

Kuwait and the Future of U.S. Power Projection

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Brief Analysis

Given the country's difficult experience during the Iran war, Washington should offer sustained political attention, practical assistance, and an expanded vision for the partnership's future.

Kuwait has emerged as one of the Gulf states most targeted by Iranian retaliation since the war began in February 2026, absorbing missile and drone attacks on American facilities as well as its national energy infrastructure and civilian networks. As host to major U.S. military assets, Kuwait has borne a disproportionate share of the conflict's spillover costs, placing the partnership at an inflection point. With operations now paused, Washington should reaffirm its commitment to the Gulf country through high-level engagement, deeper defense cooperation, targeted reconstruction support, and expanded economic and technological ties. Failure to do so risks U.S. credibility with one of its most important partners in the region.

Foundations of the U.S.-Kuwait Relationship

Kuwait has long been one of the most reliable U.S. partners in the Gulf, dating to the 1991 liberation following Iraq's invasion. Ties have been reinforced by decades of military cooperation, including support for U.S.-led coalition operations in Iraq and the fight against the Islamic State. The country hosts the fourth-largest U.S. military presence abroad, spread across Ali al-Salem Air Base, Camp Arifjan, and Camp Buehring. It is also designated a Major Non-NATO Ally and has more than \$20 billion in [active \(https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-kuwait-2\)](https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-kuwait-2) Foreign Military Sales (FMS) cases. Kuwait's geographic position allows quick access to Iraq and the northern Persian Gulf, making it a critical node for American military logistics and force projection.

Beyond security, the United States and Kuwait have deepened their economic and commercial ties substantially since the signing in 2004 of the [Trade and Investment Framework Agreement \(https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/archives/2004/february/united-states-and-kuwait-sign-trade-and-\)](https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/archives/2004/february/united-states-and-kuwait-sign-trade-and-). America is one of Kuwait's leading [suppliers \(https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/kuwait-](https://www.trade.gov/country-commercial-guides/kuwait-)

market-overview) of goods and services, and Kuwait plays a **large** (<https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-investment-climate-statements/kuwait>) role in U.S. financial markets via the Kuwait Investment Authority.

Partners Under Fire

During the current war, Kuwait has been heavily **targeted** (<https://www.facebook.com/kuwaittimesdaily/posts/kuwait-air-defense-systems-successfully-detected-and-intercepted-four-hostile-cr/1478440017663062/>) by Iran as well as Iraq-based militia groups, causing damage to oil facilities, electricity and civilian infrastructure, and desalination plants, while also killing and injuring civilians and service members. In May, Kuwaiti forces **exchanged fire** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/12/world/middleeast/kuwait-iran-bubiyah-island.html?login=smartlock&auth=login-smartlock>) with members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps after IRGC personnel crossed into Kuwaiti territory on Bubiyan Island, resulting in the arrest and detention of four Guardsmen. Previously, on March 1, Iran executed its deadliest attack of the war when it targeted a makeshift U.S. operations center at Port Shuaiba, **killing** (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-appeared-to-surveil-center-where-u-s-forces-were-killed-in-kuwait-army-memo-says/>) six Americans and wounding dozens. The personnel had been relocated there to preserve continuity of operations in the event of a strike on the main operations center, likely at Camp Arifjan.

In response, Kuwait has publicly rebuked Iran and its proxies for the attacks, **cracked down** (<https://kuwaittimes.com/article/42189/kuwait/crime/kuwait-foils-terror-financing-plot-24-arrested/>) on Iran-influenced terrorism financing, and reportedly **launched** (<https://www.wsj.com/livecoverage/iran-us-china-news-2026/card/saudi-arabia-kuwait-hit-iran-backed-militias-in-iraq-s3jBPjJvIo6hqBSa7wXx>) strikes against Iran-aligned militias in Iraq. Kuwaiti leaders have **publicly** (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/kuwait-emir-orders-heightened-readiness-to-protect-vital-sites-amid-iranian-attacks/3857042>) insisted they would not allow their territory to be used for U.S. offensive operations against Iran, but as Iran continued targeting Kuwaiti infrastructure, the government ultimately permitted U.S. operations, with **reports** (<https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20260404-us-missiles-kuwait-iran-himars-launches-gmlrs-france24-investigation>) indicating the launch of High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) from its territory.

