichment. This development prompted the UN Security Council to adopt Resolution 1696, which demanded that the nuclear research program be terminated at once. Tehran flatly ignored the resolution, and the Security Council imposed punitive sanctions at the end of the year. After George W. Bush in January 2008 called the Islamic Republic “the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism,” IRGC naval units started to play “chicken” with American warships patrolling the Gulf. Iranian officials threatened on several occasions to retaliate against US Navy vessels, in the event that any attempt were made to damage that country's nuclear facilities. Furthermore, in October 2008, the commander of the Iranian navy announced plans to construct a new base at Jask, adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz. Taken together, these initiatives raised the prospect that Tehran had the capacity to cut off maritime access to the Gulf.²²

DECLINE OF THE ALIGNMENT, 2009–18

Sizable contingents of the US armed forces remained positioned at Arifjan, the Ahmad al-Jaber and Ali al-Salem air bases, a handful of naval facilities, and the desert firing range called Camp Buehring, even as American troops pulled out of Iraq. Yet the vibrancy of the bilateral alignment became less pronounced after 2008–09. US commanders deployed two additional Patriot anti-missile batteries to Kuwait in January 2010, ostensibly to protect against possible attacks by Iran. During the spring of 2011, officials in Washington considered whether to increase the number of US troops stationed in the country after American forces completed their withdrawal from Iraq that December, so that they could quickly return if the government in Baghdad got into serious trouble. No such augmentation took place; by the end of 2012, the total number of US military personnel in Kuwait had fallen to approximately 13,500.

In fact, the United States found itself increasingly reliant on Kuwait as a crucial component of the American security presence in the region. When tensions between Washington and Tehran

²² Caitlin Talmadge, “Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz,” *International Security* 33 (2008): 82-117.

spiked during the late spring of 2012, US commanders deployed F-15 and F-22 fighter-bombers to the Ahmad al-Jaber and Ali al-Salem air bases, in order “to give the United States military greater capability against [Iranian] coastal missile batteries that could threaten shipping, as well as the reach to strike other targets deeper inside Iran.”²³ In September 2014, US officials asked the Kuwaiti government for permission to carry out air strikes against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from these two bases. The request was granted, even though Kuwait’s own air force took no part in the ensuing bombing campaign. ARCENT subsequently assumed command over US-led air and ground operations to oust ISIL from the districts it had captured in Iraq and Syria.²⁴ A Brigade Combat Team of the elite US 82nd Airborne Division arrived in Kuwait in March 2017 to back up the offensive against ISIL.²⁵

US arms shipments to Kuwait tapered off after 2008, although the Kuwaiti military remained an important market for technologically advanced weaponry. Deliveries consisted almost entirely of weapons systems whose effective operation entailed the direct involvement of US military advisers, most notably Patriot PAC-3 batteries and AMRAAM missiles. Substantial upgrades to the Kuwaiti air force’s fighter-bombers were announced on December 4, 2013. The Kuwaiti government ordered 40 improved F/A-18s in the summer of 2015 but threatened to rescind the order and purchase European-built warplanes instead after the US Congress hesitated to approve the deal. Not until November 2016 did Congress authorize the transfer of a smaller number of upgraded F/A-18s.

Kuwait Flexes Its Muscles

Kuwait in June 2010 accepted the credentials of the first Iraqi ambassador to the country since the 1990–91 war, and at the same time concluded an agreement to collaborate with Baghdad to exploit the disputed Rumailah oil field. Yet, during the winter of 2010–11, the Kuwaiti government adopted a decidedly more antagonistic posture toward its northern neighbor. A Kuwaiti Coast Guard vessel fired on an Iraqi fishing boat in the Shatt al-Arab in January 2011, despite the signing that month of a US-sponsored protocol that committed the two states to work together to ensure maritime security in the area.²⁶ Kuwait meanwhile accelerated construction of the Mubarak the Great container port on Bubiyan Island, thereby eliciting sharp criticism from Iraqi officials, who called the project a provocation that was intended to divert shipping away from both Umm Qasr and a new Iraqi port under construction directly across the Shatt al-Arab. Tensions mounted over the next two months, with the authorities in Baghdad charging that Kuwait was “strangling” the Iraqi economy—a claim once again echoing the bellicose rhetoric that had led up to the 1990 invasion.

