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Kuwait: Issues for the 118th Congress

Updated May 18, 2023

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R47390



R47390

May 18, 2023

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U.S. relations with the State of Kuwait have remained close since the United States led a multinational coalition that liberated Kuwait from Iraqi forces in 1991. Defense cooperation serves as the centerpiece of U.S.-Kuwaiti partnership. The United States has U.S. military personnel deployed in Kuwait on a lasting and rotational basis, along with forward operational commands and U.S. military equipment pursuant to a bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement and an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement. Germany, Japan, and South Korea are the only overseas countries that host more U.S. forces than Kuwait, if rotational forces are included. The Kuwaiti government pays some of the cost of the U.S. military presence in Kuwait.

U.S. foreign and defense assistance to Kuwait has been limited, and since the 1990s, Congress has considered legislation addressing bilateral relations relatively infrequently. Members of Congress may review developments in Kuwait and U.S.-Kuwait relations in the context of overseeing U.S. diplomacy and defense policy, including efforts to ensure security of the global energy supply, deter aggression, promote accountable governance and human rights, respond to humanitarian crises, and deescalate conflicts in the Middle East region.

President George W. Bush designated Kuwait as a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2004, making Kuwait eligible to purchase certain U.S. arms, receive excess defense articles (EDA), and engage in defense research cooperation with the United States. Proposed U.S. foreign military sales to Kuwait since 2020 have included U.S. construction services for the Ministry of Defense headquarters, Patriot missile system upgrades, Apache AH-64 helicopters, and land and air force munitions.

With 1.3 million citizens, Kuwait derives its global influence from its large oil and natural gas reserves, its sizeable sovereign financial resources, its strategic location at the northern terminus of the Persian Gulf, and its diplomatic outreach and posture in international and regional organizations. Kuwait's oil reserves amount to more than 7% of global proven reserves, and at current production rates, its reserves would last through this century. Kuwait's Emir, Shaykh Nawaf al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah (age 85), has ruled the country since 2020; he has delegated some constitutional functions to his designated successor and half-brother, Crown Prince Shaykh Mishaal al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah (age 82). The Al Sabah family has exercised authority in Kuwait since the 18th century. Eligible Kuwaitis vote to elect members of parliament, the National Assembly—the most constitutionally empowered and politically influential legislative body among the Arab Gulf states. Kuwait's citizenry is largely Sunni Muslim, and members of its Shia Muslim minority (~30%) participate peacefully in politics.

Kuwait's political environment has been under strain for years. The late prior Emir's succession transition in 2006 rebalanced power in the Al Sabah family, and future succession arrangements remain uncertain. Executive-legislative impasses over public spending, corruption allegations, proposed reforms to public sector employment and benefits, service costs, and financing for new economic initiatives have contributed to political discord since 2019. Following a December 2020 election, political stalemate persisted, and, in April 2022, then-prime minister Shaykh Sabah al Khaled al Hamad Al Sabah resigned. In June 2022, Kuwait's rulers announced that parliament would be dismissed and called for a new election, appointing the Emir's son, Shaykh Ahmed Nawaf al Ahmed Al Sabah, in July 2022 as an interim replacement prime minister. In September 2022, Kuwaitis voted to elect 50 members to the 65-member National Assembly (up to 15 appointed cabinet members also serve as Assembly members), choosing 27 new Assembly members, including some opposition figures.

Following the 2022 election, the Emir reappointed Shaykh Ahmed, and an atmosphere of consultation briefly emerged. Nevertheless, differences over proposed private debt relief and public spending measures brought the executive and legislature back to an impasse. In January 2023, the prime minister submitted his cabinet's resignation; in March, he was re-appointed and directed to propose a new cabinet. On March 19, Kuwait's constitutional court ruled the 2022 election void and reinstated the parliamentarians elected in December 2020. Previous court decisions to overturn election results in 2012 and 2013 prompted demonstrations, confrontations, and boycotts. Citing public opposition to the court's March 2023 decision, the Crown Prince in April dissolved the court-reinstated parliament. An election is planned for June 2023.

Kuwait relies on oil export revenues and investment earnings to fund public spending, including large recurring public sector wage and benefit costs. As a result, fluctuations in energy and other global asset prices directly affect Kuwait's national finances. Increases in oil prices since 2020 have provided a windfall that may ease pressures associated with spending reforms and/or allow more investment in the government's *Vision 2035/New Kuwait* economic diversification plans.

The 118th Congress may consider proposals from the Biden Administration to sustain and strengthen U.S.-Kuwaiti ties.

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Overview and Bilateral Relations

The U.S. Department of State describes the U.S.-Kuwait relationship as warm and multifaceted.¹ Bilateral ties have remained close since the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War (see textbox below). The United States hosted the fifth U.S.-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue ministerial in Washington, DC, in January 2022, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed the Administration's appreciation of the Kuwaiti government's "generosity," its "commitment to humanitarianism and international stability," and its "statesmanship."² During the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Kuwait chartered flights from its national airline to assist in the evacuation of U.S. personnel and Afghan employees from Afghanistan and facilitated the onward transit of 5,000 Afghans through its territory.³ Kuwaiti-U.S. counterterrorism cooperation has deepened since the early 2000s.

Figure I. Map of Kuwait



Source: CRS, using State Department and ESRI data.

Notes: Energy fields and boundaries approximate.

U.S.-Kuwaiti Defense Relations

As of 2023, thousands of U.S. military personnel are in Kuwait at the invitation of the Kuwaiti government, which pays some of the cost of the U.S. military presence.⁴ Kuwait hosts the

¹ U.S. State Department Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, "U.S. Relations With Kuwait," January 5, 2021.

² U.S. State Department, Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmed Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah Statements to the Press, January 26, 2022.

