

# Kuwait: Issues for the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress

Updated May 24, 2024

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

R47390



**R47390**

May 24, 2024

**Christopher M. Blanchard**  
Specialist in Middle  
Eastern Affairs

## Kuwait: Issues for the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress

The Persian Gulf emirate of Kuwait derives its global influence from its large oil and natural gas reserves, its sizeable sovereign financial resources, its strategic location, 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 1.3 million citizens are largely Sunni Muslim, and its Shia Muslim minority (~30%) has participated peacefully in politics.

Kuwait's Emir, Shaykh Mishal al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah (born 1940), succeeded his late half-brother in December 2023. The Al Sabah family has exercised authority in Kuwait since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A succession in 2006 rebalanced power in the Al Sabah family, and future succession arrangements are uncertain. Kuwait's politics have been under strain for years, amid differences between the executive and legislative branches of government, within the ruling family, and among different constituencies. Kuwait's National Assembly has long been the most constitutionally empowered and politically influential legislative body among the Arab Gulf states, and Kuwaiti citizens have been more politically engaged and active relative to their Gulf counterparts.

On May 10, 2024, the Emir issued a decree dissolving the elected National Assembly and suspending several articles of the 1962 constitution for a period of up to four years, citing perceived challenges to his authority and longstanding executive-legislative impasses. The decree further called for a review of the practice of democracy in Kuwait. Previous emirs took similar steps twice in the past, suspending the legislature and specific constitutional articles from 1976 to 1981 and from 1986 to 1992. The current Emir's order suspends additional articles that may enable the government to rule by decree, amend or issue laws, and implement executive decisions without future legislative review. The decree may allow Kuwaiti leaders to enact economic and public sector reforms while adapting the constitution to current conditions. However, Kuwaiti leaders may face domestic opposition and international scrutiny if changes erode the rights and responsibilities that Kuwaiti citizens have long maintained under the country's unique consultative system. The Emir has tasked the government he appointed following the Assembly's suspension with implementing development, fiscal reform, anticorruption, and service improvement measures. The Emir has until December 2024 to appoint a Crown Prince as heir apparent, a step that before May 10 would have been subject to the approval of a majority of National Assembly members.

U.S. relations with the State of Kuwait have been 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 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. 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. The Biden Administration has notified the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress of more than \$2 billion in proposed foreign military sales to Kuwait.

Kuwait has responded to the October 2023 Hamas-led attacks on Israel and ensuing Israel-Hamas war by reiterating its solidarity with Palestinians, criticizing Israeli military actions, calling for an immediate ceasefire and unhindered humanitarian access, and restating support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

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.

## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Overview and Bilateral Relations.....                         | 1  |
| U.S.-Kuwaiti Defense Relations .....                          | 2  |
| U.S.-Kuwaiti Economic Relations .....                         | 2  |
| Congress and Kuwait .....                                     | 2  |
| Kuwait’s History and Politics.....                            | 4  |
| Political System.....   | 5  |
| 2023 Succession, 2024 Election, and Assembly Suspension ..... | 6  |
| Human Rights.....   | 7  |
| Women’s Rights .....  | 8  |
| Trafficking in Persons .....                                  | 9  |
| Religious Freedom and Tolerance.....                          | 9  |
| Kuwait’s Foreign Policy .....                                 | 9  |
| Kuwait and Russia’s War against Ukraine .....                 | 9  |
| Kuwait and China.....   | 10 |
| Kuwait and its Neighbors.....                                 | 10 |
| Fiscal, Economic, and Energy Issues .....                     | 12 |
| Resources and Climate Change.....                             | 14 |
| Outlook.....  | 14 |

## Figures

|                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Figure 1. Map of Kuwait .....       | 1 |
| Figure 2. Kuwait: Basic Facts ..... | 5 |

## Appendixes

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Appendix. Political Developments 2006-2023..... | 15 |
|---|----|

## Contacts

|                         |    |
|-------------------------|----|
| Author Information..... | 17 |
|-------------------------|----|

