

BALANCING THE SCALES: KUWAIT'S NEUTRALITY AMIDST GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRIES IN A F(R)ACTIONOUS MIDDLE EAST

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Introduction

In the last ten years, the Emirate of Kuwait has established itself as a mediatory presence in Middle Eastern geopolitics. Kuwait decidedly and triumphantly remained neutral during the Qatar diplomatic crisis, resulting in Kuwait becoming one of the brokers of the Al-Ula Declaration, a landmark text which fully restored ties between Qatar and the Saudi-Emirati axis, ending perhaps the biggest crisis within the GCC since its founding in 1981. Kuwait has also consistently been less forceful in its approach to, and condemnation of, the Islamic Republic of Iran, in an attempt to balance economic opportunity with geopolitical duty. This “balancing-act” has also been seen in Kuwait’s dealings (or, perhaps, lack thereof) with Israel and in the strengthening of economic ties with the People’s Republic of China.

This essay will explore this “balancing-act” to better understand how and why Kuwait seeks to remain neutral amid conflict and tension. Divided into three main sub-sections, the first will revolve around Kuwait’s role in the geopolitics of the GCC, specifically with regard to the Qatar diplomatic crisis. The second section will analyze Kuwait’s neutrality in the Middle East more broadly, discussing flashpoints of tension such as Iran, Israel, Iraq and Syria. The third and final section of this piece will broaden out to a global level, seeking to examine Kuwait’s diplomatic strategy with regards to the US-China conflict.

Kuwait and the GCC

In order to effectively discuss Kuwait’s role in the GCC, it would be worthwhile to first mention the context surrounding the founding of the GCC. Following British withdrawal from the Gulf (and the subsequent independence of Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and the UAE), the aforementioned countries (along with Saudi Arabia) convened in Abu Dhabi, signing the GCC Charter and announcing the creation of the Council in 1981. Whilst internal factors such as shared histories and identities were key factors in its establishment, regional and global security threats such as the ongoing Iran-Iraq War and the impact of the Cold War on the region undeniably galvanised the Gulf states to seek national and regional security through the establishment of a Council supporting and promoting cooperation and regional integration. The GCC was thus a way for the Gulf to unite in a way which would

respond to regional security threats and to attempt to change the balance of power in the region.¹

Tensions within the GCC undeniably came to a climax on the fifth of June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE (among other states outside the GCC) severed diplomatic ties with Qatar, citing the funding of terrorism as their primary reason. Kuwait's late Emir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah traveled between Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE in an attempt to narrow the rift between Qatar and the Saudi-Emirati axis, seeking a swift diplomatic resolution to the existential crisis. Kuwait's role as a mediator was not all "smooth-sailing"; one of Kuwait's first attempts to rekindle relations between Qatar and the Saudi-Emirati axis was by hosting the thirty-eighth GCC summit, which made little, if any, progress in solving the crisis. The summit was only attended by the heads of state of Kuwait and Qatar; other countries effectively boycotted the event by sending ministers or deputy ministers instead, as a way of further ostracizing Qatar within the GCC.² Other early diplomatic interventions in the crisis bore smaller, yet still significant, results: a joint press conference in September 2017 between US President Donald Trump and Sheikh Sabah revealed that Kuwaiti mediation efforts had stopped any military escalation between Qatar and the Saudi-Emirati axis.³ Kuwait was ultimately instrumental as a neutral mediator between the two parties, as, alongside the US, Kuwait brokered the Al-Ula Declaration, which restored diplomatic relations within the GCC. Kuwait's role as a neutral mediator in the crisis was even recognized by UN Secretary-General Guterres, whose chief spokesperson Stephane Dujarric was quoted as saying, "The Secretary-General welcomes the efforts and contributions of Kuwait in building bridges of understanding in the Gulf region and beyond."⁴