³ Agreement Between the United States of America and Kuwait Effected by Exchange of Notes at Kuwait City, August 22, 2021; U.S. Ambassador Alina L. Romanowski, Statement on Kuwait's Cooperation with the United States on Evacuation of American Citizens and At-Risk Afghans, August 23, 2021; and, Sgt. Marc Loi, "29th Infantry Division moves 5,000 Afghans through Kuwait," U.S. 29th Infantry Division, November 5, 2021.

⁴ Current U.S. law provides for acceptance of burden sharing contributions by designated countries and regional organizations (see 10 U.S.C. 2609 and 10 U.S.C. 2350j).

forward headquarters of U.S. Army Central Command (USARCENT) and the Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), which supports Iraqi and Syrian partner forces in operations against the remnants of the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL) organization. U.S. forces affiliated with Task Force Spartan/Operation Spartan Shield also operate in Kuwait, for deterrence purposes and to build regional partner capacity. In August 2022, a purported Iraqi armed group claimed to have launched an unmanned aerial system (UAS/drone) attack against Ali Al Salem Air Base; U.S. forces, which provide for their own security in Kuwait, initially denied that any attack took place, but, in May 2023, U.S. officials told the press that remnants of an Iranian-origin UAS had been recovered on Iraq's territory following reported attack.⁵ Proposed U.S. foreign military sales to Kuwait since 2020 have included U.S. construction services for the Ministry of Defense headquarters, various Patriot missile system upgrades, Apache AH-64 helicopters, and land and air force munitions.

U.S.-Kuwaiti Economic Relations

U.S.-Kuwaiti trade relations are limited in scope. The United States and Kuwait signed a Trade Investment Framework Agreement in 2004. In 2022, U.S. exports to Kuwait were valued at \$3.39 billion and U.S. imports from Kuwait were valued at \$2.05 billion.⁶ The overall value of bilateral trade has declined since 2015, reflecting lower prices and volumes of Kuwaiti oil exports to the United States. In April 2022, the United States removed Kuwait from the U.S. Trade Representative's Section 301 Watch List citing "continued and significant progress on concerns that stakeholders identified with [intellectual property] IP enforcement and transparency rights."⁷

According to the Institute of International Education, nearly 6,000 Kuwaiti students enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States during the 2021/2022 academic year. Some Kuwaitis make use of medical facilities in the United States for specialized care, and, in 2021, Congress voiced support for U.S. efforts to resolve outstanding Kuwaiti financial obligations to U.S. health facilities.⁸

Congress and Kuwait

Congress has considered legislation addressing U.S. relations with Kuwait relatively infrequently since the 1990s, but various Members of Congress frequently visit U.S. troops stationed in Kuwait. In 2022, Congress designated U.S. veterans who served on active duty in Kuwait on or after August 2, 1990, as "covered veterans" under the Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-168), which expands health care eligibility for veterans subject to toxic exposure.

⁵ Associated Press, "US Air Force Targeted in 'Propaganda Attack' in Kuwait," August 21, 2022; and, Michael R. Gordon, Warren P. Strobel, and David S. Cloud, "Drone Strike That Killed U.S. Contractor in Syria Was Launched by Iran-Backed Militia in Iraq," *Wall Street Journal*, May 14, 2023.

⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce International Trade Administration using U.S. Census Bureau data, March 2023.

⁷ Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, USTR Releases 2022 Special 301 Report on Intellectual Property Protection and Enforcement, April 27, 2022.

⁸ Section 1297 of the William M. (Mac) Thornberry National Defense Authorization Act for 2021 (P.L. 116-283) stated the sense of Congress that "Kuwait should immediately pay such outstanding amounts owed to such United States medical institutions." See Lenny Bernstein, "Cash-strapped U.S. hospitals say Kuwait owes them at least \$677 million," *Washington Post*, August 7, 2020.

The 1990-1991 Invasion of Kuwait and its Aftermath

In August 1990, Iraq's then-dictator Saddam Hussein ordered the Iraqi military to invade neighboring Kuwait; the subsequent Iraqi occupation of Kuwait led to the displacement of Kuwait's government; the death, disappearance, and injury of thousands of Kuwaitis; and extensive damage to Kuwait's natural resources and environment. President George H.W. Bush quickly dispatched U.S. military forces to Saudi Arabia to deter further advances by Iraqi forces. The 101st Congress condemned the Iraqi invasion immediately (S.Res. 318 and H.R. 5431) and authorized and appropriated supplemental funds for Operation Desert Shield (P.L. 101-403, P.L. 101-510, and P.L. 101-511).

In January 1991, the 102nd Congress authorized the President to use military force (P.L. 102-1) pursuant to United Nations Security Council Resolution 678 (1990), which called on U.N. Member States to use "all necessary means to uphold and implement" related Security Council resolutions and restore international peace and security in the area. A U.S.-led multinational military campaign (Operation Desert Storm) to evict Iraqi forces began on January 17, 1991. Coalition forces liberated Kuwait by the end of February. Saddam Hussein's regime was weakened, and U.S. and partner forces established and maintained no-fly zones in southern and northern Iraq over the next decade, amid U.N.-backed sanctions and global scrutiny of Iraq's suspected weapons of mass destruction programs. The U.S. military and U.S. national security decisionmakers continue to study the 1990-1991 crisis and U.S. decisions for lessons to inform current policy and future planning.⁹ The 117th Congress considered but did not enact a Biden Administration-supported proposal to repeal the 1991 Iraq authorization for use of military force (P.L. 102-1).¹⁰



The after-effects of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and Kuwait's liberation have shaped the Middle East region and U.S. foreign policy for more than three decades. U.S. confrontation with Saddam Hussein's Iraq culminated in the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003. The disorder and violence that followed destabilized Iraq and arguably altered the regional balance of power in Iran's favor. More than thirty years after U.S. forces first fought alongside partners to free Kuwait from Iraqi forces, U.S. and partner militaries remain in both countries, maintaining pre-positioned equipment, conducting training and supporting deterrence operations in Kuwait while providing security advice and assistance to Iraq's post-2003 government.