## Overview and Bilateral Relations

The U.S. Department of State describes the U.S.-Kuwait relationship as warm and multifaceted.<sup>1</sup> Bilateral ties have remained close since the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait in the 1991 Gulf War (see text box 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."<sup>2</sup> A sixth dialogue was being planned in late 2023 but appears to have been postponed.<sup>3</sup> In October 2023, the U.S. Senate confirmed Karen Sasahara as U.S. Ambassador to Kuwait. 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.<sup>4</sup> Kuwaiti-U.S. counterterrorism cooperation has deepened since the early 2000s. According to the Institute of International Education, approximately 5,400 Kuwaiti students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions during the 2022/2023 academic year, an 8% annual decline.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1. Map of Kuwait**



**Source:** CRS, using State Department and ESRI data.

**Note:** Energy fields and boundaries approximate.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Faten Omar, "US-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue to boost ties, address challenges," *Kuwait Times*, September 17, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> 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, "29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division moves 5,000 Afghans through Kuwait," U.S. 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, November 5, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Institute of International Education, *Open Doors—International Students Data*, November 2023.

## U.S.-Kuwaiti Defense Relations

As of 2024, 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.<sup>6</sup> Kuwait hosts the 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. When rotational forces are included in the count, only Germany, Japan, and South Korea host more U.S. forces than Kuwait. A bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement is in place.

U.S. forces affiliated with Task Force Spartan/Operation Spartan Shield also operate in Kuwait, for deterrence purposes and to build regional partner capacity. The 401<sup>st</sup> Army Field Support Battalion–Kuwait manages pre-positioned U.S. Army stocks in Kuwait, and Kuwait-based stockpiles have been used to support Ukraine under drawdown authorities. 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, follow-on support, and services.

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. In May 2023, U.S. officials told the press that remnants of an Iranian-origin UAS had been recovered on Iraq’s territory following the reported attack.<sup>7</sup>

## U.S.-Kuwaiti Economic Relations

The United States and Kuwait signed a Trade Investment Framework Agreement in 2004. In 2023, U.S. exports to Kuwait were valued at \$2.92 billion and U.S. imports from Kuwait were valued at \$1.72 billion.<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup>

## Congress and Kuwait

Congress has considered legislation addressing U.S. relations with Kuwait relatively infrequently since the 1990s, but 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.

---

<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce International Trade Administration using U.S. Census Bureau data, March 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, USTR Releases 2022 Special 301 Report on Intellectual Property Protection and Enforcement, April 27, 2022.

### 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 101<sup>st</sup> 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 102<sup>nd</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> The 117<sup>th</sup> Congress considered but did not enact a Biden Administration-supported proposal to repeal the 1991 Iraq authorization for use of military force (AUMF, P.L. 102-1).<sup>11</sup> In March 2023, the Senate adopted S. 316 to repeal the 1991 and 2002 Iraq AUMFs.



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.

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 processed and paid compensation claims related to Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait announced the completion of the 31-year compensation process.<sup>12</sup> 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.

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

<sup>10</sup> Richard A. Lacquement Jr., "The Gulf War 30 Years Later: Successes, Failures, and Blind Spots," *War on the Rocks*, September 9, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> 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 FY2023 (§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.

<sup>12</sup> 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.” Section 1229 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2024 (P.L. 118-31 ) directs the Secretary of Defense to review and report on “the legal protections afforded by bilateral agreements” between the United States and Kuwait and “how the rights and privileges afforded under such agreements may differ from United States law.” The act also authorizes \$18.85 million for an Energy Resilience and Conservation Investment Program (ECRIP) power generation and microgrid project at Camp Buehring and \$8.2 million to complete a previously authorized ECRIP 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 area in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> The Al Sabah family’s leadership and administrative roles in Kuwait deepened during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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**).