Repositioning, Reconstruction, and Replenishment Challenges

Despite close ties, the war has exposed friction between Washington and Kuwait City. Kuwaiti officials were already concerned about declining high-level U.S. political engagement, and concerns deepened once military operations against Iran were launched without Kuwaiti consultation. At the beginning of the war, Kuwait **inadvertently** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kuwait-intercepts-hostile-drones-third-day-iran-retaliatory-strikes-2026-03-02/>) shot down three American F-15 fighter jets. Out of concern for its own security, it later placed operational **restrictions** (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-kuwait-lift-restrictions-on-u-s-military-access-to-bases-airspace-8504c830>) on the U.S. military's use of basing and overflight after President Trump announced **Project Freedom** (<https://www.war.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/4477864/project-freedom-aims-to-get-thousands-of-commercial-ships-safely-through-strait/>)—which sought to escort ships through the Strait of Hormuz—although the restrictions were soon lifted.

The war has imposed **significant** (<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/inside-the-tiny-oil-sheikhdom-cut-off-by-the-iran-war-f2b1f00a>) costs on Kuwait, including disruption to shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, which Kuwait **relies** (<https://kuwaittimes.com/article/44918/kuwait/strategic-reserves-helping-kuwait-weather-hormuz-strait-crisis-expert/>) on almost exclusively for its export-dependent economy, as well as damage to both

military and civilian infrastructure, which will require reconstruction. Kuwait's economy is already **struggling** (<https://kuwaittimes.com/article/46950/business/kuwait-gdp-fell-in-q1-2026/>) as a result of the war, with preliminary estimates showing a 4.6 percent year-over-year decline in GDP in the first quarter, despite this interval capturing only one month of the conflict. The drop was driven by lower oil production, shipping disruptions in the Strait, and weaker non-oil activity amid the conflict, although a \$16 billion oil pipeline **deal** (<https://www.wsj.com/business/energy-oil/kkr-blackstone-sign-16-billion-kuwait-oil-deal-e864ed68?mod=Searchresults&pos=1&page=1>) will help with immediate cash flow. The war has also hit Kuwait at a sensitive political time, with the suspension of the **Majlis** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/10/world/middleeast/kuwait-emir-parliament-suspension.html>) due to political gridlock in 2024 having reduced the space for domestic debate.

The broader issue will involve the extent of U.S. commitments to the Middle East and therefore Kuwait in the postwar environment. Two strategic-level questions will shape the future relationship: the nature of the postwar regional order and the restoration (or not) of freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz. The longer the war goes on, the more global energy markets will adjust and diversify away from sellers who rely solely upon this chokepoint. The conflict also underscores the limits of alternative security guarantors: despite China's close ties to Iran, Beijing has shown little ability or desire to constrain Iranian escalation, reinforcing the continued importance of the U.S. security role in the Gulf.

At the operational level, two areas will require close attention: the future of U.S. basing in Kuwait and the ability of the United States or its partners to rapidly replenish Kuwait's military reserves.

The Evolving Defense Partnership

The U.S.-Kuwait defense relationship has long centered on basing infrastructure built after the 1991 Gulf War, but the missions that once justified that footprint have changed. As Washington considers consolidating some forces farther west through the **Western Basing Network** (<https://jewishinsider.com/2026/06/frank-mckenzie-centcom-us-military-bases-middle-east-israel/>) to reduce exposure to Iranian missiles and drones, it will need to balance operational requirements with Kuwait's political sensitivities.

The United States has strong strategic reasons to maintain and modernize parts of its military posture in Kuwait as the Iran threat and Strait of Hormuz challenge persist, but officials will need to balance U.S. operational requirements with Kuwait's political risk acceptance. If Washington chooses to reduce its footprint, U.S. officials will also have to think through how to reinforce American security commitments to Kuwait. If it chooses to rebuild, the United States and Kuwait will need to address how any base reconstruction will be funded. President Trump has historically insisted on demonstrating commitment from all partners that host a U.S. military presence. Kuwait has **provided** (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RS21513.pdf>) in-kind financing of \$200 million per year since 1996 for the U.S. presence, but the Kuwaiti government will want to be reassured of continuing U.S. commitments moving ahead.