Photo Source: U.S. Department of Defense, Kuwait 1991.

The military presence that the United States established and maintained in the Gulf in the wake of the 1991 war cemented a role for the United States as a de facto guarantor of the Gulf's security that has endured. The global economy's reliance on the free flow of energy resources from the Persian Gulf similarly has evolved since the 1990s but persists. U.S. and host country decisions about the future presence and role of U.S. forces in the region thus remain a question of significant regional and global interest.

In 2022, the U.N. Compensation Commission that has processed and paid compensation claims related to Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait announced the completion of the 31-year compensation process.¹¹ Under a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions, a portion of proceeds from Iraq's oil sales were allocated to fund the \$52.4 billion in compensation claims paid over the life of the program. Congress may consider how the development and implementation of this claims compensation process might inform arrangements to secure and administer compensation for claims arising from Russia's invasion of Ukraine or other cases of state aggression.

⁹ Richard A. Lacquement Jr., "The Gulf War 30 Years Later: Successes, Failures, and Blind Spots," *War on the Rocks*, September 9, 2020.

¹⁰ See Charlie Savage, "Senate panel votes to repeal 1991 and 2002 laws authorizing wars with Iraq," *New York Times*, August 4, 2021; and, Rebecca Kheel, "House votes to repeal 1991, 1957 war authorizations," *The Hill*, June 29, 2021. In 2022, the House-passed version of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2023 (§5878 of H.R. 7900) would have repealed P.L. 102-1. The Senate version did not contain a repeal provision. The final version, the James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 (H.R. 7776 /P.L. 117-263), did not contain a repeal provision.

¹¹ United Nations, "Iraq makes final reparation payment to Kuwait for 1990 invasion," February 9, 2022.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023 (Section 8111 of Division C, P.L. 117-328) authorizes the Department of Defense to incur obligations not to exceed \$350 million during the fiscal year “in anticipation of receipt of contributions, only from the Government of Kuwait.” The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for FY2023 (Section 2402 of P.L. 117-263) authorizes \$26.85 million for Energy Resilience and Conservation Investment Program power generation and microgrid project at Camp Arifjan.

Kuwait’s History and Politics

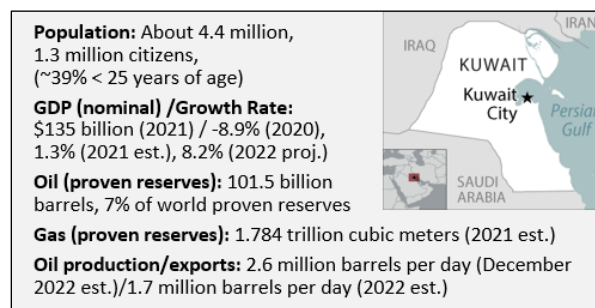
Coastal Kuwait grew gradually as a trading center in the northern Gulf region as the Al Sabah family and others gained influence there after migrating to the region in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Kuwait’s interior was home to then-nomadic tribal groups, and urban-rural differences and tribal identities and relations have remained influential in Kuwaiti society and politics.¹² The Al Sabah family’s leadership and administrative roles in Kuwait deepened during the 18th century. At the end of the 19th century, the Al Sabah family sought British protection from the Ottoman Empire, trading Kuwait’s sovereignty by treaty for security guarantees. Kuwait’s citizenry includes Sunni and Shia Muslims and descendants of settled and nomadic communities, all of which have experienced considerable social and economic change since the discovery of oil in 1938. Kuwait regained independence from the United Kingdom in 1961, developing rapidly with an influx of oil revenue and foreign labor. Under a constitution adopted in 1962 and renewed following the 1991 U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait from occupation by neighboring Iraq, the Al Sabah family has shared some power with Kuwait’s diverse citizenry. Together they have forged a global profile for their small, energy-rich emirate (**Figure 2**).

Political System

Kuwait’s 1962 constitution recognizes the Emir as head of state and ruler, with power as commander-in-chief of the military and authority to appoint all judges and to dismiss or suspend Kuwait’s unicameral legislature. The Emir appoints a prime minister as head of government, who in turn selects the cabinet. The prime minister has always been a member of the Al Sabah family, and Al Sabah family members usually hold key cabinet portfolios such as defense, interior, foreign affairs, and finance.

Plans for succession within the ruling Al Sabah family are uncertain, and the Assembly must confirm the Emir’s designee for the position of crown prince. This requirement reportedly has contributed to controversial entanglements between rival royal family members and some members of the National Assembly since a leadership transition in 2006.¹³ Until 2006, the main

Figure 2. Kuwait: Basic Facts



Source: CRS, using data from the U.S. State Department, Esri, the Central Intelligence Agency, International Monetary Fund, and Government of Kuwait.

¹² See Alanoud al-Sharekh and Courtney Freer, *Tribalism and Political Power in the Gulf: State-Building and National Identity in Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE*, (I.B. Tauris-Bloomsbury), September 2021.

¹³ See Kristin Smith Diwan, “Kuwait’s constitutional showdown,” *Foreign Policy*, November 17, 2011; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, “Kuwait: Political crisis at critical juncture,” *BBC News*, October 23, 2012; and, Rivka Azoulay and Claire (continued...)

branches of the family (Al Jaber and Al Salem) generally had alternated in holding the positions of Emir and Crown Prince. In 2006, Assembly members and other leading figures questioned the suitability of the late Emir's successor from the Al Salem branch on health grounds and recommended his replacement through a negotiated transition. Since that time, members of the Al Jaber branch of the Al Sabah family have served as Emir and Crown Prince.¹⁴

Kuwait's National Assembly is the longest-established elected body among the Gulf Arab states. It has a greater scope of authority than any other Gulf Arab legislature or consultative body. Eligible voters elect 50 Assembly members, with up to 15 members of the cabinet eligible to serve and vote in the Assembly ex-officio.¹⁵ The Assembly's members draft legislation and act on legislation proposed by the government. The Assembly does not vote to confirm cabinet nominees, but its members frequently question ministers (a process known as interpellation or colloquially as "grilling"), and the Assembly can remove ministers by a vote of no confidence. The Assembly can remove the prime minister by voting to declare the Assembly's inability to cooperate with the prime minister.