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 created legislative deadlock and fueled political confrontation, leading to the election and dismissal of several Assemblies and resignations of several cabinets (see Chronology, in **Appendix**). Some observers have described tensions in Kuwaiti politics over the last two decades as reflecting “conflict over policy 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.”<sup>14</sup> The Emir’s May 2024 dissolution of the National Assembly and suspension of constitutional articles appears to leave Kuwaitis weighing options for preserving their system’s relative openness and consultative nature, pursuing efficient governance and change, and ending paralysis and confrontation.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> See Luai Allarakia and Hamad H. Albloshi, “The Politics of Permanent Deadlock in Kuwait,” Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, March 11, 2021.

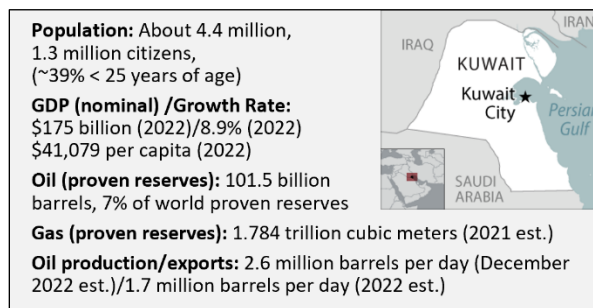
## Political System

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 have often held key cabinet portfolios such as defense, interior, foreign affairs, and finance.

Plans for succession within the ruling Al Sabah family are uncertain, and the National Assembly would under normal circumstances be required to confirm the Emir's designee for the position of crown prince.<sup>15</sup> Until 2006, the main branches of the family (Al Jaber and Al Salem) generally had alternated in holding the positions of Emir and Crown Prince.<sup>16</sup> In 2006, Assembly members and other leading figures questioned the suitability of the 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.<sup>17</sup>

Kuwait's National Assembly has been the longest-established elected body among the Gulf Arab states and, under the 1962 constitution, the Assembly has had a greater scope of authority than any other Gulf Arab legislature or consultative body. Under normal circumstances, eligible voters elect 50 Assembly members, with up to 15 members of the cabinet eligible to serve and vote in the Assembly ex-officio.<sup>18</sup> The Assembly's members have been empowered to draft legislation and act on legislation proposed by the government. The Assembly has not voted to confirm cabinet nominees, but its members have frequently questioned ministers (a process known as interpellation or colloquially as "grilling"), and the Assembly has had the power to remove ministers by a vote of no confidence. The Assembly has had the power to remove the prime minister by voting to declare the Assembly's inability to cooperate with the prime minister. Prior

**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.

<sup>15</sup> During the period of the Assembly's first suspension, a leadership transition occurred and the Emir and Crown Prince were sworn in before the sitting government. The requirement for legislative approval reportedly had contributed to controversial entanglements between rival royal family members and some members of the National Assembly following the 2006 leadership transition. 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 Beaupré, "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.

<sup>16</sup> In addition to the Al Jaber, 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.

<sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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.



to its May 2024 suspension, the Assembly had been suspended twice before: from 1976 to 1981 and from 1986 to 1992.

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, has not had political representation. Authorities have announced plans to carry out "unprecedented" measures in 2024 against expatriates living illegally in Kuwait.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> The legacy of disputes since 2006 over Kuwait's electoral system has continued to shape Kuwaiti politics (see Chronology in **Appendix**).

## 2023 Succession, 2024 Election, and Assembly Suspension

On December 16, 2023, Shaykh Nawaf al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah died at age 86 after a long period of reported ill health. He was succeeded by his half-brother, Crown Prince Shaykh Mishaal al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah (born 1940).

On February 15, 2024, Emir Mishaal issued an order dissolving the National Assembly pursuant to the constitution after a legislator used language deemed offensive to the Emir and the Assembly voted not to remove the statement from its record.<sup>21</sup> An election, the fourth since 2020, was held on April 10, 2024. Authorities disqualified some candidates for participating in so-called tribal elections, which are informal primaries among tribal groups to select a group-affiliated candidate. The April 2024 election returned 29 opposition members to the legislature, largely mirroring the parliament elected in 2023. Among those elected were one woman legislator and eight members of the country's Shia minority.