An analysis of Kuwait's foreign policy would be simply incomplete without a discussion of reasons which led the late Kuwaiti Emir to talk his country on this diplomatic path. The Emir Sabah al-Sabah was a champion of Arab unity and diplomacy, as he sought to increase Kuwait's visibility and importance on a regional and global stage through establishing the Emirate as a mediator and peacekeeper.⁵ In contrast to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who have invested significantly in traditional military power (ranked by the GFP at 0.2966 and 0.5859 respectively – 0.0000 being a perfect score) Kuwait's late Emir chose to lead Kuwait on a different path, focusing

¹ Omar Al-Hassan, "The GCC's Formation: The Official Version," *Aljazeera Studies*, March 30, 2015, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/2015/03/201533011258831763.html>.

² Khalid Al-Jaber, "The GCC's worst summit," *Aljazeera*, December 9, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/12/9/the-gccs-worst-summit/>.

³ Ibrahim Fraihat, "Superpower and Small-State Mediation in the Qatar Gulf Crisis," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 2 (May 2020): 79-91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1741268>.

⁴ "Note to Correspondents: Gulf region," United Nations, last modified December 4, 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2020-12-04/note-correspondents-gulf-region>.

⁵ "Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah, who championed Arab unity, dies at age 91," *France 24*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200929-kuwait-s-emir-sheikh-sabah-who-championed-arab-unity-dies-at-age-91>.

on mediatory politics as a way of transforming Kuwait into a significant player with power on both the regional and global stage.⁶ Thus, Kuwait's desire to maintain neutrality and be a mediatory player can be explained by the late Emir's wish both to increase Arab unity and to augment Kuwait's influence on the regional and global stage.

In the context of this particular crisis, Kuwait shone as a mediatory force for a variety of reasons. Although the official reason given for the severing of ties between Qatar and the Saudi-Emirati axis was the funding of terrorism, there is significant weight to the thought that the 2017 diplomatic crisis was a continuation and culmination of other diplomatic spats resulting from Qatar's fundamental unwillingness to follow Saudi foreign policy.⁷ The perhaps most significant divergence between the foreign policy of Doha and Riyadh is with regard to the Muslim Brotherhood.⁸ While Doha strongly supports (financially and otherwise) Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates across the Arab world,⁹ such as the controversial cleric al-Qaradawi, the Muslim Brotherhood is branded as a terrorist organization in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.¹⁰ Kuwait, meanwhile, boasts a comparatively freer environment for the Muslim Brotherhood. The Hadas movement (the Brotherhood's affiliated group in Kuwait) operates in Kuwait, and its politicians currently hold three of the fifty seats of the National Assembly.¹¹ This perhaps puts Kuwait in a unique position in its diplomatic mediation between Riyadh and Doha, as it is the only country in the GCC to have Brotherhood-affiliated delegates in a National Assembly. That is not to say that Kuwait in any way actively supports the Muslim Brotherhood; rather, Kuwait's foreign policy has to be more aware and respectful of the plurality of opinions in the Kuwaiti state, given the presence of a democratic institution that does hold (albeit limited) power in the legislation of the country.

⁶ "Global Firepower Countries Index," GFP, accessed April 16, 2022, <https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries.php>.

⁷ Frank Gardner, "Qatar crisis: Saudi Arabia and allies restore diplomatic ties with emirate," *BBC News: Analysis*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55538792>.

⁸ Alex MacDonald, "Qatar blockade: What caused it and why is it coming to an end?," *Middle East Eye*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/qatar-blockade-saudi-arabia-lift-cause-end>.

⁹ Eric Trager, "The Muslim Brotherhood Is the Root of the Qatar Crisis," *The Atlantic*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/muslim-brotherhood-qatar/532380/>.

¹⁰ Adam Schreck, "UAE backs Saudis with Muslim Brotherhood blacklist," *Yahoo! News*, March 9, 2014, <https://news.yahoo.com/uae-backs-saudis-muslim-brotherhood-blacklist-083656729.html>; "Muslim Brotherhood in Bahrain," Counter Extremism Project, accessed February 16, 2022, <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/muslim-brotherhood-bahrain>.