Replenishing Kuwait's Depleted Stocks

Since the war began, the Trump administration has accelerated several FMS approvals for Gulf countries in the line of fire. For Kuwait, this has included **\$2 billion** (<https://www.state.gov/releases/bureau-of-political-military-affairs/2026/06/kuwait-counter-unmanned-aerial-systems-platforms/>) for a counter-unmanned aerial systems (C-UAS) platform, **\$8 billion** (https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/2026-03-20/emergency-weapons-middle-east-iran-21127293.html) for eight Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense Sensor Radars (LTAMDS), **\$1 billion** (<https://thedefensepost.com/2026/05/27/kuwait-nasams-us-raytheon/>) for National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS) mobile launchers, **\$484 million** (<https://www.state.gov/releases/bureau-of-political-military-affairs/2026/07/kuwait-c-17-sustainment>) for C-17 transport aircraft sustainment, and **\$800 million**

<https://www.dsca.mil/Press-Media/Major-Arms-Sales/Article-Display/Article/4379701/kuwait-patriot-program-sustainment-and-follow-on-technical-support>) for Patriot sustainment and upgrades (authorized prewar).

Fast-tracking approvals does not automatically translate into quicker delivery. And while America's defense industrial base faces production constraints across the board, the problem is especially striking for critical systems like air defense interceptors, precision-guided munitions, and aircraft. Replacing systems lost and munitions expended during the conflict will likely take years instead of months, and if partners cannot be replenished quickly, confidence both in U.S. security guarantees and defense technology could wane.

Policy Recommendations

To manage the strain produced by the Iran conflict, the United States should adopt a comprehensive reassurance strategy for one of its most reliable partners in the region. The best way to support Kuwait's postwar reconstruction efforts is to ensure freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. America should also do the following:

- **Conduct a force posture review and consultation.** The U.S. Department of Defense should immediately consult with the Kuwaiti government to determine how America's basing infrastructure should evolve in the Gulf country. Rather than a posture review focused on [Europe](https://www.politico.eu/article/pete-hegseth-launches-review-us-force-europe/) (<https://www.politico.eu/article/pete-hegseth-launches-review-us-force-europe/>), the department should conduct a global posture review. It must also define a sufficient level of force needed to meet U.S. security objectives, while balancing Kuwait's ability to defend itself and sustain the partnership.
- **Reestablish high-level political engagement.** Visible engagement is the fastest way to address concerns regarding Kuwait's perception of a downgrade in relations, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio's June [trip](https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/06/secretary-rubios-travel-to-the-uae-kuwait-and-bahrain) (<https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/06/secretary-rubios-travel-to-the-uae-kuwait-and-bahrain>) to Kuwait is a good start. But reversing deeper fears will require sustained engagement. Washington can immediately demonstrate political commitment through a call between President Trump and Emir Mishal al-Ahmad al-Sabah, ushering in a U.S. ambassador with strong ties to the administration, and sustained cabinet-level visits and calls.
- **Accelerate defense replenishment.** Washington should move beyond expedited approvals and focus on accelerating production of critical defense systems. Such an approach would include prioritizing Gulf orders, drawing on constrained U.S. inventories where necessary, expanding co-production, and working with trusted allies like the [United Kingdom](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-deploying-rapid-sentry-air-defence-system-kuwait-pms-office-says-2026-04-03/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-deploying-rapid-sentry-air-defence-system-kuwait-pms-office-says-2026-04-03/>) to provide secure, interoperable systems.
- **Establish a reconstruction and resilience initiative.** Washington and Kuwait should develop a joint framework for rebuilding military and civilian infrastructure. The initiative should prioritize infrastructure hardening, strengthening of air and missile defense integration, energy resilience, protection of critical water or transportation networks, and civil defense measures.
- **Deepen the partnership beyond defense.** Kuwait could benefit from technology working groups, cybersecurity partnerships, and digital and energy infrastructure resilience initiatives. Officials should therefore schedule the next iteration of the U.S.-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue, which has not been held since [2024](https://2021-2025.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-sixth-round-of-the-u-s-kuwait-strategic-dialogue/) (<https://2021-2025.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-sixth-round-of-the-u-s-kuwait-strategic-dialogue/>). A more durable, politically resilient partnership will help sustain the relationship.

Conclusion

The Iran war has exposed both strengths and vulnerabilities of the U.S.-Kuwait relationship. Kuwait remains strategically indispensable to U.S. regional operations, but the costs it has borne have raised legitimate concerns about consultation, deterrence, reconstruction, and replenishment. The challenge now is not whether the partnership survives but whether it can evolve. If Washington responds with sustained political attention, practical assistance, and a broader vision for the relationship, the war could ultimately strengthen the partnership. If it does not, it could instead deepen friction with one of America's most important Gulf partners.

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