Analysts expected that the election result meant that confrontation between the executive and legislative branches was set to continue.<sup>22</sup> The Emir designated his nephew Shaykh Ahmad Abdullah Al Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah as Prime Minister and issued a decree delaying the first session of the new Assembly until May 15. On May 10, the Emir issued a decree dissolving the Assembly and suspending articles of the constitution, including Article 107, which calls for the election of a replacement assembly within two months. The Emir suspended articles beyond those suspended in previous suspension decrees in 1976 and 1981, which appear to enable the

---

<sup>19</sup> Kuwait Times, "MoI: 'Unprecedented' crackdown on residency violators after amnesty," May 23, 2024.

<sup>20</sup> 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. Albloschi, "The Politics of Permanent Deadlock in Kuwait," Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), March 11, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Fiona MacDonald, "Kuwaiti Emir Dissolves Parliament After MPs' Offensive Language," *Bloomberg*, February 15, 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Courtney Freer, "Kuwait's Legislative Stalemate and Prospects for Reform," Gulf International Forum, April 2024, and AGSIW, "What Do the Latest Parliamentary Elections Mean for Democratic Politics in Kuwait?" April 15, 2024.

executive branch to issue laws and amend the constitution during the Assembly's suspension without future legislative review.<sup>23</sup> Oman's ruler visited Kuwait on May 14, and other Arab officials engaged Kuwaiti counterparts during an Arab League summit in Bahrain in mid-May. As of May 23, the U.S. government had not commented publicly on the Emir's decree.<sup>24</sup>

The Emir has until December 2024 to appoint an heir apparent as Crown Prince, which would have required the approval of a majority of the National Assembly.<sup>25</sup> The Emir's selection process and any accompanying competition between candidates and branches of the Al Sabah family may shape Kuwait's politics during 2024 and beyond. In February 2024, the prime minister acknowledged intra-family differences, but said they stopped short of disruptive conflict.<sup>26</sup>

## 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."<sup>27</sup>

The 2023 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 or detention; political prisoners and detainees; serious restrictions on free expression and media freedom, including censorship and the existence of criminal libel laws; 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 and civil society organizations; restrictions on freedom of movement and residence within the territory of a state and the right to leave the country; inability of citizens to change their government peacefully through free and fair elections; serious government corruption; serious government restrictions on or harassment of domestic and international human rights organizations; extensive gender-based violence, including domestic or intimate

<sup>23</sup> In 1976 and 1986, Kuwait's then-emir suspended Articles 56 (paragraph three), 107, 174, and 181. The 2024 decree suspends articles 51, 56 (paragraphs two and three), 71 (paragraph two), 79, 107, 174 and 181. Article 71 (paragraph two) provides for legislative review of decrees issued during the Assembly's dissolution. Article 181 states that constitutional provisions may not be suspended unless martial law has been declared. The Emir's May 10 decree did not declare martial law. In 1976, the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait reported in a now released cable that "Under article 181 of the Kuwaiti constitution of 1962, the Amir was expressly barred from suspending any article of that constitution, except after declaring martial law, which he did not declare. Thus, it seems that the Amir acted unconstitutionally when he suspended several provisions of the constitution without declaring martial law. (The fact that he suspended the article barring his own action (181) raises a legal paradox.)" See U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, Diplomatic Records Archival Database, Cable Record, U.S. Embassy Kuwait to SECSTATE (KUWAIT 4265), "Rule by Decree in Kuwait: Nature, Duration and Then What?" September 7, 1976.

<sup>24</sup> In August 1986, following the prior such decree, the State Department replied to a congressional question for the record about the measures taken by stating "It would be inappropriate to discuss publicly diplomatic exchanges we might have with the government of Kuwait about these measures. . . . We regret restrictions on the democratic process but note that in his decree, the Emir of Kuwait reiterated his commitment to Kuwait's parliamentary path." U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, *Developments in the Middle East, August 1986*, hearing, 99<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, August 14, 1986, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1986.