¹¹ "About us," Islamic Constitutional Movement, accessed February 14, 2022, <https://www.icmkw.org/portal/index.php#.Yg1jvZbP1PY>; "Members of the National Assembly," Kuwait National Assembly, accessed February 14, 2022, <https://www.kna.kw/clt-html5/about-en.asp>.

This may indeed have been another reason for which Kuwait was ultimately successful in its diplomatic mediation of the Qatar diplomatic crisis; unlike Qatar, which sponsors and supports the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Saudi-Emirati axis, which has proscribed it, Kuwait again took a more neutral and considerate approach to its dealings with the Muslim Brotherhood both as a Kuwaiti political entity and a regional power network, which allowed its diplomacy to seem more genuine and balanced. While Oman does not view the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization either, as the population of Oman is Ibadi-majority (rather than Sunni, like the Muslim Brotherhood), there is less of a reason for the Brotherhood to have any sort of official presence there.

Many consider Oman to be the principal mediator and neutral force in the region; however, there are significant reasons for which Oman was not suited to act in this role during the Qatar diplomatic crisis. The Saudi-Emirati axis view Oman with a degree of suspicion, as Oman has been engaging in joint naval drills with the Islamic Republic of Iran as recently as December 2021.¹² The Saudi-Emirati view might well be that Oman's friendly relations with the Islamic Republic would encourage Oman to favor Qatar in the 2017 disputes, thus jeopardizing Oman's role as mediator. Furthermore, during the crisis, Qatari vessels used Omani ports at Salalah, and their tankers were thus still able to travel through the Strait of Hormuz, ensuring the continued export of Qatar's LNG, a vital part of its economy.¹³ This also would have brought Oman's neutrality into question; Kuwait, on the other hand, simply due to its geographic position, was not in a position to supply Qatar with space in its ports or its airspace, and thus its position as neutral would not have been brought into question.

Omani foreign policy is not without its wariness of Saudi-Emirati activity in the region either – Saudi Arabia's military presence in the Mahra Governorate of Yemen, for example, presents a unique problem for Oman, as the governorate was always traditionally in Oman's sphere of influence, through the supply of humanitarian aid and dual nationality.¹⁴ With regards to Omani-Emirati relations, the border regions have proven to be a particular obstacle; Emirati influence in the border territories is viewed as a problem serious enough that Oman has banned non-Omanis from buying any land or real-estate in the area.¹⁵ This all has led to a cooling of relations between Oman and the Saudi-Emirati axis of the GCC, something which ultimately prevented the Sultanate from mediating in the 2017 Qatar crisis.

¹² "Iran, Oman hold joint military exercises in Strait of Hormuz, Sea of Oman," *PressTV*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2021/12/16/672788/Iranian-Navy-Oman-joint-military-drill-Strait-of-Hormuz/>.

¹³ "Qatar to use Oman ports to bypass Gulf blockade," *ENCA*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.enca.com/world/qatar-to-use-oman-ports-to-bypass-gulf-blockade>.

¹⁴ Abdulaziz Kilani, "The Limits of a Saudi-Omani Rapprochement," *Newlines Institute*, September 1, 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/saudi-arabia/hed-the-limits-of-a-saudi-omani-rapprochement/>.

¹⁵ Kristin Smith Diwan, "In a Region Beset by Zero-Sum Conflicts, Oman Remains Open to All," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, June 3, 2019, <https://agsiw.org/in-a-region-beset-by-zero-sum-conflicts-oman-remains-open-to-all/>.

There is also an argument stating that Qatar was a small-state mediator in the region prior to the Qatar diplomatic crisis, during which Qatar lost this role. However, Qatar's prior role in the mediation of regional conflicts was not primarily due to a desire of Arab unity or regional peace. Rather, Qatar's mediation efforts focused on areas which impacted Doha's support for political Islam, such as the 2012 mediation between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine and the recent negotiations with the Taliban.¹⁶ Mediating conflicts was in itself not a foreign policy objective for Qatar; rather, it was a part of its broader plan for the region supporting political Islam, both as an ideology and as a way of increasing its own political influence amid the domination of Saudi-Emirati foreign policy in the GCC.