Following threats by radical Iraqi movements to disrupt work on Bubiyan Island, Kuwaiti officials declared that it was Baghdad’s responsibility to prevent any cross-border attacks. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki visited Kuwait in March 2012 in a bid to improve bilateral relations, and Emir Sabah reciprocated by paying a visit to Baghdad. But the trips did little to ameliorate Kuwait’s resurgent animosity toward the al-Maliki government. On the contrary, the Kuwaiti ruler’s son,

²³ Thom Shanker, Eric Schmitt, and David Sanger, “US Adds Forces in Persian Gulf, A Signal to Iran,” *New York Times*, July 3, 2012.

²⁴ Kenneth Katzman, *Kuwait: Governance, Security and US Policy*, CRS Report RS 21513, 2017, 17.

²⁵ Charlsy Panzino and Andrew deGrandpre, “The US Is Sending 2500 Troops to Kuwait,” *Army Times*, March 9, 2017.

²⁶ Moeh, Abdullah, and Bin Yatiban, “Role of the US Interests,” 317.

Nasir, traveled to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq a month later and proposed to link the KRG with the GCC as an affiliated “northern Gulf region.”²⁷ Observers speculated that, by making direct overtures to the KRG, Kuwait was signaling its intention to do whatever it could to perpetuate the internal instability that had kept Baghdad paralyzed in regional affairs.

Concurrently, Kuwait bolstered relations with Iran. The speaker of the Kuwaiti National Assembly charged in July 2008 that Washington was “provoking” Tehran at a time when “dialogue, not escalation” was required to resolve resurgent tensions over the Islamic Republic’s nuclear-research and ballistic-missile programs.²⁸ Kuwait welcomed Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki in November 2009, then dispatched Prime Minister Nasir al-Muhammad Al Sabah to Tehran to discuss the potential for joint economic ventures. The Kuwaiti premier told reporters that his government was “prepared to improve our ties in all fields with the friendly country of Iran.”²⁹ Kuwait and Iran restored formal diplomatic relations in May 2010, despite a brief crisis a month earlier over allegations that Iranian diplomats were operating a clandestine spy ring inside Kuwait.

Relations between Kuwait and Iran soured in March 2011, after three Kuwaiti soldiers were sentenced to death for passing information to the IRGC about local military installations. Tehran retaliated by expelling three Kuwaiti diplomats, prompting the Kuwaiti government to recall its ambassador. The crisis quickly subsided, however, and in February 2014, a senior official in the foreign ministry called relations between the two countries “excellent, historical and developing.”³⁰ Emir Sabah journeyed to Tehran in June 2014, accompanied by Kuwait’s ministers of foreign affairs, finance, petroleum, and trade. The trip marked the first time that any GCC ruler had set foot on Iranian soil since the 1978–79 revolution. In an attempt to prevent bilateral relations from suffering, the Kuwaiti authorities quashed speculation that Iran had any connection to the huge cache of small arms discovered in al-Abdali in August 2015.³¹ Kuwait did withdraw its ambassador in the wake of violent Iranian protests against Saudi Arabia’s January 2016 execution of the dissident Shii preacher Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, but it did not sever formal diplomatic relations over the incident. Once again, the disruption speedily passed, and the two governments expressed their intention to resume “friendly and brotherly” relations.³²

Emir Sabah invited Iranian President Hasan Rouhani to Kuwait in February 2017. Upon his arrival, Rouhani told his hosts, “There are vast potentials for deepening and cementing relations between Iran and Kuwait in different aspects that can be tapped for the two nations and the region to benefit from.”³³ Two months later, Kuwaiti officials remarked that one of the main purposes behind the construction of the Mubarak the Great Port was to stimulate and stabilize the Islamic Republic’s erratic foreign trade.³⁴ The amiable atmosphere was punctured by

²⁷ B. Charbel, *Iraq and Kuwait: A Step in the Right Direction*, Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2012.

²⁸ “Kuwait’s Parliament Speaker Says the West is ‘Provoking’ Iran on Nuclear Issue,” *Gulf News*, July 14, 2008.

²⁹ “Kuwaiti Premier in Rare Iran Visit Seeks Better Ties,” *Reuters*, November 22, 2009.

³⁰ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Walking the Tightrope: Kuwaiti-Iranian Relations in the Aftermath of the Abdali Affair*, Gulf State Analytics, August 29, 2017.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² “Iran, Kuwait Urge Better Ties between Tehran and GCC,” *Daily Star*, January 26, 2017.