<sup>25</sup> Following the 1976 dissolution of the National Assembly and suspension of its constitutional role, a succession transition occurred at the end of 1977. A new crown prince was chosen in early 1978 and was sworn in before the appointed cabinet.

<sup>26</sup> Merza al Kuwaidi, "Kuwaiti PM: Talk of Family 'Feud' Is Just 'Drama,'" *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, February 6, 2024.

<sup>27</sup> Reuters, "Kuwait executes seven convicted of murder," November 17, 2022.

partner violence sexual violence, workplace violence, and other forms of such violence; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults, which were enforced; and crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons.

The government took credible steps in some cases to prosecute and punish officials who may have committed human rights abuses.<sup>28</sup>

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.”<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.”<sup>31</sup> In March 2024, Kuwait’s security officials reaffirmed a ban on all unauthorized public gatherings or the advertising of such gatherings in rallies amid calls on social media for demonstrations in solidarity with Palestinians.<sup>32</sup>

## 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.”<sup>33</sup> 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 and one woman won a seat in the June 2023 election. The cabinet appointed in January 2024 has one woman member.

The State Department reports that in 2023, Kuwaiti law did “not provide women the same legal status, rights, and inheritance provisions as men,” and found that “omen experienced discrimination in most aspects of family law, including divorce and child custody, as well as in

<sup>28</sup> U.S. State Department, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kuwait, April 22, 2024.

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

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. According to the report, “Sentences for organizing public demonstrations among 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.”

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

<sup>32</sup> *Arab Times*, “No shows for pro-Palestinian rally in Kuwait,” and “Unauthorized Gatherings or Marches Prohibited in Kuwait,” March 2, 2024.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. State Department, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kuwait, April 22, 2024.

the basic rights of citizenship, the workplace, and in certain circumstances the value of their testimony in court.”<sup>34</sup> 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 2023 State Department report on trafficking in persons found Kuwait’s visa sponsorship system “continued to render migrant workers highly vulnerable to exploitation, specifically trafficking.”<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> Shia Muslims and religious minorities report some discrimination. The state regulates and directs the content presented by Sunni religious leaders.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> 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.<sup>39</sup> During 2022, Kuwait’s military delivered more than 70 tons of food and medical supplies for Ukrainians, and

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> U.S. State Department, 2023 Report on Trafficking in Persons: Kuwait, June 28, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. State Department, 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Kuwait, May 15, 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> U.S. State Department, 2020 Country Report on Terrorism: Kuwait, December 16, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> 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 the 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. The Department of Defense Inspector General reported in May 2023 that artillery and vehicles withdrawn from pre-positioned U.S. Army stocks in Kuwait for drawdown transfer to Ukraine had not been maintained properly by Kuwait-based contractors, requiring costly repairs prior to their transfer.<sup>40</sup>

## Kuwait and China

Kuwait's economic and political relationships with the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) are limited, 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.<sup>41</sup> Kuwaiti telecom providers Zain and VIVA have partnered with PRC-firm Huawei in developing their fifth generation (5G) mobile communications networks.<sup>42</sup> In his capacity as Crown Prince, the current Emir visited China in September 2023 and met with PRC leader Xi Jinping. The countries signed memoranda of understanding on the completion of the Mubarak al Kabeer port, housing projects, and renewable energy cooperation.<sup>43</sup>

## 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.<sup>44</sup> 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. In July 2023, Kuwait's Oil Minister asserted exclusive Kuwaiti/Saudi rights to develop the offshore Dorra/Arash gas field after an Iranian official preliminary consideration of development had begun.<sup>45</sup> After Iranian and Kuwaiti officials indicated they would each pursue their own rival development projects, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia reasserted their position that they have an

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, *Management Advisory: Maintenance Concerns for the Army's Prepositioned Stock-5 Equipment Designated for Ukraine* (DODIG-2023-076), May 23, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> For background, see CRS In Focus IF11251, *National Security Implications of Fifth Generation (5G) Mobile Technologies*, by Kelley M. Saylor.

