

**LSE LECTURE**  
**‘THE BRITISH INVOLVEMENT IN KUWAIT: LESSONS FOR**  
**TODAY?’**  
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The following remarks are based on my experience as a diplomat in the region on and off since the late 60s, on my more recent travels in the Gulf and my involvement with a programme with Durham University and Chatham House supported by the Sir William Luce Memorial Fund looking at political reform in the GCC states. I have also drawn for this lecture on a book I have written with a couple of colleagues tracing the history of certain British Missions around the Gulf, including Kuwait (‘British Missions Around the Gulf’, Hugh Arbuthnott, Terence Clark, Richard Muir, Global Oriental, London, 2008).

**Work of the Luce Programme**

In the Luce Memorial Fund seminars at Durham and at Chatham House since 2005 members of GCC governments, politicians and academics from the region have spoken very frankly about reform in the GCC. We have tackled such questions as:

- How politically stable are these states?
- Can governments and societies adapt to a post oil future?
- Can political change be led solely from the top?

**GCC common features**

The seminars have noted that the six GCC states, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, share a remarkable amount of common ground.

- these states have proved remarkably stable and have developed faster over the last half century than the rest of the Arab world
- they have done so as countries still run by hereditary monarchs whose dynasties have been around for several hundred years;

- the remarkable economic growth has been almost entirely oil based, leading to rentier societies with high levels of imported labour
- the indigenous populations enjoy a high standard of living, free education and health services, cheap utilities and little or no tax
- they depend on the west – essentially the US – for their security; US forces are based in Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, with equipment stored in Oman and use of bases there; the UAE recently invited the French in (Saudi Arabia has of course been the exception since the early 1990s).
- but all six states have jealously guarded their internal autonomy and where it has been eroded by globalisation and other outside pressures have found common cause in the institutions of the GCC.

### **...and common problems**

The six states also face some very similar problems:

- with a few exceptions –Dubai and Bahrain in some respects – they have so far failed to develop anything approaching viable non oil economies; the indigenous populations have grown very fast yet few young people are prepared for competition with workers in the Far East or Europe;
- many GCC citizens remain deeply conservative, resistant to change. Reform has been perceived as an aspect of globalisation, as a threat to local mores, social structure and oil funded welfare. Withdrawal into a secure past, a kind of passive negativism becomes an attractive alternative.
- at the same time there is undoubtedly a growing element in these populations angry at the concentration of political and economic power and at the slow speed of political change. This mood is deeply mistrustful of government and often channelled into radical Islam – Sunni, Shi'a or Ibadhi. Throughout the Gulf the Arab nationalists and the more moderate liberal reformers are an older generation, often embattled or on the retreat.

### **But important differences too**

Each state is different and that the parallels go only so far.

At the simplest level, the style of national dress varies subtly from state to state. Each sets its own tone in its media: compare Al Jazira with Saudi national TV. Or compare the rather remote and stern image presented by Sultan Qaboos with the stream of visitors received by the smiling Kuwaiti Amir as 'the father' of his people or the technocratic Maktoums chairing meetings of CEOs and engineers.

And there are more profound differences. Oman goes back thousands of years; the other states are more recent. Saudi Arabia did not take its modern shape until the 1930s and had little involvement with Britain. The Trucial states separately had treaty relations with Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the union - the United Arab Emirates - was essentially a British creation. Kuwait was a British protectorate from 1915 to 1961 but internally remained robustly independent. In short, politically and economically each state has a different history; each has travelled a different distance and will need to find its own way forward.

### **Focus on Kuwait**

For the rest of the time available I want to develop these themes by focussing on Kuwait and to say something about the impact of Britain's involvement with Kuwait. There are two reasons for doing so:

- firstly Kuwait, was seen in the 1960s and 70s as a beacon for reform in the Gulf, leading the way, far ahead of some other states; a lot of the discussion in the Luce seminars focussed on the Kuwait experience and how relevant this might be to the other states.
- secondly having arrived in Kuwait in 1999 as Ambassador I quickly found myself studying the Kuwait/British Treaty of Friendship of 1899 and the history that flowed from it. This led me into research in the British archives about Kuwait's period under British protection and the political process then and after full independence in 1961. There is also important work by Kuwaiti, European and American historians covering much of the period, against which one can check the British record.