³³ Ulrichsen, *Walking the Tightrope*.

³⁴ “Kuwait Broadens Economic Cooperation with Iran,” *al-Diyyar*, May 29, 2017.

Kuwait's decision that July to expel most of Iran's diplomatic representatives, after the principal-ity's High Court reversed the acquittals of 22 individuals who had been charged with conspiring with Tehran and the Lebanon-based Hizbullah to engage in unspecified "hostile acts."³⁵ But, yet again, Kuwait soon resumed its accommodating posture toward Tehran, and—in contrast to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain—refused to applaud Washington's unilateral abrogation of the agreement that put strict limits on Iran's nuclear-research program, the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).³⁶

More important, relations between Kuwait and Russia came out of hibernation. Notable increases in bilateral trade accompanied a resurgence of security connections. The Kuwaiti army as early as 2009 ordered 70 BMP-3 armored personnel carriers. Emir Sabah traveled to the Black Sea resort of Sochi in November 2015 to confer with Russian President Vladimir Putin. A prominent Kuwaiti journalist observed that the meeting showed that "Russia is an important player in the [Middle East]. Russians have taken up the niche vacated by the United States to prove that they can take a seat at any negotiating table to discuss the crises in the region."³⁷ Kuwait's official news agency reported that the two leaders discussed "ways and means of promoting [bilateral] economic, investment, oil and *military* cooperation," and that the Kuwaiti defense ministry signed a "statement of intent" with the Russian weapons manufacturer Rosoboronexport for unspecified "military equipment."³⁸ Rosoboronexport and two other Russian arms-making conglomerates participated in the international armaments exhibition that took place in Kuwait City in December 2015. Fourteen months later, the Kuwaiti government announced that it had purchased \$15 million worth of Russian-made T-90 main battle tanks.

Kuwait's relations with the PRC blossomed as well. Emir Sabah's May 2009 visit to Beijing led to the awarding of a contract to a Chinese construction company to design and build a causeway between Bubiyan Island and the Kuwaiti mainland capable of handling trucks moving in and out of the Mubarak the Great Port, a project that observers called "one of the largest infrastructure ventures in Kuwait."³⁹ At the same time, KFAED agreed to finance a massive irrigation and water-storage project in China's western province of Xinjiang, despite widespread sympathy inside Kuwait for that province's beleaguered Muslim community. The PRC's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative envisaged even tighter logistical connections between the two countries: The Mubarak the Great Port came to be incorporated into Chinese plans to set up a gigantic free zone that would put Kuwait at the heart of an extensive maritime and railway network linking Central Eurasia to Europe.⁴⁰ Dealings between Kuwait and the DPRK, by contrast, proved mercurial: Direct flights between the two countries by the North Korean carrier Air Koryo were inaugurated in 2011 but terminated five years later under intense pressure from Seoul and Washington. Still, thousands of North Korean laborers found employment in Kuwait at a time when Washington was clamoring for the international community to ostracize Pyongyang.

³⁵ Giorgio Cafiero, "Kuwait-Iran Diplomatic Row Could Have Wide-Ranging Impact," *Al Monitor*, July 25, 2017; Ali Shihabi, *Kuwait: A Case Study in the Futility of Accommodating the Iranian Regime*, Arabia Foundation, September 18, 2018.

³⁶ Hamad H. Albloshi, "Kuwait's Careful Balancing Act with Iran, Saudi Arabia," *Al Monitor*, May 24, 2018.

³⁷ "Russia Becomes Most Important Actor in Middle East—Kuwaiti Experts," *TASS*, November 10, 2015.

³⁸ Habib Toumi, "Kuwait, Russia Boost Ties, Cooperation," *Gulf News*, November 11, 2015 (emphasis added).

³⁹ Niazi, *Kuwait Looks Towards the East*, 6.

⁴⁰ Mordechai Chaziza, "China's Strategic Partnership with Kuwait," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 7 (2020): 509.