<sup>43</sup> Kuwait News Agency, Kuwait Crown Prince concludes productive China's (sic) visit," September 24, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> For background, see CRS Insight IN11917, *Political Transition in Yemen*, by Carla E. Humud.

<sup>45</sup> Reuters, "Kuwait, Saudi Arabia have 'exclusive rights' in Durra gas field, Kuwait oil minister says," July 10, 2023.



exclusive right to do so.<sup>46</sup> An Iranian official said in March 2024 that Iran views the Dorra/Arash field as shared.<sup>47</sup>

**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 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.

Kuwait's government has responded to the Israel-Hamas war by condemning and denouncing Israel's military actions, calling for accountability for alleged violations of international humanitarian law, and demanding an immediate ceasefire and unimpeded provision of humanitarian aid.<sup>48</sup> Kuwait's initial response to the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack on Israel said the attack came as a result of Israeli violations and attacks on Palestinians.<sup>49</sup> Kuwait has joined other Arab states in calling for "a comprehensive and just solution for the Palestinian cause that includes an independent state on the 1967 border with East Jerusalem being its capital."<sup>50</sup> Kuwait Specialized Hospital operates with Kuwaiti state support in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip.

Emir Meshaal visited Egypt on April 30, 2024 and in a joint statement with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi the two countries "confirmed their categorical rejection of Israel's ongoing military operations and their possible expansion into the Palestinian city of Rafah" and said the leaders "were in alignment with regard to the vital need to reach an urgent, immediate and enduring ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and on the critical importance of ensuring the unfettered, adequate and sustainable delivery of humanitarian aid and relief to the Palestinian people in the occupied territories."<sup>51</sup>

In May 2022, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Kuwait-based Jordanian national Abdallah Yusuf Faisal Sabri for sanctions, stating that Sabri had "managed Hamas's operational expenses" since 2018.<sup>52</sup> Press reports citing current and former U.S. officials have focused on allegations that Kuwait-based entities since October 2023 have used crowdfunding mechanisms to solicit funding that benefits Hamas.<sup>53</sup> Kuwaiti officials have revoked the fundraising licenses

<sup>46</sup> Reuters, "Iran will pursue rights over Durra gas field if other parties shun cooperation, oil minister says," July 30, 2023; and Reuters, "Saudi Arabia, Kuwait reaffirm rights to natural resources in Durra gas field, Saudi ministry says," August 2, 2023.

<sup>47</sup> Iranian Vice President for Legal Affairs Mohammed Dehghan quoted in *E'temad*, March 8, 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Kuwait News Agency, "Kuwait strongly denounces Israeli occupation aggression on Gaza," December 2, 2023; and, Kuwait News Agency, "Kuwait condemns Israeli bombing of Palestinians waiting for humanitarian aid," February 29, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Cleary Waldo, Gabriel Epstein, Sydney Hilbush, Aaron Y. Zelin, "International Reactions to the Hamas Attack on Israel," October 11, 2023. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Foreign Affairs October 7, 2023 statement linked in this report is no longer active, but several Kuwaiti and regional news outlets contemporaneously carried the text cited in this report.

<sup>50</sup> Kuwait News Agency, "Kuwait strongly denounces Israeli occupation aggression on Gaza," December 2, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Presidency of Egypt, "Joint Statement on the State Visit by Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Meshal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah," April 30, 2024.

<sup>52</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Covert Hamas Investment Network and Finance Official," May 24, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhennet, "Seeking cash, Hamas turns to allies experienced in 'financial jihad,'" *Washington Post*, January 12, 2024.



of some charitable entities since December 2023 and have underscored requirements for fundraising to abide by Kuwaiti law.<sup>54</sup>