Kuwait ultimately excelled in its handling of the mediation between Qatar and the Saudi-Emirati axis; while both Oman and Qatar have been, in the past, influential mediators in the region, the fundamental advantage which Kuwait possesses is that Kuwait holds the complete trust of the Saudi-Emirati axis (unlike Oman, through its relations with Iran, and Qatar, through its support for political Islam) whilst still being able to follow an independent foreign policy divergent from that of the anti-Iran Saudi-Emirati axis.

Kuwait and the Middle East

While it would be ill-considered to even suggest that Kuwait holds complete neutrality between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Kuwait has proven itself to be much more cautious and restrained in its condemning of Iran in comparison to the rather brazen and much less restrained attitudes of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE (particularly under the virulently anti-Iran gaze of Donald Trump's foreign policy). When Trump unilaterally withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a landmark agreement that sought to paralyze Tehran's nuclear program in return for the lifting of sanctions, Bahrain, the UAE and Saudi Arabia all expressed their support for and jubilation at the move.¹⁷ In contrast to this, Kuwait released a much more muted response, stating that although Kuwait strongly supported the agreement when it was announced in 2015, it "understands" the US position.¹⁸ Although this may not seem significant, it is necessary to put this comment in the context of Kuwait's loyalty to both the United States and Saudi Arabia. Thus, the lack of the same degree of celebration and support in the official Kuwaiti reaction signifies a marked difference in the foreign policies of Kuwait and the Saudi-Emirati axis. It is also worth bearing in

¹⁶ "Qatar's Mediation Challenges in the Afghan Peace Process," Rise to Peace, accessed April 17, 2022, <https://www.risetopeace.org/2021/08/11/qatars-mediation-challenges-in-the-afghan-peace-process/risetopeace/>.

¹⁷ "Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Egypt welcome President Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA," *Memri*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.memri.org/reports/saudi-arabia-uae-bahrain-egypt-welcome-president-trumps-withdrawal-jcpoa>.

¹⁸ "Kuwait follows up US announcement on Iran nuclear deal with great interest", *Kuwait News Agency*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2725312&language=en>.

mind that Kuwait's late Emir was the first Gulf head of state to visit Iran since 1979, pledging closer bilateral ties during an official visit to the Islamic Republic in 2014.¹⁹ Kuwait's cautiousness with regards to its criticisms of Iran were also shown in 2016, following the storming of Saudi Arabia's diplomatic facilities in Iran. While Bahrain and Saudi Arabia severed all diplomatic ties with Iran, and the UAE downgraded theirs, Kuwait was more dexterous in its reaction, recalling its ambassador from Tehran but still maintaining the same level of diplomatic communication (the same reaction as Qatar).²⁰ Although there is no doubt that Kuwait was keen to show its support for Saudi Arabia, it is also worth mentioning that Kuwait did not sever channels of diplomacy like other GCC countries did; further evidence pointing towards Kuwait's support for mediatory and multilateral foreign policy.

There are many reasons why Kuwait has chosen a path less aggressive in its criticism of Iran. Firstly, Kuwait has a sizeable Shiite minority, but has so far avoided the sectarian violence which has plagued the likes of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Keen to maintain this internal stability, and aware of the influence of the Shiite minority in parliamentary elections, Kuwait must be careful not to slip into anti-Shiite rhetoric when criticizing Iran, stirring up a sectarian divide which has so far not been realized. The perhaps surprising unity between the Sunni and Shiite populations in Kuwait was exemplified following the 2015 terrorist attack at a Kuwaiti Shiite mosque. The Kuwaiti Emir was quick to visit the wreckage; reportedly, upon being told that it was dangerous, he responded "but those are my children."²¹ The following Friday, joint Sunni-Shiite prayers were held at the Grand Mosque, attended by the Kuwaiti Emir.²² Economic prospects have also encouraged Kuwait to be more prudent in its criticism of the Islamic Republic. Kuwait's hallmark project "Silk City" is reliant on foreign investment, and Kuwait has been keen to specifically court and target Iranian investment in the scheme. There have also been plans desiring infrastructure connecting Kuwait, Iraq and Iran, to further bolster economic development in the country.²³