The Assembly's membership has reflected Kuwait's political and social diversity over time, including Sunni and Shia Muslims, social liberals and conservatives, younger and older Kuwaitis, urban and more rural citizens, and supporters and critics of the prevailing constitutional order. The country's majority expatriate population, which remains critical to its economy and includes individuals holding public sector positions, does not have representation. Some religious and social conservatives have opposed women's rights as candidates and members of the Assembly since the state recognized those rights in 2005 (see Women's Rights below). Opposition activism in Kuwait over the last two decades has featured critiques of alleged government corruption, advocacy for stronger legislative authority and greater checks on executive power, rejection of electoral system changes, and, in some instances, demands that the state implement more religiously and socially conservative policies.¹⁶ The legacy of disputes since 2006 over Kuwait's electoral system continues to shape Kuwaiti politics (see Chronology below).

2022 Election, Reinstatement of 2020 Assembly, and 2023 Election

Kuwait's political environment has been strained for years with questions about leadership succession and debates over public finances, services, social issues, and alleged corruption. Disagreements between successive governments and members of the elected National Assembly have created legislative deadlock and fueled political confrontation, leading to the dismissal of several Assemblies and resignations of several cabinets (see Chronology below). Some observers have described enduring tensions in Kuwaiti politics since 2009 as reflecting "conflict over policy

Beaugrand, "Limits of political clientelism: elites' struggles in Kuwait's fragmenting politics," *International Journal of Archaeology and Social Sciences in the Arabian Peninsula*, Vol. 4, 2015. Members of the Al Salem, Hamad, and Abdullah lines of the family—all named for descendants of sons of Emir Mubarak Al Sabah (ruled 1896-1915)—remain eligible to lead under the constitution.

¹⁴ For background on Kuwaiti succession, see Kristian Ulrichsen and Simon Henderson (eds.), *Kuwait: A Changing System Under Stress*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Note 69, October 2019.

¹⁵ Kuwaiti male and female citizens over the age of 21 may vote, excluding citizens naturalized within 20 years of the election date and members of the armed forces and police services.

¹⁶ For background on Kuwait's electoral system and opposition politics since 2011, see Yuree Noh, "The Rise of the Islamic Constitutional Movement in Kuwait," Project on Middle East Political Science, February 2014; Shafeeq Ghabra, "Kuwait: At the Crossroads of Change or Political Stagnation," Middle East Institute, May 20, 2014; Daniel L. Tavana, "The Evolution of the Kuwaiti 'Opposition': Electoral Politics After the Arab Spring," Baker Institute for Public Policy, August 7, 2018; Courtney Freer and Andrew Leber, "The 'tribal advantage' in Kuwaiti politics and the future of the opposition," Brookings Institution, April 19, 2021; and, Luai Allarakia and Hamad H. Albloshi, "The Politics of Permanent Deadlock in Kuwait," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), March 11, 2021.

with disputes over the rules of the game,” and, at times, “an overzealous utilization of oversight tools, such as the repeated questioning of ministers followed by votes of no confidence.”¹⁷

Following a December 2020 election, political stalemate persisted, and in April 2022 then-prime minister Shaykh Sabah al Khaled al Hamad Al Sabah resigned. The Emir and Crown Prince initially delayed naming a replacement, and, in June 2022, the Crown Prince announced the Assembly would be dismissed pursuant to the constitution and called for a new election.¹⁸ In relaying the decision to dismiss the parliament, the Crown Prince referred to “practices and behaviors that threaten national unity,”¹⁹ perhaps reflecting the ruling establishment’s dissatisfaction with the outgoing Assembly’s pointed approach to questioning government officials and parliamentarians’ refusal to endorse government fiscal proposals. The Assembly had not enacted the 2022-2023 budget and did not approve authority for the government to borrow domestically or internationally to finance long-debated projects. In July 2022, leaders appointed the Emir’s son, Shaykh Ahmed Nawaf al Ahmed Al Sabah, as prime minister to serve until the planned election.

On September 29, 2022, Kuwaiti voters elected a new Assembly, including 27 new members, among them various opposition figures and members of the Islamic Constitutional Movement—the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood’s political arm. Women members, absent from the previous Assembly, again won seats. Voters also returned Ahmed al Saadoun, who served as Assembly speaker from 1985 to 1999, to parliament.

In October, the Emir reappointed Shaykh Ahmed Al Sabah as prime minister; who made initial cabinet appointments. However, the cabinet promptly resigned after some National Assembly members protested that the cabinet’s membership had not changed sufficiently. Consultations followed and a new cabinet was seated in mid-October.

Observers of Kuwaiti politics noted that an atmosphere of consultation and potential cooperation emerged after the 2022 election, with the government announcing pardons of some convicted government critics in an attempt to “create an atmosphere for fruitful cooperation between the executive and legislative authorities... and remove all obstacles that would hinder development and achievement.”²⁰ The cabinet presented proposals for reform across several sectors, while the Assembly endorsed several legislative proposals to address accountability for corruption and launched investigations related to corruption allegations involving some defense and property contracts.²¹ The cabinet’s four-year government program called for recovering stolen public funds and rooting out corruption, and Kuwait’s Minister of Defense pledged to cooperate with parliamentary investigations.

Some Assembly members proposed measures that would commit the government to purchasing the private debt of Kuwaiti citizens or increasing public sector salaries in response to cost of living pressures. Other Assembly members renewed efforts to interpellate (or “grill”) cabinet members over alleged financial mismanagement. In January 2023, cabinet ministers boycotted National

¹⁷ See Luai Allarakia and Hamad H. Albloshi, “The Politics of Permanent Deadlock in Kuwait,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, March 11, 2021.