From all this emerges a picture of Kuwait's formation as a modern state and Britain's role in it. The history helps explain the present and what many observers see as the current bind in Kuwaiti politics.

## **Kuwait's history**

From the founding of the state in the early 18<sup>th</sup> c the Al Sabah have governed by the consent of Kuwait's other leading settled families who concentrated on trade. In the desert it was a matter of winning the loyalty of the tribes. The concept of a contract between rulers and ruled has thus been behind Kuwait's governance from the outset.

Modern Kuwait is usually reckoned to have started with Shaikh Mubarak who took power in 1896. Like his predecessors Mubarak faced Turkish pressures to accept that Kuwait was part of the Ottoman Empire. He agreed to some outward forms of allegiance to the Sultan in Constantinople – it was for example convenient to Mubarak and to Kuwait's merchants on their voyages up and down the Gulf to use the Ottoman flag. But Mubarak decided to offset Turkish pressures by striking a secret deal with the British in 1899 – the 'Treaty of Friendship'. The essential conditions of this were that for his part Mubarak would allow no foreign power into Kuwait without British agreement; for their part the British gave an implicit undertaking of support, backed up by the appearance of a British gunboat whenever Mubarak felt threatened.

George Curzon was at this time Viceroy of India. He had travelled widely and studied Persia – producing several thick volumes on his travels there - and the Gulf region. Curzon had long nagged London about the threat to India from Russian and German ambitions in the Gulf.

In 1904 Curzon made a Gulf tour with a fleet of seven Royal Navy ships with the declared purpose of showing, as he put it: 'by my presence the intention of His Majesty's Government to maintain their political and commercial ascendancy in those waters'. Kuwait was the last stop on the Arab side of the Gulf. In his private report to London Curzon described Mubarak as 'by far the most masculine and vigorous personality whom I have encountered in the Gulf' and concluded from their meeting that Mubarak had burnt his boats with the Turks and 'was now definitely ranged on our side'.

Curzon had in fact underestimated Mubarak. For the rest of his reign until 1915 he continued to play the British off against the Ottomans. The British Political Agent noted in 1910: 'Kuwait is ... in the happy position of being sought by two great Powers, thus affording him a lever by which he can

increase his own importance while balancing the two Powers against each other in all matters concerning himself”.

At the same time Mubarak was determined to preserve his domestic independence, running the sheikhdom with a firm hand and keeping the British Political Agent guessing about his intentions. In their reports from Kuwait Agents worried about what they felt were autocratic tendencies and feared that British support would lead Mubarak to think that he need no longer depend on the affections of his people; might Kuwaitis then complain about their ruler and look to Britain for deliverance? They did not and Mubarak appears to have continued to command the allegiance of his people.

With the outbreak of war in 1914 Kuwait ranged itself with Britain and in 1915 became formally a British protectorate – but as ‘an independent principality’.

After the war Britain once again came to Kuwait’s assistance, now against tribal (ikhwan) incursions which at one stage in 1920 threatened Kuwait with absorption into Ibn Saud’s rapidly expanding Kingdom of Nejd. The price for Kuwait was British drawn boundaries which reflected the loss of desert territory, some of it potentially oil bearing, to Ibn Saud. But there was also benefit for Kuwait: definition of the border with Iraq giving Kuwait territory up to Umm Qasr and the western shore of the waterway leading to it. Behind this lay a strategic British decision that preservation of an independent Kuwait was a long term British interest.

Mubarak was succeeded by his two sons who died in quick succession so that in 1921 his grandson Ahmed Jaber took over the sheikhdom. In doing so Shaikh Ahmed resisted pressure from a group of leading merchants for an elected advisory council – or Majlis. In 1938 Ahmed faced further demands for a Council, this time supported by his cousin and Crown Prince, Shaikh Abdulla Salem. Abdulla Salem calculated that without a representative Council, key merchant families would turn against the Al Sabah. Abdulla Salem put this to the British Political Agent Gerald de Gaury, who like his predecessors worried about the Ruler’s autocratic style and thought it time that Kuwait moved nearer to the democracy many in Britain in the 1930s thought should be encouraged in the overseas territories. De Gaury lent his weight to the internal pressures for the Ruler to accept the Council.