On the thirteenth of August 2020, the Middle East entered a new era of Israel-Arab relations, with the official normalization of ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, an agreement which was followed by a similar accord between Israel

¹⁹ "Kuwait's ruler makes rare visit to Iran to build ties", *Reuters*, June 1, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-kuwait-idUSKBN0EC1LX20140601>.

²⁰ Habib Toumi, "Qatar recalls ambassador to Iran," *Gulf News*, January 6, 2016, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/qatar/qatar-recalls-ambassador-to-iran-1.1649619>.

²¹ "The 2015 Kuwait Mosque Bombing," CrimeScene DB, last modified May 24, 2016, <https://crimescenedb.com/the-2015-kuwait-mosque-bombing/>.

²² "Kuwait mosque attack: Sunnis and Shia hold unity prayers," *BBC News*, July 3, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33387267>.

²³ "Nasser As-Sabah: We will only be safe if we get closer to Iran and Iraq," *Al-Rai Media*, March 23, 2018, <https://www.alraimedia.com/article/803176/-الإ-إذا-تقار-بنا-مع-إيران-والعراق>

and Bahrain.²⁴ An open secret in Middle Eastern politics is the covert relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, particularly in the context of fighting the common regional enemy: Iran.²⁵ Fundamentally, the Israel-Palestine conflict has lost its status as the primary concern for the region, as the security threats posed by Iran have proven more important, leading most of the Gulf to begin the process of collaborating with the Israeli state to cooperate on regional security matters regarding Iran. In the context of regional security and the Iranian threat, Israel has become a natural ally for the anti-Iranian Saudi-Emirati axis. The Palestine question, however, has become less of an issue of regional security and more of an issue of Arab unity and Arab pride; factors which the Saudi-Emirati axis has deemed less important. Kuwait, however, has been steadfast in its rejection of the recent Gulf trend of recognising Israel, stating that Kuwait will be the last Arab country to do so.²⁶ To some, this position would seem to not be in keeping with Kuwait's role as a neutral mediator, holding the belief that the recognition of both Israel and Palestine is conducive to mediation in the region. However, to recognize Israel would signal to Iran a fundamental aligning with US foreign policy, severing any possibility of Kuwait acting as a mediator in the Saudi-Iranian conflict and jeopardizing its more nuanced and balanced position in this (ultimately more important) regional rivalry. Thus, not recognizing Israel is exactly how Kuwait intends on maintaining its neutral position as it signals that Kuwait is independent in the creation and shaping of its foreign policy, basing it on mediated and multilateral decisions rather than on the whims of powerful political players such as the United States. It must be said, however, that the Kuwaiti population is fiercely pro-Palestine, and the existence of a representative democratic institution in the Emirate would make recognition of Israel an extremely thorny issue in the National Assembly, as the populace and the delegates alike would be against the move.

A core aspect of Kuwait's mediatory foreign policy which has so far not been discussed is Kuwait's policy of humanitarianism, in the context of both Iraq and Syria. The hosts and founders of the International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq, Kuwait pledged \$2 billion to the rebuilding of essential infrastructure in Iraq (the most out of any Gulf country).²⁷ Kuwait's humanitarian foreign policy in the region has been key to their role as a neutral mediator, as humanitarian aid is vital to bring about security and stability, and therefore prosperity, in the region. With a Shiite majority, Iraq has over the last few years become more aligned with Iran; the fact that

²⁴ Steve Holland, "In break with past, UAE and Bahrain forge ties at White House," *Reuters*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/israel-gulf-usa-int-idUSKBN2660MC>.