Kuwait's foreign-policy assertiveness after 2009 reflected not only the obsolescence of the security partnership with the United States but also a diminution in the level of threat in the northern Gulf. The secretary-general of the GCC declared in July 2010 that the six member states did "not wish for a confrontation [with Tehran] and we reject any military option. We ask that Iran respond to and co-operate with legitimate international resolutions and the [IAEA] in order to resolve the current problems."⁴¹ Iranian representatives in April 2012 met with diplomats from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and the PRC to discuss ways to resolve the dispute over the nuclear-research program. Both sides described the talks as constructive, and officials in Washington announced that Tehran might be permitted to resume production of enriched uranium if it promised not to develop nuclear weapons and not to interfere with future IAEA inspections. Further negotiations culminated in the June 2015 JCPOA, for which Kuwait voiced much greater enthusiasm than did most other GCC states.⁴² As soon as this agreement was announced, the Kuwaiti government welcomed the Islamic Republic's foreign minister, who assured his hosts that Tehran intended to fully honor its commitments.⁴³

Iranian missile development decelerated after 2008 and concentrated more on telecommunications and space exploration than on military purposes. June 2009 saw the start of large-scale production of a locally produced anti-missile battery, which was designated the Shahin. This weapon provided the basis for the Mersad air-defense system that became operational in the spring of 2010. A ship-based anti-missile battery, the Mihrab, was introduced in January 2012, and the Mersad system was upgraded to become the Raad system that September. During the spring of 2016, Iran took delivery of the first of four Russian-made S-300 anti-missile batteries. Yet another aerial interdiction weapon, the Bavar, was tested in January 2018.

ISIL's emergence as a threat to regional security during the spring of 2015 did little to reinvigorate the Kuwaiti-US partnership. Reports circulated that autumn that the Kuwaiti air force had contracted to purchase 28 European-made Typhoon fighter-bombers to take the place of the F/A-18s it had been unable to obtain from Washington; the procurement of the Typhoons was finalized in April 2016.⁴⁴ Prime Minister Jaber al-Mubarak Al Sabah traveled to France in October 2015 and concluded a weapons acquisition deal worth almost \$3 billion.⁴⁵ This package included two dozen Caracal heavy-transport helicopters and an undisclosed number of Sherpa armored personnel carriers. A further agreement put French engineers in charge of modernizing and maintaining most of the warships that make up the Kuwaiti navy, tasks that had previously been carried out by US military personnel. In a similar vein, Kuwait in October 2018 signed a bilateral security pact with Turkey, which opened the door to both an exchange of "military expertise and know-how" and a Turkish military presence on Kuwaiti soil.⁴⁶

⁴¹ *Al-Hayah*, July 16, 2010.

⁴² Albloshi, "Kuwait's Careful Balancing Act"; Cinzia Bianco, "The GCC Monarchies: Perceptions of the Iranian Threat amid Shifting Geopolitics," *International Spectator* 55 (2020): 102.

⁴³ Khaled Alsalloum and Mohamed Tayie, "The Present and Future of Kuwaiti-Iranian Relations," *Asian Social Science* 14 (2018): 105.

⁴⁴ Robert Wall, "Finmeccanica Signs Deal to See Kuwait 28 Eurofighter Typhoons," *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2016.

⁴⁵ Lucie Aubourg, "Kuwait Is Buying a Bunch of Weapons to Protect Itself from the Islamic State," *Vice News*, October 22, 2015.

⁴⁶ "Why is Kuwait Approaching Turkey for Military Cooperation?" *TRT World*, October 26, 2018; Abu Sulaib, "Kuwaiti Policy," 52.

CONCLUSION

Relations between Kuwait and the United States have exhibited a distinctive trajectory over the past three decades. Kuwait started to rely on Washington to protect it against all external threats in the aftermath of the 1990–91 war, and in return permitted the US armed forces to establish a substantial military presence on Kuwaiti territory. As a result, the security alignment between the two states came to approximate the protectorate that had existed between Kuwait and the United Kingdom from the 19th century until December 1971, when Britain withdrew its armed forces from the Gulf.

One crucial difference between the era of British predominance and the present day is that Kuwait is now an independent state that enjoys the right to pursue foreign policies that promote its own strategic interests. The Kuwaiti government found itself tightly constrained during the initial years of its security alignment with the United States, both by the country's heavy reliance on its new partner and by the high level of threat that existed in the northern Gulf. As Washington's overt commitment to and investment in the partnership deepened, however, Kuwait took steps to further its own objectives and priorities, sometimes at the expense of those of the United States. Such initiatives remained limited so long as the level of threat in the region stayed elevated. But as the Kuwaiti-US alignment started to obsolesce, and the level of regional threat concurrently diminished, Kuwaiti officials have adopted more assertive and self-interested external policies, which often turn out to be antinomic to American preferences.

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