But when disputes broke out within the Council and the British authorities in India and London realised that the Council would produce unwanted results – nationalist control of the oil company and a foreign policy at variance with the British interest – de Gaury was instructed to give the Ruler Britain's support in quickly closing down the Council. De Gaury was posted away from the Gulf and a safer pair of hands sent to Kuwait. This rare example of British intervention in Kuwait's internal affairs –afterwards seen by the British in the Gulf as a bad mistake –still rankles with some senior Al Sabah .

When he succeeded Ahmed as Ruler in 1950 Abdulla Salem was preoccupied with the domestic consequences of the oil boom and rapid economic expansion. With its rapidly growing wealth Kuwait attracted skilled professionals from other Arab countries. With this influx, the return of Kuwaiti graduates from universities in Cairo and Baghdad and access to the pan Arab media - radio broadcasts and newspapers from Cairo - Arab nationalism entered the political discourse. With Suez in 1956 and the overthrow of the British backed Iraqi ruling family in 1958 the Ruler had the tricky task of balancing Kuwait's Arab credentials with the continued need for British protection.

Like Ahmed before him, Abdulla Salem resolutely resisted British offers of advice on how to run his state. Rather he reached agreement with Britain in 1961 that Kuwait should become fully independent with a formal defence agreement between the two states. That agreement was soon activated in face of a threatened Iraqi invasion. As Qasim moved his troops to the border Britain rushed a force to protect Kuwait. But once the crisis passed London recognised that it was in both Britain's and Kuwait's interest to hand over to an Arab League brigade and for Britain to resume its low defence profile.

At this point Abdulla Salem convened the constituent assembly which produced the 1962 constitution in force today. It drew on practice elsewhere within the Arab and wider developing world. But the drafters also took account of Kuwait's experience with elected councils in the 1920s and 30s and again in the 1950s as well as the much older traditions of consultation between ruler and ruled out of which the Councils had grown.

There is no evidence of a British hand in this process; the Embassy, as it now was, reported but did not seek to intervene. The Foreign Office in

London reminded those who still thought in colonial terms that Kuwait was an independent state.

The constitution confirmed the Al Sabah as hereditary monarchs. But for the first time in the Gulf it limited the powers of the Ruler and gave significant powers to an independent judiciary and to an elected assembly. Abdulla Salem ensured however that all key executive powers remained with the Al Sabah led government.

In short, while Britain provided Kuwait with external security – or did until the withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971 –the Kuwaitis preserved their independence in their internal affairs. These remained driven by domestic factors and regional influences.

Relations between the Al Sabah and the elected assembly became strained as Kuwait's economy and society continued to develop. Internally the Suq Al Manakh crisis created a major financial upheaval. Externally the country faced serious crises with Iraq in the 70s, and with Iran under Khomeini in the 80s as Kuwait was drawn into assisting Iraq in Saddam's war against Iran. In this febrile atmosphere the Amir – Shaikh Jaber Al Ahmed from 1977 and his Crown Prince Shaikh Sa'ad Abdulla – found it increasingly difficult to rule with an active and opinionated Assembly. Their solution was to bring in more of the traditional tribes to offset the urban nationalist and populist movements and then to shut the Assembly down from 1976 to 1981 and again from 1986 until the Iraqi invasion in 1990.

The approach changed on liberation in 1991. The Al Sabah then accepted that a combination of popular pressure from within Kuwait – people who had been through occupation and exile felt empowered –coupled with the expectations of western members of the coalition that had rescued Kuwait from Saddam, meant that it would be damaging to the family's long term interest not to restore constitutional rule. Shaikh Sabah Al Ahmed, the Ruler's brother, had by then had long experience of government as foreign minister. In the 1990s as the health of the ruler and Crown Prince deteriorated Shaikh Sabah became increasingly influential in Government. He was de facto Prime Minister from the late 1990s and became Amir in 2006.