¹⁸ Kuwait’s leaders previously dissolved the National Assembly for long periods from 1976 to 1981 and from 1986 to 1992. Temporary dissolutions occurred in 2003, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, 2016 and 2020 as mandates for new elections within 60 days.

¹⁹ *Kuwait Times*, “Kuwait Crown Prince dissolves parliament,” August 2, 2022.

²⁰ *Kuwait Times*, “Cabinet announces pardon on persons for penalties restricting their freedoms,” January 17, 2023.

²¹ B Izzak and Kuwait News Agency, “Govt lays out four-year plan for long-term development,” *Kuwait Times*, December 13, 2022; and, Izzak, “Assembly forms panel to probe two defense deals,” *Kuwait Times*, December 14, 2022.

Assembly sessions and forced the Assembly's adjournment, arguing that the cabinet had not had sufficient opportunity to comment on the proposed legislation that would incur state costs. On January 23, the prime minister submitted the cabinet's resignation, and the crown prince reappointed him to nominate a new cabinet in March 2023.²²

On March 19, Kuwait's Constitutional Court ruled the 2022 election void and reinstated the parliamentarians elected in December 2020. The ruling came in response to cases filed by members of the 2020 Assembly, and the court found that the government's formal decree to dismiss the 2020 Assembly shortly after Shaykh Ahmed became prime minister was invalid because it did not allow sufficient time to determine if that Assembly membership and a new prime minister could work together effectively.²³ Previous court decisions to overturn election results in 2012 and 2013 prompted demonstrations, confrontations, and boycotts.

Public opposition to the court's March 2023 decision surfaced immediately, including through small demonstrations. Some members of the 2020 and 2022 parliaments made strident statements criticizing various actions of the executive and judicial branches or calling for constitutional reform. Kuwait's rulers reportedly pressured the head of the Supreme Judicial Council that appoints the members of the Constitutional Court to resign.²⁴ The Council rejected his initial resignation, but he later resubmitted it.²⁵ In April 2023, the Crown Prince announced the 2020 parliament would be dismissed, acknowledging "popular will" and saying that unspecified planned reforms would "move the state into a new phase of discipline."²⁶ The Crown Prince dismissed the reinstated parliament on May 1. An election is planned for June 6, 2023. Campaign rhetoric to date has featured candidates portraying the election as a referendum on alternate paths for governance in Kuwait.

Chronology of Selected Political Developments, 2006-2020

January 2006	Longtime Emir Shaykh Jaber al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah (aka Jaber III) dies on January 15, 2006. His designated successor at the time, Shaykh Sa'ad al Abdullah al Salem Al Sabah, was infirm. A brief succession dispute ensues, and the National Assembly endorses a transfer of power to then-Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah al Ahmad al Jaber Al Sabah (aka Sabah IV), the younger brother of the late Emir. Shaykh Sabah becomes Emir on January 29, 2006.
June – July 2006	Following executive-legislative disputes over electoral system reform, the Emir dissolves the National Assembly, and Kuwaitis hold a national election on June 26, 2006. Women run as candidates for the first time. After the election, the National Assembly adopts a new electoral law reducing the number of electoral districts from 25 to 5.
May 2008	Continuing executive-legislative differences over public sector wage reform lead the Emir to dissolve the National Assembly. Kuwaitis hold a national election on May 17, 2008, the first under the new 5-district electoral system.
March – May 2009	After opposition parliamentarians demand to question the then-prime minister, the prime minister and cabinet resign in March. The Emir dissolves the National Assembly and Kuwaitis hold a national election on May 16, 2009. Women candidates win seats for the first time. The Emir reappoints the prime minister.

²² Fiona MacDonald, "Kuwait Cabinet Quits as MPs Push for Oil Wealth Spending," *Bloomberg*, January 23, 2023.

²³ B Izzak, "2022 Assembly Annulled," *Kuwait Times*, March 20, 2023; and, Ahmed Hagagy, "Kuwait court reinstates previous parliament," *Reuters*, March 19, 2023.

²⁴ Kristin Smith Diwan, "New Elections and Frustration within Kuwait's Elite," *AGSIW*, May 10, 2023.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Fiona MacDonald, "Kuwait Emir Dissolves Reinstated 2020 Parliament for Second Time," *Bloomberg*, April 17, 2023.

December 2011 – February 2012	Amid region-wide political turbulence often referred to as the ‘Arab Spring,’ some Kuwaitis challenge the government over corruption allegations, including through public demonstrations and the storming of the Assembly building in November 2011. The Emir dissolves the National Assembly in December 2011, and Kuwaitis hold a national election on February 2, 2012. Opposition candidates win 34 of 50 seats.
June – December 2012	In June, the Constitutional Court invalidates the Emir’s December 2011 decree dissolving the previous National Assembly (the membership elected in May 2009). The decision dissolves the Assembly elected in February 2012 and reinstates the Assembly’s May 2009 membership. Opposition members refuse to attend Assembly sessions, preventing a quorum; the Emir again dissolves the Assembly in October. The cabinet unsuccessfully appeals to have the 25-district electoral law reinstated, and the Emir issues a decree reducing the number of candidates that voters can select from four to one. Many opposition members reject the reduction because it has the effect of limiting the utility of informal coordination among candidates and voters across communal differences such as location, tribe, and class. Demonstrators protest the changes, some opposition members clash with security forces, and the government imposes controls on public gatherings. Many opposition candidates boycott the December 1, 2012 election. Turnout declines from nearly 60% in February 2012 to just over 40% in December 2012.
June – July 2013	The Constitutional Court finds the December 2012 National Assembly election invalid on procedural grounds, but upholds the Emir’s October 2012 decree reducing the number of votes per voter from four to one. Fewer opposition members boycott the July 27, 2013 election, and turnout increases to above 51%.
October – November 2016	The Emir dissolves the National Assembly and calls for an early election, as Kuwaitis debate austerity measures proposed and adopted in response to fiscal strains resulting from lower oil prices and high public sector spending. Turnout again increases, approaching 70% in the November 26, 2016 election. Voters elect one female candidate.
September – December 2020	Emir Shaykh Sabah al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah dies on September 29, 2020. His half-brother Shaykh Nawwaf al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah becomes Emir. Their half-brother Shaykh Mishal al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah becomes Crown Prince. An October decree calls for a national election as Kuwaitis face a fiscal crisis exacerbated by low global oil prices and the COVID-19 pandemic. Turnout exceeds 60% in the December 5, 2020 election. Voters do not elect any women candidates. (Note: In June 2022, following eighteen months of political deadlock, Kuwait’s leaders announce that the Assembly membership elected in December 2020 is to be dismissed and a new election is to be held. Voters select 27 new members to the Assembly in a September 2022 election, but the judiciary annuls the results in March 2023 and rules that the Assembly membership elected in December 2020 be reinstated.)

