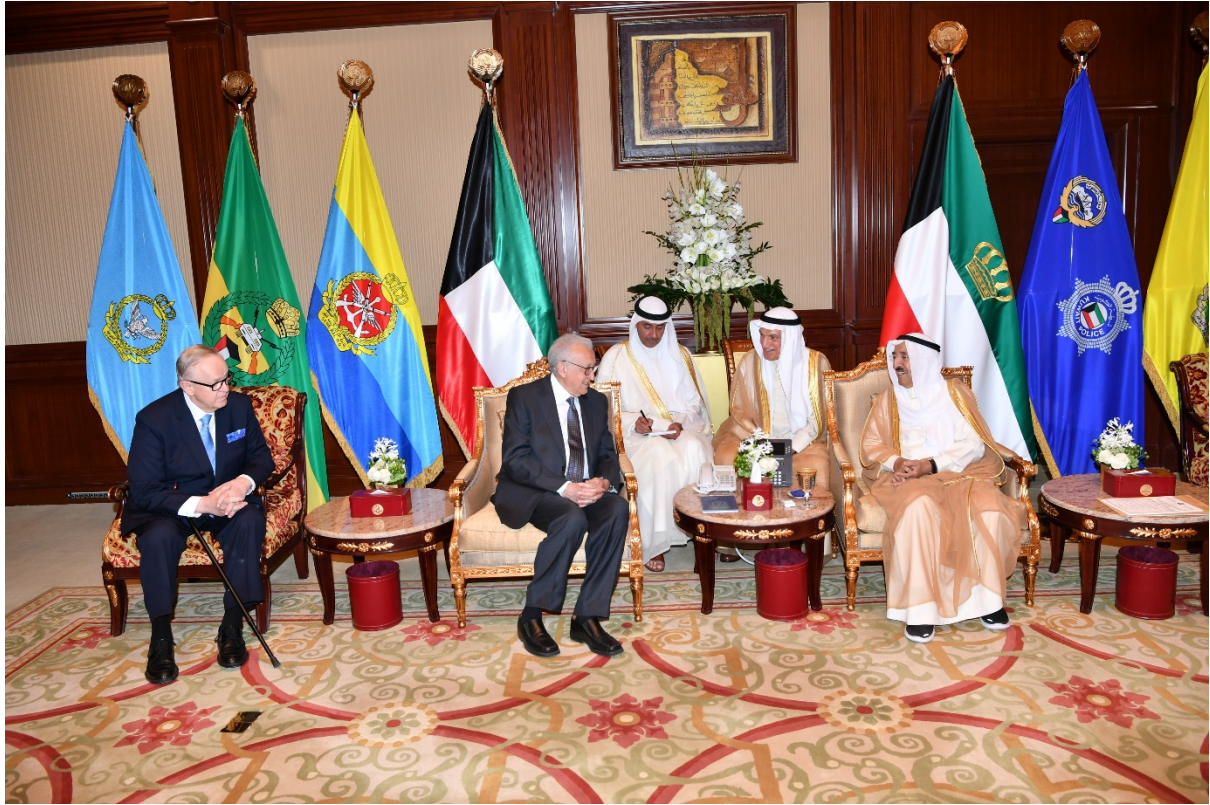


# The Elders Kuwait Trip Report

1-4 July 2018



## **Kuwait trip report**

In July 2018, The Elders visited Kuwait at the invitation of the country's Emir, to exchange views on regional political and security issues, especially the tensions around Iran, the Yemen conflict and the year-old dispute inside the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC). The Elders' delegation was led by Lakhdar Brahimi and included former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari as well as four staff from the Secretariat. The Elders were pleased to be able to engage with Kuwait as an elected UN Security Council Member, as chair of the GCC, and as a country that is actively seeking diplomatic solutions to regional crises.

The Elders had the valuable opportunity to meet with the Emir, Sheikh Sabah IV Ahmed Al-Jaber al-Sabah; Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Hamad al-Sabah, the Prime Minister; and Khaled Jarallah, Deputy Foreign Minister, to hear the views of the government and leadership of Kuwait. A meeting with the chairman and staff of the Kuwait Arab Fund for Development presented a good opportunity to hear more about Kuwait's regional development role. They were also glad to visit Kuwait's National Assembly, the only fully elected parliament in the Gulf, and to meet with the Speaker of Parliament, Marzouq Al Ghanem, as well as MPs Safa Hashem and Mohammed Dallal; and were delighted to have the opportunity to hear a variety of views from Kuwait's diverse and active civil society and academic world.