## **Contemporary politics**

In the now nearly 18 years since liberation there has been a series of important developments under Shaikh Sabah's leadership in which Kuwait has continued to chart a path for the rest of the GCC:

- women now have the vote and can run for election, although no female candidate has yet been successful (here, Oman has so far had rather greater success);
- the electoral system in Kuwait has been adjusted to reduce the scope for ballot rigging and to achieve a fairer distribution of seats – although the new 5 constituency system is still skewed towards the central more affluent districts
- there is greater – but by no means complete - freedom of assembly and the media is amongst the least fettered in the Arab world; at the last count Kuwait with an indigenous population of 1.5m had 17 newspaper titles and 6 independent satellite TV channels; political groupings are recognised as such and dealt with by the Government, although formal political parties remain banned
- the Assembly has established that it has a voice in the succession. The government acknowledged on Shaikh Jaber's death in 2006 that the Assembly could properly vote on the fitness of ailing the Crown Prince Shaikh Sa'ad to succeed – in fact he withdrew gracefully minutes before the vote
- Freedom House ranks Kuwait highest of the Arab states on political rights and civil liberties

These reforms have come about through a combination of initiatives from the top and pressures from below, primarily the liberals, but on change to the electoral system from a clear majority within the Assembly. The Speaker of the Assembly has been an important influence, particularly in mediating with the Government. Regional and global trends have also been significant, including the western belief that democracy is the only way forward and an essential underpinning of stability – although the stridency of the Bush administration on this point hasn't helped.

But the Kuwaiti reforms would not have been made to happen without the determination of members of the ruling family led by Shaikh Sabah. As elsewhere within the GCC it is clear that political change still has to come



from the top; people look to the government to lead; popular pressures for political reform are still muted.

### **Challenges to reform**

Indeed there are now signs that the reform process in Kuwait faces serious challenge:

- narrow interests of family, tribe, class, clan and religion can still, and often do, trump the national interest and put a brake on reform. These interests all too often find expression on the floor of the National Assembly
- Kuwait's political groupings are now primarily on religious (Salaf, Muslim Brotherhood, Shi'a), sectarian and tribal lines. This trend has accelerated since the fall of Saddam and the rise of sectarian tensions in Iraq. Even the most politically established of the Kuwaiti Islamist groups, the ICM/Muslim brotherhood is unclear about its ultimate aims: would it be prepared to govern constitutionally? Tribal MPs are prone to put sectarian before national interest. The government were unable to stop tribal primaries in the recent elections: two of the five electoral constituencies are now represented entirely by tribal members.
- Some argue that the government has compounded this factionalism by weak leadership and by appointing ministers for the interest they represent rather than skill for the job – disastrous, says one Kuwaiti critic, like a football team with randomly picked players and no mutual understanding; as a result the government itself has no clear strategy and too easily allows itself to be dragged into personal vendettas and petty bickering.

Some would say that much of this is the stuff of politics, that only by engaging in the game can the system mature; MPs should be given responsibility and learn from their mistakes; ministers should be readier to tackle tough questioning. Others argue that the Kuwaiti system is not as yet robust enough to handle the rough and tumble of a fractious assembly.

The increasingly frequent breakdowns between the Assembly and government appear symptomatic of a deeper malaise. The Amir is running out of expedients - the most recent was for the Prime Minister to resign in mid December and for the Amir to call on him to form a new cabinet, which he has just done. But there have already been threats from Assembly

members to resume efforts to bring about a vote of confidence against the Prime Minister and a walk out by 12 of the 50 elected members when the Prime Minister took his new oath of office doesn't augur well. Another ploy could be for the Amir to hold out the prospect of exhausting the Assembly with repeat elections – but that cannot be a long term solution.

It is possible to argue that the democratic process is still not sufficiently in the national bloodstream, in Kuwait or indeed in the rest of the GCC. NGOs and other civil society organisations are weak and dominated either by the government or by religious groups; individuals are mistrustful both of the National Assembly and of the government; an orange movement that emerged in the election before last seems largely to have disappeared. Newly enfranchised women outside the middle class liberal areas have voted mainly for male Islamist candidates.

So faced with this disarray, the government retains control of all key aspects of national life – indeed the new Cabinet has more ministerial seats occupied by Al Sabah family members than the last. The Government seeks with diminishing success to cajole the Assembly into giving its support.