Sources: Compiled from international media and wire service reports, 2006-2020. Turnout data from International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Human Rights

Kuwait’s government, like those of some other Gulf countries, publicly rejects foreign criticism of human rights practices, dismissing such critiques as interference in Kuwait’s internal affairs. Amid foreign and domestic attention to the execution of seven individuals convicted of murder and other offenses in November 2022, Kuwait’s Foreign Minister said, “The decisions of our judicial apparatus are independent without any interference from inside or outside Kuwait.”²⁷

The 2022 U.S. State Department report on human rights conditions in Kuwait found

credible reports of: torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by government agents; arbitrary arrest; political prisoners and detainees; serious restrictions on free expression and media, including censorship and the existence of criminal libel laws;

²⁷ Reuters, “Kuwait executes seven convicted of murder,” November 17, 2022.

serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement including the right to leave the country; serious government corruption; government harassment of domestic human rights organizations; lack of investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate partner violence; trafficking in persons; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or intersex persons; and the existence and use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults.²⁸

According to the report, “Numerous activists representing stateless persons of Arab heritage – known as Bidoon—reported mistreatment at the hands of authorities while in detention.”²⁹ The Bidoon community consists of approximately 100,000 residents of Kuwait who lack or have been denied registration as Kuwaiti citizens, which limits their access to employment, social benefits, and political rights. Kuwait’s government historically has declined to recognize claims from members of the Bidoon community to citizenship based on questions about the timing, circumstances, and purpose of individuals’ migration to Kuwait. Kuwaiti authorities separately are pursuing initiatives to reduce the expatriate population and create more public and private sector employment opportunities for Kuwaiti nationals.

Kuwait’s government limits freedom of speech and association.³⁰ The state has not outlawed political parties, but authorities effectively ban them. The government has outlawed informal primaries among tribal groups, though one study released in 2021 found “electoral returns offer evidence of growing tribal coordination intended to ensure representation within the National Assembly, albeit one disrupted by changes in electoral laws.”³¹ The National Assembly in December 2022 moved to delay committee consideration of proposed changes to electoral laws that would provide for candidates to run on coordinated political lists pending further consultation with the executive.

Women’s Rights

The Emir recognized women’s political rights in 2005 after the National Assembly blocked an earlier initiative to do so. According to the State Department, women in Kuwait face “cultural, social, and financial barriers to full political participation.”³² No women won seats in the National Assembly election of 2020, but an appointed woman cabinet member had the right to vote on Assembly decisions during its tenure. Two women won Assembly seats in the September 2022 election. The State Department reports that Kuwaiti law “does not provide women the same legal status, rights, and inheritance provisions as men,” and found that, in 2022, “women experienced discrimination in most aspects of family law, including divorce and child custody, as well as in the basic rights of citizenship, the workplace, and in certain circumstances, the value of their

²⁸ U.S. State Department, 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kuwait, March 20, 2023.

²⁹ Ibid. The Arabic term for such persons is *bidoon jinsiya* (without nationality) or, colloquially, *Bidoon* [(those) without].

³⁰ Ibid. According to the report, “Sentences for organizing public demonstrations amongst the Bidoon, participating in unlicensed or illegal demonstrations against the country’s ruling system, spreading false news, or criticizing the Amir or other leaders on social media ranged from six months in prison to 10 years plus fines for multiple offenses. The government actively monitored social media and incarcerated bloggers and political activists for expressing opinions and ideas critical of the government.”

³¹ Courtney Freer and Andrew Leber, “Defining the ‘Tribal Advantage’ in Kuwaiti Politics,” *Middle East Law and Governance*, 2021, pp. 1-30.

³² U.S. State Department, 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kuwait, March 20, 2023.

testimony in court.”³³ Some Kuwaiti social and religious conservatives oppose changes in gender relations and women’s participation in politics and the work force introduced since the late 1990s.

Trafficking in Persons

The 2022 State Department report on trafficking in persons found Kuwait’s visa sponsorship system “continued to render migrant workers highly vulnerable to exploitation, specifically trafficking.”³⁴ Kuwait is a Tier 2 Watch List country, meaning that the State Department judges that Kuwait “does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so.”

Religious Freedom and Tolerance

According to the State Department, the Kuwaiti government has official initiatives to promote religious tolerance and provides for limited freedom of religious practice.³⁵ Shia Muslims and religious minorities report some discrimination. The state regulates and directs the content presented by Sunni religious leaders.³⁶ Under a National Plan to Reinforce Moderation, Kuwait’s Ministry of Information and Ministry of Religious Endowments have supported programs to combat religious radicalization and promote religious tolerance.³⁷ In 2015, the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL/Daesh) group claimed a major terrorist attack against a Kuwaiti Shia mosque. Kuwait is a member of the Global Coalition against Daesh and periodically announces security actions against suspected IS-supporters in the country.