²⁵ "Saudi Arabia and Israel: A history of quietly warming ties," *Ynet News*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/HJ3KaV59D>.

²⁶ "Kuwait says it'll be 'last to normalize' with Israel, will stand by Palestinians," *The Times of Israel*, August 16, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/kuwaiti-officials-reject-israel-normalization-reaffirm-support-for-palestinians/>.

²⁷ "Kuwait International Conference: Increased GCC Role for Reconciliation in Iraq," Gulf International Forum, February 20, 2018, <https://gulffif.org/iraq-reconstruction-conference-increased-gcc-role-and-hopes-for-reforms-and-reconciliation-policy-focus/>.

Kuwait is so keen to aid a country more aligned with Saudi Arabia's rival shows an eagerness in its quest for mediation and stability.

Although Kuwait joined its GCC neighbors in the supporting of anti-Assad groups at the start of the conflict²⁸ (and Kuwaiti individuals were implicated in the funding of armed groups and terrorists fighting against Assad),²⁹ the Kuwaiti government consistently opposed the supplying of arms,³⁰ and has recently begun to carve its own foreign policy on the matter, one more in keeping with its attachment to mediation, multilateralism and humanitarianism. Kuwait has instead focused on the humanitarian side of the conflict, hosting three conferences to gather humanitarian aid for Syria in 2013, 2014 and 2015,³¹ and in 2016 co-hosted the Supporting Syria and the Region Conference, culminating in a record \$11 billion pledge.³² Kuwait's humanitarian policy in Syria and Iraq has inflated the global view of Kuwait, something which Kuwait is keen to translate into local legitimacy. Kuwait has also not been so hasty in its re-establishing of ties with the Assad regime, unlike other GCC states such as the UAE and Bahrain. Kuwait has instead declared that any decision regarding Kuwait's diplomatic relations with Assad Syria is to be taken after any decision on the matter by the Arab League; again, demonstrating Kuwait's commitment to Arab and global multilateralism as a way to counter and cure the f(r)actionous nature of the Middle East.³³

Kuwait and the US-China Rivalry

Like other GCC countries, Kuwait enjoys a very favorable relationship with the US, particularly one focused on defence and security-related issues. This is perhaps the tradition following the United States' operation Desert Storm which ultimately liberated Kuwait from Iraqi occupation; this has given Kuwait and the US an undeniably special bond, one which must not be underplayed. Kuwait houses many military bases used by the US, including the Ali al-Salem airbase, the Ahmad al-Jaber

²⁸ "Kuwaiti Paper Criticizes Syria: Assad's Regime More Criminal than Saddam's Regime," *Memri*, April 22, 2003, <https://www.memri.org/reports/kuwaiti-paper-criticizes-syria-assads-regime-more-criminal-saddams-regime>.

²⁹ Theodore Karasik, "Kuwait's apprehension about normalizing relations with Syria," *Atlantic Council*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/kuwait-s-apprehension-about-normalizing-relations-with-syria/>.

³⁰ "Kuwait expects more Arab countries to reopen embassies in Damascus," *Reuters*, December 31, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kuwait/kuwait-expects-more-arab-countries-to-reopen-embassies-in-damascus-kuna-idUSKCN1OU0VP>.

³¹ Diana Al Rifai, "Donors pledge \$3.8bn at Syria crisis meeting in Kuwait," *Aljazeera*, March 31, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/3/31/donors-pledge-3-8bn-at-syria-crisis-meeting-in-kuwait>.

³² "Supporting Syria and the Region Donors' Conference in London," *Center for Mediterranean Integration*, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://www.cmimarseille.org/highlights/supporting-syria-and-region>.

