How Kuwait Is Surviving the Gulf Crisis

by Lori Plotkin Boghardt **(/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt)**

Jul 27, 2017
Also available in
العربية (/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-twajh-alkwyt-ryah-alazmt-alkhlyjyt)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lori Plotkin Boghardt (/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt)
Lori Plotkin Boghardt was a senior fellow in Gulf politics at The Washington Institute from 2013-2018.

Articles & Testimony

The Kuwaiti emir helping to mediate the conflict is regarded as one of the region's wise, experienced figures, but the country must demonstrate sensitivity to both sides as it continues to seek a resolution.

Next week, on August 2, is the 27th anniversary of the day Saddam's forces stormed across Iraq's southern border with the goal of annexing their small neighbor, Kuwait. It took only two days to seize the entire country. During the seven-month occupation, Iraqi soldiers tortured and killed hundreds of civilians, and took thousands hostage. The country was pillaged. When the Iraqis were forced to retreat by the U.S.-led international coalition, they set fire to 700 Kuwaiti oil wells, leaving a path of vast economic and environmental destruction.

The Iraqi invasion and occupation of 1990-1991 remains a core component of the Kuwaiti national consciousness. More than any other event in the country's modern history, the experience exposed the enormous vulnerability of being a small, resource-rich state surrounded by much larger, more powerful neighbors in a volatile region. It has shaped the way Kuwait's ruling al-Sabah family, other political elites, and the general public think about regional security. This historical experience frames Kuwait's approach to the current Gulf crisis that pits three Gulf states -- Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain -- plus Egypt, against a small fourth Gulf state, Qatar.

Kuwait's paramount approach to the Qatar dispute is to play the role of a cautious but effective mediator. Kuwait has garnered substantial international support for its role, which in turn has provided an added layer of security for the country during this tense period. Kuwait's emir who is leading the mediating effort, Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, is regarded as one of the region's wise, experienced figures. He has spent decades as a diplomat and mediator, including only a few years ago over the same fundamental issues with most of the same actors as in the current crisis.

While Kuwait's mediating tradition stretches back decades, it has carried special meaning in the years following the

country's liberation from Iraq. As Mariam Alkazemi, a professor at Kuwait's Gulf University for Science and Technology, described to me, "The memory of the Iraqi invasion is a powerful motivator." The emir himself was a leading figure in Kuwait's restoration after liberation.

In this context, Kuwait is also emphasizing the need for stability, peaceful relationships between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, and the integrity of the regional body. In major speeches since the start of the crisis, the country's emir has expressed that he is "extremely concerned" over "unprecedented developments" and called for preserving Gulf unity and "ending the rift through dialogue." Kuwait believes the GCC and the U.S. security umbrella provided to its members remain critical to its survival. The regional body itself was an initiative of the former emir of Kuwait, Shaykh Jabir al-Ahmed al-Jabir al-Sabah. As Hamad Althunayyan, a PhD researcher in political science at the University of Maryland, told me, "The GCC is very personal to Kuwait."

The small state also must walk a fine line between maintaining its own independent political approach and sovereignty while preserving its security alliance with the Gulf peninsula's political center of gravity, Saudi Arabia. There is concern in Kuwait about whether neutral countries in the Gulf crisis, like itself and Oman, are next in line to be pressed to undertake major policy reorientations. Kuwait has long been a neutral actor in regional policy and does not represent the same kind of threat to the boycotting countries as Qatar. Yet Kuwait has always enjoyed a more vibrant political life and robust civil society than most of its GCC neighbors. This has been an irritant at times, especially to Saudi Arabia, which has sought to preserve a more restrictive environment inside the kingdom.

An example of Kuwait's different approach in the context of the current crisis regards the Muslim Brotherhood. Kuwait's political Brotherhood group, Hadas, functions as a legal association that competes for seats in Kuwait's spirited parliament, the National Assembly. The boycotting countries, on the other hand, have declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization (with accommodation for Bahrain's own social and political Brotherhood groups that have forsworn foreign ties). Kuwait also has a long tradition of tolerating a diverse press with liberties unique to the GCC. Debating domestic and foreign politics in Kuwait is natural, again in contrast to elsewhere in the Gulf. It's important to note the relative nature of these freedoms; Kuwait too has taken harsh measures in recent years against political expression and protest that have crossed sometimes ambiguous red lines.

From Kuwait's standpoint, what happens with Qatar carries implications for Kuwait. As a Kuwaiti activist expressed to me, if the boycotting countries were to force leadership change in Qatar or compel the current Doha leadership to entirely reorient its foreign policy, this would signal a threat to Kuwaiti political independence as well.

Meanwhile, tensions are high in Kuwait for reasons unrelated to the Qatar crisis. There is increasing concern about the activities of Iran-linked Shia armed militias, including the Popular Mobilization Forces and Hezbollah, across the border in Iraq that could pose a threat to Kuwait. Sectarian tensions inside the country have risen following a July 16 final court ruling against Shia citizens and one Iranian on charges of "furtive contacts" with Iran and Hezbollah, planning "hostile actions" inside Kuwait, and possession of large quantities of weapons. Kuwait is expelling Iranian diplomats from the country. As the Kuwaiti activist described to me, these sensitive circumstances for Kuwait "make the strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia all the more important."

Kuwait's central yet still vulnerable position in the Gulf dispute has created a "rally around the flag" effect. It is clear that the emir enjoys broad support among Kuwaitis for his role in the crisis. "I can easily say that the overwhelming majority support the emir's on-going efforts," Hamad Althunayyan told me. "Most Kuwaitis seem to be proud of the emir's handling of the crisis and are united behind him in a manner we haven't seen in recent years," according to the Kuwaiti activist. Abdullah Alkhonaini, an assistant researcher at Kuwait's Rai Institute for Strategic Studies and Research, summed it up well: "We all praise our 'mediator' identity," he explained to me.

There even appears to be a resurgent nationalism in Kuwait linked to the way many identify with the position of the

small state of Qatar. "Sudden political crises that threaten food supplies evoke powerful memories for Kuwaitis who lived through the Iraqi war," Dr. Alkazemi told me. With Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates outlawing criticism of their policy toward Qatar, many Kuwaitis feel appreciative of the wider space for political debate in their own country. "Being able to share one's opinion on the issue in the media, and see discussion threads on social media tackling the issue, makes me value our Constitution," Abdullah Alkhonaini expressed to me.

There have been signs of pressure on Kuwait from the leading boycotting countries to jump on their bandwagon. The challenge for the Kuwaiti emir is to find a solution to the crisis that addresses the grievances of these neighbors, without creating the perception that Qatar is losing its independence in the process. Kuwait's American partners support the emir's role, as demonstrated when U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson used Kuwait as a base to conduct his "shuttle diplomacy" in the Gulf in July. Washington would be wise to continue to work with the Kuwaitis to help bolster their position and protect them from negative consequences of their balanced role.

Lori Plotkin Boghardt is the Barbara Kay Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Cipher Brief

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya’s Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)