Kuwait’s Foreign Policy

Kuwait’s experiences of military occupation and liberation in 1990 and 1991 shape its foreign policy, which generally promotes neutrality, balanced relations with major powers, respect for international law, and diplomatic resolution of conflicts. Kuwait is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League. As a major oil producer, Kuwait is a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and coordinates with OPEC and non-OPEC oil producers by agreement under the auspices of the OPEC+ group.

Kuwait and Russia’s War against Ukraine

Kuwaiti officials have spoken out against military aggression and violations of sovereignty and territorial integrity since Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Kuwait has voted to condemn Russian aggression and violations of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity but joined other Arab Gulf states in abstaining on a 2022 resolution to suspend Russia’s membership in the U.N. Human Rights Council.³⁸ During 2022, Kuwait’s military delivered more than 70 tons of food and medical supplies for Ukrainians, and

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ U.S. State Department, 2022 Report on Trafficking in Persons: Kuwait, July 19, 2022.

³⁵ U.S. State Department, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Kuwait, May 15, 2023.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ U.S. State Department, 2020 Country Report on Terrorism: Kuwait, December 16, 2021.

³⁸ For a detailed review of Kuwait’s votes on selected U.N. measures related to Ukraine, see Appendix in CRS Report R47160, *Middle East and North Africa: Implications of 2022 Russia-Ukraine War*, coordinated by Christopher M. Blanchard.

Kuwait pledged \$2 million for Ukraine programs to the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Kuwait and China

Kuwait's economic and political relationships with the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) are nascent, and China is a leading importer of Kuwaiti oil. Under the banner of China's Belt and Road Initiative, PRC-based entities have engaged with Kuwaiti partners on Kuwait's planned Silk City, Five Islands, and Mubarak Al Kabeer port megaprojects, which may develop areas of northern Kuwait into a logistics hub.³⁹ Kuwaiti telecom providers Zain and VIVA have partnered with PRC-firm Huawei in developing their fifth generation (5G) mobile communications networks.⁴⁰

Kuwait and its Neighbors

Kuwait's preference for multilateralism and diplomatic outreach has been evident in its officials' mediation efforts in the Middle East region and beyond since 2015.

- **Gulf Cooperation Council and Yemen.** Kuwaiti leaders contributed to rapprochement between Qatar and its critics in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates from 2017 to 2021, when those countries ended their isolation of Qatar. In 2016, Kuwait hosted peace talks between Yemeni government officials and representatives of the Ansar Allah (aka Houthi) movement.⁴¹ Kuwait also has sent military forces to support the Yemeni government as part of the military coalition led by neighboring Saudi Arabia.
- **Iran.** Kuwaiti officials continue to engage with counterparts from neighboring Iran on a range of issues and generally support dialogue between Iran and its Arab neighbors. Unresolved maritime boundaries between Kuwait and Iran may have implications for the development of maritime energy resources and for commercial and military navigation in the northern Persian Gulf.
- **Israel and the Palestinians.** Kuwait's leaders have chosen not to recognize or engage with Israel to date, though some other Arab states' recognition of Israel under the Abraham Accords has prompted Kuwaiti press discussion of normalization with Israel. Some Kuwaitis remain vocally opposed to recognition of Israel, and Kuwait's National Assembly and government have endorsed some anti-normalization measures since 2020. Kuwait's government participates in the Arab boycott of Israel and supported the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. In May 2022, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Kuwait-based Jordanian national Abdallah Yusuf Faisal Sabri for sanctions, stating that Sabri "has managed Hamas's operational expenses" since 2018.⁴² In January 2023, the

³⁹ See CRS In Focus IF11735, *China's "One Belt, One Road" Initiative: Economic Issues*, by Karen M. Sutter, Andres B. Schwarzenberg, and Michael D. Sutherland. See also, Kuwait News Agency, "Kuwait, China sign Silk City, 5 islands MoU," November 18, 2018; Fiona MacDonald, "'Silk City' Dream Stifled in Only Gulf State Where Voters Matter," *Bloomberg*, November 6, 2019; and, Sylvia Westall and Ahmed Hagagy, "Kuwait plan for northern mega city faces political hurdles," Reuters, May 1, 2019.

⁴⁰ For background, see CRS In Focus IF11251, *National Security Implications of Fifth Generation (5G) Mobile Technologies*, by Kelley M. Sayler.

⁴¹ For background, see CRS Insight IN11917, *Political Transition in Yemen*, by Carla E. Humud.

⁴² U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Covert Hamas Investment Network and Finance Official," May 24, 2022.

- Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to Israeli Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir's visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem by stating Kuwait's "strong condemnation and denunciation of the extremist minister in the Israeli occupation government storming the courtyards of Al Aqsa Mosque under the protection of the Israeli occupation forces."⁴³
- **Iraq.** Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani visited Kuwait in November 2022 and met with Kuwaiti executive and legislative leaders. The delineation of maritime boundaries remains a subject of Kuwaiti-Iraqi discussion – both Kuwait and Iraq are developing large capacity ports on the Khor Abdullah waterway (see **Figure 1**).⁴⁴ Kuwait and Iraq have agreed on managing oil fields that transcend the Iraq-Kuwaiti border.
 - **Syria.** Kuwait closed its embassy in Syria in 2012 but maintained diplomatic relations with the Syrian government. Some Kuwaiti citizens raised funds for groups opposed to Syrian President Bashar Al Asad.⁴⁵ Kuwait's Foreign Ministry in April 2023 said that Kuwait would support Arab states' consensus on Syria, and Kuwait did not officially oppose Syria's readmission to the League of Arab States in May 2023.