The key theme emerging from the visit was the need for political solutions to regional conflicts. Kuwait's leadership has a longstanding commitment to dialogue and diplomacy to address regional conflicts, and The Elders discussed the growing need for thoughtful diplomacy to find political solutions.

Kuwait has been a strong supporter of multilateralism, in part because of the vital role that the UN played in upholding Kuwait's sovereignty when the country faced invasion and occupation by its neighbour, Iraq. It was said that if the UNSC took the same strong position on the other conflicts in the region, it could solve all of them. Within its immediate region, Kuwait has been a founder and advocate of the GCC for the past four decades.

Kuwait also has a more open public and parliamentary debate than most regional peers, and while this focuses mainly on domestic issues, it also means that foreign policy is crafted under more public scrutiny than some of the neighbouring states. For instance, public sympathy for the Palestinian issue is a factor in policymaking. In general, Kuwaiti MPs and civil society interlocutors expressed the view that the region should be able to sit down and resolve its own issues without always depending on external players, who would have their own agendas.

## **Dialogue with Iran**

Kuwait supported the multilateral Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear programme when it was signed in 2015, and reminded the world of this when the US recently decided to withdraw. The JCPOA had not dealt with the concerns and worries that regional states had about Iran's foreign policy, but Kuwait's view was it should be developed and built upon to address these concerns, rather than being cancelled. The region was

better off with the nuclear agreement than without it, but the main concerns of regional states were not about Iran's nuclear programme. Iran was using other (conventional and non-conventional) means to threaten the region.

The Kuwaiti leadership has consistently taken the approach that a problems between the GCC and Iran need to be solved politically, not militarily. Kuwaiti officials share the concerns of their Saudi and Emirati neighbours about Iran's regional behaviour. Relations had been damaged by the discovery in 2015 of the "Al Abdali cell", a group of 25 Kuwaitis and one Iranian that were convicted of spying for Iran, amassing weapons and seeking to overthrow the government. Kuwait expelled some Iranian diplomats in response and recalled its ambassador to Tehran, but did not cut diplomatic relations. However, one official said, it was difficult to convince the Kuwaiti people, and other GCC countries, of the merits of dialogue with Iran while Iran was behaving in this way towards Kuwait and other countries in the region, including Yemen.

Officials emphasised that GCC governments did not want regime change in Iran, and wanted a tranquil neighbourhood, but were highly sensitive to what they saw as Iranian threats to their identity and sovereignty. It was said that European countries, who were seeking to find ways to preserve and uphold the JCPOA, could also play a valuable role in convincing the Iranians to change their regional behaviour.

Outside government, The Elders heard broad support for the government's position. However there was some frustration with what was seen as a lack of Iranian response to the good offices of the emir. A former ambassador said that Iran had so far only been willing to "converse", not negotiate. Iran should consider confidence building measures that could demonstrate the value of the Kuwaiti approach. Kuwait's neighbours would be more likely to see the value of dialogue if it led to actions and changes in behaviour. Instead trust had been damaged by the discovery of the cell. There were also questions about Iran's internal division. One interlocutor said that to have a meaningful dialogue with neighbours, Iran also needed a dialogue with itself.

It was suggested that the current environment is not encouraging dialogue as states in the region wait to see how renewed US sanctions, including sanctions on Iran's oil trade, will play out. Conversely, another interlocutor argued that Iran comes under more economic pressure from the US in the coming months, it might place more importance on Kuwait as a potential mediator with other GCC states.

Among civil society representatives, The Elders heard a sense that Iran's expansion of influence in the region was not necessarily a function of Iranian strength, but rather a reflection of a deficit of leadership in the Arab world, as well as the weakness of traditional Western powers. The Arab world was lacking a collective voice. Several people argued that geopolitics occupied too much time and bandwidth, while the region was behind in terms of education, democracy, gender equality and youth empowerment. Too many Arab leaders had responded to the 2011 Arab uprisings with repression instead of grasping the need for thoroughgoing reform. No one was pushing for the economic co-operation and integration that the region needed. The younger generation were highly able, but frustrated; "the doors are closed, even for them to leave the region".