³³ Theodore Karasik, "Kuwait's apprehension about normalizing relations with Syria," *Atlantic Council*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/kuwait-s-apprehension-about-normalizing-relations-with-syria/>.

airbase and the Mohammed al-Ahmad Kuwait Naval Base. Furthermore, Kuwait allowed the US and its allies to base over 100,000 troops within its borders in preparation for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.³⁴ This was symptomatic of a wider network of clientistic relationships that the US had been building in the Gulf region of the last few decades, and these defence-focused relationships have largely lasted, as the US is still Kuwait's biggest supplier of arms, and the US and Kuwait have a very strong bilateral relationship.³⁵

That being said, given the growing dual hegemonic world order of the US and China, Kuwait has been keen to court China in order to guarantee the economic support for its landmark "Kuwait Vision 2035" project, aiming to diversify Kuwait's extremely oil-reliant economy. Kuwait's economy is the most oil-reliant in the GCC, with ninety-four-point two percent of its exports being of fuel, as well as over fifty percent of its GDP being reliant on oil.³⁶ This has made Kuwait's economic diversification paramount to the survival of the state; in the face of unreliable oil prices and a global trend towards renewable energy sources, Kuwait has been courting China as the principal financial contributor to this hallmark project. This long-term national plan centers around large-scale infrastructure projects to transform Kuwait into a high-tech regional and international financial hub, including the development of Kuwait's currently uninhabited northern islands and the establishment of the aforementioned 250-square-kilometre city coined Madinat ah-Tahreer, or Silk City (a name which fits neatly into China's Silk Road-inspired Belt and Road Initiative).³⁷ Kuwait has also been key in talks targeting the establishment of a Free Trade Area between the GCC and China, further integrating the Chinese economy into the post-oil plans for the GCC.³⁸ Balancing the economic promise of China's BRI, which has partnered with Kuwait to fund and construct the infrastructure projects of Kuwait Vision 2035 (particularly Bubiyan Island's Mubarak al-Kabeer port), with growing political animosity between China and the US (Kuwait's biggest security partner), has again pushed Kuwait to shape its neutral foreign policy in a way which angers neither hegemon while benefitting from both.³⁹

Particularly in recent years, however, Kuwait has been shifting its outlook on the global scene from one reliant on American support to one more independent from American foreign policy and instead focused on GCC multilateralism. For example,

³⁴ "U.S has 100,000 troops in Kuwait," *CNN*, February 18, 2003,

<https://www.edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/02/18/sprj.irq.deployment/index.html>.

³⁵ Thomas Frohlich, "Saudi Arabia buys the most weapons from the US government. See what other countries top list," *USA Today*, last modified March 26, 2019,

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2019/03/26/us-arms-sales-these-countries-buy-most-weapons-government/39208809/>.

³⁶ "Kuwait," OEC, accessed February 20, 2022, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/kwt/>.

³⁷ Ehsan Bayat, "What you need to know about Kuwait's Silk City," The Bayat Foundation, last modified July 2, 2020, <https://ehsanbayat.com/what-you-need-to-know-about-kuwaits-silk-city/>.

³⁸ Weida Li, "China and Kuwait agree to establish strategic partnership," FindChinaInfo, July 10, 2018, <https://findchina.info/china-and-kuwait-agree-to-establish-strategic-partnership>.

³⁹ Bayat, 2020.

Kuwait joined other GCC countries in supporting China's policies in both Hong Kong and in Xinjiang, advocating for the respect of China's territorial integrity and sovereignty.⁴⁰ Much like in other conflicts, Kuwait is keen to create a unified GCC response to conflicts in order to strengthen the Council's position on the global stage. In parallel with the other GCC countries, Kuwait sees the United States' pushing of a "human rights agenda" as a potential obstacle to long-lasting close relations and another reason for its gradual shift to a less America-focused foreign policy. Although, from a Western perspective, it seems somewhat strange to say that defending the policies of China regarding its treatment of Uyghur Muslims is an example of multilateralism, from the perspective of the GCC, the real threat is the possibility of human rights issues within the GCC preventing trade between the Gulf and the West. Therefore, through a unified GCC response supporting China's policies, the GCC is trying to indirectly support their own policies that are deemed by some to be human rights abuses. As these issues become more and more important in the US-China rivalry, it is not impossible that GCC countries will find themselves in a position where they must begin to align themselves more closely with China, a trend that we may already be seeing in Kuwait's growing defence ties with China.