**Iraq.** Kuwait's land border with Iraq was delineated by a United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Boundary Demarcation Commission following the 1990-1991 Gulf War and endorsed by the U.N. Security Council in Resolution 833 (1993). 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**).<sup>55</sup> In September 2023, Iraq's Federal Supreme Court invalidated the Iraqi parliament's 2013 endorsement of a 2012 agreement on the partial delineation of the Iraq-Kuwait maritime border, citing lack of two-thirds majority support for the implementing law. On September 19, 2023, the United States and the GCC jointly "called for the complete demarcation of the Kuwait-Iraq maritime boundary beyond boundary point 162 [defined in the 2012 agreement] and called on the Government of Iraq to expeditiously resolve the domestic legal status of the 2012 Kuwait-Iraq Agreement to regulate maritime navigation in Khor Abdullah and ensure that the agreement remains in force."<sup>56</sup> Rejection or reopening of the 2012 agreement could affect both countries' ability to use the waterway and affect their relative rights regarding maritime boundary and resource claims in northern Persian Gulf waters adjacent to Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al Sudani visited Kuwait in November 2022 and met with Kuwaiti executive and legislative leaders. Iraqi and Kuwaiti officials consulted on outstanding border issues in Iraq in July 2023. 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.<sup>57</sup> 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. Kuwait supported the statement of the May 2024 Arab League summit in Bahrain, which among other things called for "the lifting of unilateral coercive measures imposed on Syria."<sup>58</sup>

## 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.<sup>59</sup> Relative to other Gulf Cooperation Council members pursuing similar economic transformation

<sup>54</sup> *Arab Times*, "Ten charities blocked for good from collecting donations," March 19, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> 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.

<sup>56</sup> U.S. State Department, "Joint Statement Following the Ministerial Meeting of the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)," September 19, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Sylvia Westall and Mahmoud Harby, "Insight: Kuwaitis campaign privately to arm Syrian rebels," Reuters, June 27, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> *The National*, "Full text of Arab League's Bahrain Declaration," May 16, 2024.

<sup>59</sup> 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>.

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.<sup>60</sup> Kuwait has considerable 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.

As of 2022, the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) managed \$769 billion in sovereign wealth assets between the \$700 billion Future Generations Fund (FGF) and the smaller General Reserve Fund (GRF).<sup>61</sup> The executive may not issue debt or access FGF assets without parliamentary approval, and used GRF funds and existing authority to transfer stakes in state entities to the KIA in exchange for funds to cover successive budget deficits from 2020 to 2022. The Finance Minister of the post-June 2023 government resigned shortly after his appointment, citing changes to KIA management procedures.

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.<sup>62</sup> In 2021, the state drew down GRF assets during a deficit-driven liquidity crisis, and parliament refused to authorize borrowing.<sup>63</sup> Higher oil prices have offered fiscal respite since 2022, but underlying differences remain unresolved and this has limited progress toward goals set out under the Vision 2035/"New Kuwait" program.<sup>64</sup> The U.S. government country commercial guide for Kuwait, has observed that authorities responded to fiscal pressures and executive legislative-impasses by "postponing major infrastructure projects and putting other projects on hold until further notice."<sup>65</sup> The 2023 Investment Climate Statement notes that "recovering oil prices ...could help restart many of the key infrastructure projects from Vision 2035."<sup>66</sup>

In September 2023, the International Monetary Fund reported that while "frequent changes of government, and the political impasse between the government and Parliament, have impeded important fiscal and structural reforms" high oil prices and Kuwait's ample financial reserves and

<sup>60</sup> Argus Media, "Kuwait's al-Zour refinery starts commercial operations," November 6, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Adrienne Klasa, Andrew England, and Simeon Kerr, "Inside the Kuwait Investment Authority: 'It's chaos there now,'" *Financial Times*, July 29, 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Fiona MacDonald, "This \$600 Billion Wealth Fund Got Caught in a Power Struggle," *Bloomberg*, June 20, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Fiona MacDonald, "One of World's Richest Nations Taps Wealth Fund as Cash Dries Up," *Bloomberg*, February 3, 2021.

<sup>64</sup> For examples, see Fiona MacDonald, "Oil Money Can't Buy Progress for Gulf's Laggard State Kuwait," *Bloomberg*, January 3, 2023.

<sup>65</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, Country Commercial Guide: Kuwait, Market Overview, September 13, 2022.