## **The GCC and Yemen**

Kuwaitis inside and outside government expressed sadness at the divided state of the GCC, saying that the GCC states would be better served by finding a unified stance at a time when the region faced multiple security threats, and when so many external powers were trying to gain a foothold in the Middle East. A number of people criticised Qatar's foreign policy, especially its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and the role of Al Jazeera, which they saw as encouraging support for opposition movements at the expense of governments. However, in the words of a former ambassador, Qatar was "naughty, not evil".

There was understanding and respect for the concerns of the "Quartet" who are boycotting Qatar (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt). However, Kuwaitis took the view that the Gulf leaders could resolve these issues through dialogue using the Quartet's conditions as a basis for discussions. Media reform needed to be part of the picture, to improve professional standards, which had been damaged by the crisis; this applied not just to Al Jazeera but across the board, as Gulf broadcasters and newspapers had become more and more politicised as they vied to demonise the other side.

Kuwait is a member of the Gulf coalition that is intervening in Yemen. It has sent troops to help protect the Saudi border and expressed solidarity with Saudi Arabia in the face of missile attacks by the Houthis. It has also actively supported a political solution. In 2016 it hosted 100 days of UN-sponsored peace talks between the Yemeni parties, and this year reiterated its support for the mediation efforts of the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths. Kuwait has a 40-year history of providing aid to Yemen, and had begun to implement a \$500m programme of development aid to Yemen, but had stopped because of the conflict. It had committed \$100m for humanitarian aid, and Kuwaiti NGOs had also been very active across different areas of Yemen.

## **The Palestinian issue**

In May, Kuwait had tabled a [draft resolution](#) to the UN Security Council that would have required the UN secretary-general to make proposals for an international mechanism to protect Palestinian civilians living under Israeli occupation, but was vetoed by the US. Kuwaiti interlocutors emphasised that Kuwait sees itself as a representative of the broader Arab group of countries at the UN, underscoring its need to speak up for Arab causes. Parliament has also consistently expressed strong support for the Palestinians.

MPs and civil society interlocutors emphasised the Palestinian problem as one of the drivers of radicalisation in the region. The recent military victories against ISIS would prove only temporary, if such groups retained an ability to sway young people's minds. They could use technology to enter any house and take the message that the region's regimes were weak and incapable of bringing justice, to the Palestinians or to other Islamic causes. "Terrorists claimed that they were the only people that could bring justice, and this had managed to sway many young people." It was noted that ISIS had shifted its discourse more towards the Palestinian issue since it lost territory in Iraq and Syria.

## **Aid to Iraq and Syria**

Kuwait has provided and encouraged aid to Iraq, and to Syrian refugees. When Iraq started to liberate its territories from Daesh, Kuwait was keen to support stabilisation by hosting a conference for the reconstruction of Iraq. This had taken place in February, with the participation of around 2500 private companies as well as the World Bank. \$30bn had been pledged to support Iraq, and Kuwait had begun to finance some projects that were proposed by the Iraqi government. When it came to Syria, Kuwait had decided to focus on the humanitarian side more than the political track. Kuwait had hosted three donor conferences for refugees and participated in the fourth and fifth in London and Brussels.

Beyond aid, the Kuwaiti leadership has sought to engage politically with the Iraqi government and a wide range of political leaders. The countries had managed to resolve most of the outstanding issues relating to UNSC resolutions, The Elders were told. Most of the Iraqi leaders had visited Kuwait, including Moqtada al-Sadr and Ammar Al Hakim. They remembered that the Emir was the only Arab leader who attended the Arab League summit when it was in Baghdad [in 2012].

MPs told The Elders there was public scepticism about levels of aid spending, especially to Iraq, given the painful history of the occupation. The personal support of the emir had been essential to secure parliamentary backing. Civil society interlocutors suggested that the 2018 elections had shown some positive signs, in that voting had been less sectarian and more focused on national issues. But there was still no consensus or trust in Iraqi politics. There were too many wounds from Baathist persecution and from the maltreatment of minorities.