The consequence is near deadlock and a growing list of unresolved problems. These are particularly visible at a time like the present when governments around the world are taking emergency measures to deal with an unprecedented financial crisis and Kuwait also faces challenge. Oil wealth and deep financial pockets help; the Central Bank has shown a strong grip and leadership. But Kuwait is not immune. Banks, finance houses and some companies have run into serious difficulties. The oil industry has again suffered political interference with further delays on the development of the northern oil fields and much needed refineries; the Government appears to have been panicked by Parliament into pulling out from a major joint venture with Dow Chemical. And beyond that Kuwait still lacks consensus around a strategy for a post oil future.

Let us hope that the new government under the Prime Minister HH Shaikh Nasser Mohammed can move things forward. But if it can't, one temptation will be to wind the film back to the 1980s or before and return to a simpler form of rule. The Kuwaiti press hints that that is the view of some members of the Al Sabah. They may be encouraged in that direction by the wane around the world in fashion for democracy and within the GCC by other ruling families. The Kuwaiti political commentator Abdul Rahman Al Assiri

speaks of 'the dissatisfaction of neighbouring states with the style and form of the political system of Kuwait'. There was again no reference to political reform in the recent GCC summit communiqué.

Other voices, perhaps the majority of those in Kuwait who care about reform, insist that the only way forward for the long term is to take a long hard look at the political process within the constitutional framework. Need the Prime Minister, until recently always the Crown Prince, be a member of the Al Sabah inner circle? Should the Assembly be given more responsibility so that it can be held more fully to account for its actions, and if so how? But that could mean opening the 1962 constitution which might prove a Pandora's box; for example, Islamists have long been pressing for the Shari 'to become *the* source of legislation rather than *a* source as it is now.

And while this internal debate continues Kuwait cannot avoid external challenges:

- the old threat of absorption into Saudi Arabia last seen in the 1930s has surely receded for good. One of the great benefits of the GCC has been, like the EU, to make it unthinkable to resolve any differences between members other than through peaceful negotiation. But as Assiri other more conservative partners still have ways of making their views felt
- and Iran, not a threat before 1979 now creates serious concerns. Kuwaitis are conscious that they depend entirely on desalting water from the sea that not far away will cool the new reactor at Bushire; an important cross border gas field remains unexploited for lack of agreement on where the offshore border runs; suspicions lurk of Iranian mischief making among some elements of Kuwait's Shi'a community; and, with the rest of the GCC, Kuwait worries about Iran's nuclear programme, its long term intentions in the Gulf and the strain that could put on the essential relationship with the United States – whether through a US or Israeli attack on Iran or through some grand bargain between the new US administration and Iran which sidelined the GCC states
- as to the other neighbour, Iraq, memories are still fresh of Saddam's invasion and claim to Kuwait as part of Iraq. Much since then remains unresolved: Kuwait still has large state claims on Iraq for compensation for loss of oil revenues and environmental damage during the invasion; Iraqi politicians have at times sounded equivocal

about the post 1991 settlement and the 1993 UN demarcation of the border; what view will future Iraqi governments take?

So Kuwait, a small state with no hinterland and few natural borders, remains dependent, as it has been since the 1899 Treaty of Friendship with Britain, on imported security and will do so until such time as there can be a satisfactory regional security arrangement.

### **In conclusion**

- Like the rest of the GCC, Kuwait remains an oil monarchy, an autocracy.
- but it is more liberal than others; the Al Sabah have been evolving their open style of rule for over three centuries and for many years led the way in the GCC; Kuwait has been seen as a model of reform others might follow
- at present the Kuwaiti political system seems stuck in a cul de sac – and the economy languishes in comparison to those of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Oman
- on past form Kuwait will again find a way forward. That may involve further bold reform from the top and possibly a bumpy ride. But Kuwait's openness, strong sense of nationhood and loyalty to the father figure of HH The Amir give it great resilience
- responsibility for change will lie as in the past with the Kuwaitis themselves. They will continue to deserve strong support from all those with an interest in the stability of this crucial area

There is still a part for Britain. Our past in the region and our close involvement with Kuwait for over a century give us a special perspective. Britain's moment in the Middle East may have passed. But there is much that Britain can still do today - given a willingness on our part to study this past, to learn from it, to rebuild regional confidence in Britain's judgement and, when necessary to be prepared to commit forces in the right way as we did in the early part of the last century, in 1961 and again in 1991.