The last five years have proven that Kuwait is looking to diversify its sources of high-tech security and defence. In 2018, during the late Kuwaiti Emir's visit to China, a new strategic partnership was announced between the two countries,⁴¹ and China's State Administration for Science, Technology and Industry for National Defence announced an agreement with the Kuwaiti government to increase defence industrial co-operation in the same year.⁴² Furthermore, China and Kuwait announced on the twelfth of January 2022 that they would intensify bilateral co-operation with a special five-year plan. A key part of this new co-operation is the development of 5G telecommunication networks in Kuwait, something which has been deemed a security threat by some Western countries.⁴³ Kuwait's growing ties with China in any sphere will understandably concern the US, but defence and security sectors have been traditionally dominated and supported by American efforts and investments into Kuwait. The beginning of a trend away from this is indicative of a larger, more regional

⁴⁰ Dave Lawler, "The 53 countries supporting China's crackdown on Hong Kong," *Axios*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/countries-supporting-china-hong-kong-law-0ec9bc6c-3aeb-4af0-8031-aa0f01a46a7c.html>; Catherine Putz, "Which Countries are For or Against China's Xinjiang Policies?," *The Diplomat*, July 15, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies/>.

⁴¹ Weida Li, "China and Kuwait agree to establish strategic partnership," *FindChinaInfo*, July 10, 2018, <https://findchina.info/china-and-kuwait-agree-to-establish-strategic-partnership>

⁴² Charles Forrester, "SASTIND signs collaboration agreement with Kuwait," *Janes*, July 11, 2018, https://www.janes.com/article/81689/sastind-signs-collaboration-agreement-with-kuwait?from_rss=1

⁴³ "China, Kuwait to intensify efforts for five-year co-operation plan," *CGTN*, January 12, 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-01-12/China-Kuwait-to-intensify-efforts-for-five-year-cooperation-plan-16Loz4C0Uak/index.html>.

trend away from total reliance on the US to a more nuanced and balanced approach taking into account the undeniable growing power of China whilst still largely supporting US interests in the region.

Conclusion

In an ever more polarized world, presidential speeches harboring and supporting aggression and “gun-boat diplomacy” are becoming more and more commonplace; one needs only to look at Russian President Putin’s speech announcing the invasion of Ukraine to see that war and violence still constitute a large part of modern international relations. Kuwait, however, stands out as an outlier within the GCC, within the Middle East more widely and quite possibly on a global level as well, through its tireless efforts to find multilateral and diplomatic solutions to the biggest geopolitical challenges.

Kuwaiti foreign policy takes into account this somewhat destabilized political world order through a considered neutral and mediatory foreign policy supported by humanitarianism and multilateralism. This has allowed Kuwait success in its mediation of the Qatari diplomatic crisis, and its delicate balancing-act between Saudi Arabia and Iran has meant that Kuwait will receive maximum economic and political benefit while not betraying fundamental alliances. Its “tough” stance on recognizing Israel is a part of this strategy with regards to Iran; and its keen support for humanitarianism in Syria and Iraq has put Kuwait in a favorable position on a global level, inflating Kuwait’s status and significance on the world stage. The full effects of Kuwait’s strategy with regards to the US-China conflict remain to be seen; but growing ties with the People’s Republic certainly bring into question the status-quo of a blindly pro-American Gulf. As a country whose modern history has been defined by an invasion, it has been essential for Kuwait to stand against violence and aggression in geopolitics through its carefully crafted and nuanced foreign policy, one which seeks to fight against the growing f(r)actionousness of the geopolitical world order.

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