## **Role of the US**

Kuwait has a close alliance with the US and many Kuwaitis have personal links to the US as a place of study or second homes. Nonetheless, discussions with civil society indicated concern about the direction of travel in US politics. In terms of foreign policy, changes from one administration to another had put Kuwait in a difficult position; it had been advised to have dialogue with Iran and now it was being asked to help contain Iran. The US stance towards the Israeli Palestinian issue was unclear but the signs were negative. There was a view that the US had little interest in resolving the Gulf crisis, and that it was playing both sides. As is often the case in the Gulf, civil society interlocutors flagged the growing sums that the US earns from selling arms to the region.

## **Domestic debate and the social contract**

Kuwait's domestic political debate is largely focused on the economy, austerity plans and the social contract. There is still public scepticism about the need for economic reform, which government is trying to communicate better. MPs emphasised the need to develop the skills and ecosystem to support entrepreneurs and empower youth in the private sector.

Civil society interlocutors said that Kuwait's diverse society included various groups who felt their religious affiliation very strongly, yet the society benefitted from a degree of openness

and tolerance towards this diversity. It was said that Kuwait's various Islamists operated within the framework of the constitution and loyalty to their country, and that at present, the clashes that took place in parliament were primarily about social and economic issues. Relative austerity, such as cuts to water and energy subsidies, is spurring some populism. There is growing public criticism of migrant workers – who make up the majority of the public sector workforce – and of the country's high levels of spending on foreign aid. As elsewhere in the Gulf, there is uncertainty about how the social contract will evolve in the longer term, as the current fiscal model is unsustainable.

### **Migrant workers and social attitudes**

The Elders met with local members of Project 189, an NGO that featured in The Elders' Sparks of Hope project, because of their work on migrant domestic workers' rights. 90% of Kuwaiti households employ a foreign domestic worker. In total, Kuwait employs over 620,000 migrant domestic workers, making up one in five of the country's residents. Some 250,000 are from the Philippines, and there have been recent tensions between Kuwait and the Philippines over migrants' rights.

Project 189 works on two main tracks. First, they provide support to migrant workers who have faced abuse, from sexual and physical assault to non-payment of salaries. Secondly, Project 189 work within Kuwaiti society to address perceptions and prejudices against migrant workers. They use creative digital campaigns, including current campaign #LookWithHumanEyes, in an attempt to break down barriers and prejudices. They emphasised the importance of framing these issues in ways that resonate with local society and culture, including Islamic traditions, as the discourse of human rights is perceived by some segments of Kuwaiti society as something alien or imported – although The Elders rejected the idea that human rights were either exclusive to or intrinsic to the West.

They highlighted the need for a better understanding of structural violence and micro-aggressions. At present it was too easy for some of the employers to make the false dichotomy that, "if I'm not beating her, I am good to her." In terms of policy, the discussion also highlighted a need to improve the options for women to report abuse, including access to female interlocutors who were trained in responding to sexual abuse and would be sensitive to those who had experienced trauma.

Meanwhile, Abolish 153, another Kuwaiti NGO, highlighted issues of violence against women. They campaign in particular for Kuwait to abolish a little-used "honour killing" law, which predates the country's independence, and seek stronger legal and practical protections against gender-based violence and domestic abuse.

### **Conclusions**

The Elders share the view of the Kuwaiti leadership that dialogue will be essential to reduce the tensions between Iran and its neighbours, and ultimately establish relations based on good neighbourliness instead of mutual insecurity.

The Elders also commended the Emir for Kuwait's efforts to prioritise peaceful and political processes to address all the problems of the region, in particular the conflicts in Yemen, Syria and Palestine.

Lakhdar Brahimi, former Foreign Minister of Algeria and UN diplomat, said:  
"Kuwait has long been a voice for stability and cooperation in this region and we welcome its continued commitment to a peaceful path, including as a member of the UN Security Council. We also greatly appreciate Kuwait's generosity to the victims of war in Syria and Iraq through the pledging conferences for humanitarian aid it has hosted and contributed to in such a substantial way."

Martti Ahtisaari, former President of Finland and Nobel Peace Laureate, added:  
"We admire Kuwait's work and determination to foster a peaceful and harmonious environment for its people, its neighbours and the wider region.."

## Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Jane Kinninmont, Head of Programmes at The Elders, based on notes taken throughout the trip.