<sup>66</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, International Trade Administration, Investment Climate Statement, December 30, 2023.

borrowing capacity “would also allow Kuwait to tackle its long-standing structural impediments and reinvigorate non-oil, private sector-led growth from a strong position.”<sup>67</sup>

## Resources 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.<sup>68</sup> Kuwait’s water resources are extremely limited, and the state burns fossil fuels to generate power for water desalination, air conditioning, and other essential services. In 2023, summer power demand, driven by air conditioning needs, exceeded available supply, creating some power outages.<sup>69</sup>

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 then-Foreign Minister described as “a solid serious pledge” to achieve carbon neutrality in oil and gas operations by 2050 and nationwide by 2060.<sup>70</sup>

## Outlook

Kuwaiti-U.S. security cooperation appears likely to continue to anchor the bilateral relationship, while the pace of implementation of Kuwaiti plans for economic transformation may determine 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, Kuwaiti engagement with China, Kuwait’s policy toward Israel and the Palestinians (including Hamas), Kuwait’s posture toward Russia and Ukraine, 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.

---

<sup>67</sup> International Monetary Fund, “Kuwait: 2023 Article IV Consultation-Press Release; and Staff Report,” September 18, 2023.

<sup>68</sup> 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.

<sup>69</sup> Yesar Al Maleki, “Kuwait’s Summer Electricity Crunch Set to Worsen,” *Middle East Economic Survey*, November 3, 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Salem Al Sabah quoted in Reuters, “Kuwait says to become carbon neutral in oil and gas by 2050,” November 8, 2022.

## Appendix. Political Developments 2006-2023

### Chronology of Selected Political Developments, 2006-2023

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| January 2006                  | Longtime Emir Shaykh Jaber al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah (aka Jaber III) dies on January 15, 2006. His designated successor, 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.   |
| 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 Mishaal 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.   |
| December 2020 – April 2022    | Political stalemate persists, and, in April 2022 then-prime minister Shaykh Sabah al Khaled al Hamad Al Sabah resigns. The Emir and Crown Prince delay naming a replacement, and,  |

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
|                      | in June 2022, the Crown Prince announces the Assembly will be dismissed pursuant to the constitution and calls for a new election. The dismissed Assembly had taken a pointed approach to questioning government officials and refused to endorse government fiscal proposals or approve authority for the government to borrow domestically or internationally to finance long-debated projects.  |
| July – December 2022 | The Emir's son, Shaykh Ahmed Nawaf al Ahmed Al Sabah, becomes prime minister. On September 29, 2022, Kuwaiti voters elect 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 win seats. Voters return Ahmed al Saadoun, who served as Assembly speaker from 1985 to 1999, to parliament. In October, a newly appointed cabinet resigns after some Assembly members protest that the cabinet's membership had not changed sufficiently. Consultations follow and a new cabinet is seated. Consultation follows government pardons of some convicted government critics. |
| January – May 2023   | Cabinet ministers boycott Assembly sessions forcing its adjournment, arguing that the cabinet had not had sufficient opportunity to comment on proposed legislation that would incur state costs. The cabinet resigns. In March, the Constitutional Court rules that the October 2022 election is void and reinstates the parliamentarians elected in December 2020. Amid some public opposition to the court's decision, including small demonstrations, some members of the 2020 and 2022 Assemblies call for constitutional reform.<br><br>In May 2023, the Crown Prince dismisses the reinstated 2020 Assembly.  |
| June – December 2023 | On June 6, 2023, voters elect a new Assembly, returning 38 of the members elected in September 2022 to office. Following the election, the Emir and Crown Prince appoint a new government again led by Shaykh Ahmed Nawaf al Ahmed Al Sabah as prime minister. The cabinet resigns in December 2023 following the Emir's death. Crown Prince Shaykh Mishaal al Ahmed al Jaber Al Sabah becomes Emir.   |

**Sources:** Compiled from international media and wire service reports, 2006-2024. Turnout data from International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

## **Author Information**

Christopher M. Blanchard  
Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs

---

## **Disclaimer**

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.