

Kuwaiti Official Makes Jerusalem Pilgrimage

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Brief Analysis

The foreign minister's visit to the holy city may mark a change in Arab diplomacy toward Israel.

On September 14, Kuwait's first deputy prime minister and foreign minister Sheikh Sabah al-Khaled al-Hamad al-Sabah flew from Jordan to Ramallah for talks with Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas. The trip was noteworthy enough on its own given Kuwait's continuing enmity toward the Palestinians for siding with Saddam Hussein when Iraq invaded in 1990. What was arguably much more significant was that Sheikh Sabah, a senior member of the ruling family, also took a side trip to Jerusalem to pray in the Old City -- essentially a journey into Israel.

In the view of much of the world, he did not actually visit Israel itself but rather only occupied territory annexed by Israel after the 1967 war. Kuwait does not have official relations with Israel and, unlike Oman and Qatar, never allowed the establishment of an Israeli trade office. The one Israeli diplomatic outpost in the Gulf -- not officially declared but referred to obliquely and almost certainly unintentionally last year in an official budget document -- is not in Kuwait.

Still, Sheikh Sabah's move was a rare and high-profile breaking of the longstanding Arab boycott against visiting the iconic Mosque of Omar (also known as the Dome of the Rock) and the al-Aqsa Mosque, both of which sit on top of what Arabs call al-Haram al-Sharif and Jews and Christians refer to as the Temple Mount. Known visits by prominent Arabs to the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount since 1967 can be counted on one hand: President Anwar Sadat of Egypt in 1977, Egyptian foreign minister Amr Mousa in 1994, and Egypt's Grand Mufti and a Jordanian prince in 2012. As recently as May of this year, former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal publicly declined an invitation to visit Jerusalem because it was under occupation -- though the offer came from his former Israeli counterpart, Amos Yadlin, with whom the prince was publicly debating regional issues, thereby breaking another Arab diplomatic convention.

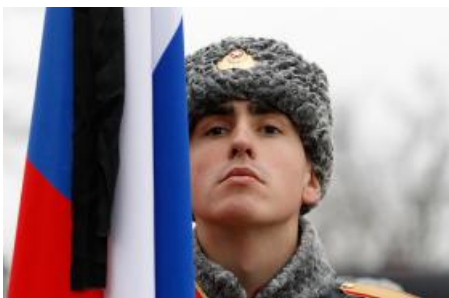
Kuwait's official position on Jerusalem is encapsulated in the so-called "Kuwait Declaration" issued at the end of the Arab Summit in May. The summit, held in Kuwait City, was vexed by disagreements over Egypt and Syria, but all of the participating states were able to agree on "the full rejection of the...Judaization of Jerusalem [and] attacks [by Israel] against Islamic and Christian shrines [in Jerusalem]." This week, the official Kuwait News Agency reported Sheikh Sabah's visit without mentioning the words "Israel" or "Judaization," instead emphasizing Kuwait's "constant and forever" support of the Palestinian people and quoting the minister as saying he would be paying "more visits to Palestine, including Jerusalem."

According to the *Jerusalem Post*, the trip was coordinated with Israel, but no representative of the Israeli government or the municipality of Jerusalem was invited to meet with Sheikh Sabah. An unidentified Israeli official was quoted as saying, "When an Arab leader wants to pray at the al-Aqsa Mosque, we will facilitate that."

In the absence of public comment, Kuwait's full diplomatic intentions can only be guessed at. Under the circumstances, the visit could reflect the country's efforts to enhance its reputation for attempting mediation (as in its so-far-unsuccessful attempts to broker reconciliation between Qatar and Saudi Arabia). From Israel's point of view, Kuwait may be trying to join the Sunni Muslim camp of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, with which Israel is believed to have security ties even in the absence of formal diplomatic relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Whatever the case, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and other dangerous developments in the Middle East appear to be prompting unexpected policy decisions. Palestinian leader Abbas has in the past controversially called for Arab leaders to visit Jerusalem's Muslim shrines and was condemned because it was perceived as advocating normalization with Israel. The lack of high-profile public outrage in the wider Arab world at Sheikh Sabah's gesture is therefore significant.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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