Fiscal, Economic, and Energy Issues

Kuwait's state finances remain almost completely dependent on oil revenue and investment income, but authorities are engaged in efforts to expand non-oil revenue sources and promote private sector economic activity under the national *Vision 2035*/*"New Kuwait"* initiative.⁴⁶ Relative to other Gulf Cooperation Council members pursuing similar economic transformation initiatives, Kuwait's efforts appear nascent and the country's political stalemates arguably have constrained them. Increases in oil prices from 2020 lows have brought a windfall to Kuwait and other oil exporters, and pushed Kuwait's fiscal balance back into surplus in 2022 after a large deficit in 2020-2021 amplified by the effects of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

Kuwait's oil reserves amount to more than 7% of global proven reserves, and at current production rates, would last through this century. (For a map of Kuwaiti energy resources, see **Figure 1**.) Kuwait plans to expand its oil production capacity, but has limited spare capacity at present. Under the October 2022 OPEC+ decision to cut production by 2 million barrels per day, Kuwait agreed to reduce its production by 135,000 barrels per day. Kuwait is expanding the capacity of its Al Zour oil refinery from 800,000 barrels per day to 1.4 million barrels per day.⁴⁷ Kuwait has considerable

⁴³ Kuwait Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement, January 3, 2023.

⁴⁴ See Middle East Monitor, "Kuwait calls on Iraq to complete maritime border demarcation," December 21, 2022; *Al Sharqiya* (Iraq), "Kuwait calls on Iraq to withdraw naval vessels that exceeded its territorial waters," December 2, 2022; and, Bader Al Saif, "Think Big: Why Broadening Negotiations Could Help Resolve the Kuwaiti-Iraqi Maritime Dispute," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 19, 2021.

⁴⁵ Sylvia Westall and Mahmoud Harby, "Insight: Kuwaitis campaign privately to arm Syrian rebels," Reuters, June 27, 2013.

⁴⁶ For 2021, the IMF estimates that oil and investment earnings accounted for \$36 billion and \$13.8 billion in revenue respectively out of \$53.8 billion in total revenue (equal to ~92.5%). See IMF Country Report No. 22/89, Kuwait 2021 Article IV Consultation Staff Report, Table 1, March 2022. For a summary of Vision 2035/New Kuwait, see World Bank Group, State of Kuwait Country Engagement Framework, 2021 – 2025; and information from the Kuwaiti government available at - <http://www.newkuwait.gov.kw/home.aspx>.

⁴⁷ Argus Media, "Kuwait's al-Zour refinery starts commercial operations," November 6, 2022.

natural gas reserves, but its gas production infrastructure is less developed. Kuwait imports natural gas for domestic consumption even as it continues to flare associated gas from oil production.

The Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) manages \$769 billion in sovereign wealth assets between the \$700 billion Future Generations Fund (FGF) and the smaller General Reserve Fund (GRF).⁴⁸ The executive may not issue debt or access FGF assets without parliamentary approval, and has used existing authority to transfer stakes in state entities to the KIA in exchange for funds to cover successive budget deficits.

As discussed above, executive-legislative impasses over public spending, corruption allegations, proposed reforms to public sector employment and benefits, service costs, and financing for new economic initiatives have contributed to political discord since 2019.⁴⁹ In 2021, the state drew down GRF assets during a deficit-driven liquidity crisis, and parliament refused to authorize borrowing.⁵⁰ Higher oil prices offered some fiscal respite in 2022, but underlying differences remain unresolved and this has limited progress toward goals set out under the Vision 2035/“New Kuwait” program.⁵¹ According to the U.S. government country commercial guide for Kuwait, authorities have responded to fiscal pressures and executive legislative-impasses by “postponing major infrastructure projects and putting other projects on hold until further notice.”⁵²

Kuwait and Climate Change

Kuwait is highly vulnerable to the projected effects of global climate change, including sea level rise and increased average temperatures, which already are consistently among the highest in the Gulf.⁵³ Kuwait’s water resources are extremely limited, and the state burns fossil fuels to generate power for air conditioning, water desalination, and other essential services. Kuwait is a major oil producer and exporter, and as such, global energy transition away from fossil fuel consumption may affect Kuwait’s fiscal outlook. In November 2022, Kuwait made what its Foreign Minister described as “a solid serious pledge” to achieve carbon neutrality in oil and gas operations by 2050 and nationwide by 2060.⁵⁴

Outlook

Kuwaiti-U.S. security cooperation appears likely to continue to anchor the bilateral relationship, while slow implementation of Kuwaiti plans for economic transformation may limit opportunities for deeper bilateral economic partnership. Congress may conduct oversight of the U.S. military’s presence and programs in Kuwait and may monitor Kuwaiti government decisionmaking on a range of foreign and domestic policy topics. These may include Kuwait’s oil production,

⁴⁸ Adrienne Klasa, Andrew England, and Simeon Kerr, “Inside the Kuwait Investment Authority: ‘It’s chaos there now,’” *Financial Times*, July 29, 2022.

⁴⁹ Fiona MacDonald, “This \$600 Billion Wealth Fund Got Caught in a Power Struggle,” *Bloomberg*, June 20, 2021.

⁵⁰ Fiona MacDonald, “One of World’s Richest Nations Taps Wealth Fund as Cash Dries Up,” *Bloomberg*, February 3, 2021.

⁵¹ For examples, see Fiona MacDonald, “Oil Money Can’t Buy Progress for Gulf’s Laggard State Kuwait,” *Bloomberg*, January 3, 2023.

⁵² U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, Country Commercial Guide: Kuwait, Market Overview, September 13, 2022.

⁵³ For a detailed study see, Deen Shariff Sharp, Abrar Alshammari, and Kanwal Hameed, *The Quiet Emergency: Experiences and Understandings of Climate Change in Kuwait*, London School of Economics, October 13, 2021.

⁵⁴ Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Salem Al Sabah quoted in Reuters, “Kuwait says to become carbon neutral in oil and gas by 2050,” November 8, 2022.

Kuwait's posture toward Russia and Ukraine, Kuwaiti engagement with China, Kuwait's relations with its Arab and non-Arab neighbors, developments in Kuwaiti politics, alleged support by Kuwaiti nationals or residents for terrorist groups, and the Kuwaiti government's protection of human rights, including women's rights and religious freedom.

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