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Kuwait: Security, Reform, and U.S. Policy

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Kuwait has been pivotal to all the U.S. interventions in the Persian Gulf region since the 1980s because of its location, its role as the object of past Iraqi aggression, and its close cooperation with the United States. Kuwait remains a key to the U.S. ability to act militarily in the northern Persian Gulf region now that all U.S. forces have left Iraq. Kuwait's relations with the post- Saddam government in Iraq have warmed significantly in recent years through resolution of many of the territorial, economic, and political issues from the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Although the threat from Iraq has abated, Kuwait is increasingly suspicious of Iranian intentions in the Gulf, aligning Kuwait with U.S. efforts to contain Iranian power in the Gulf. Still, Kuwait maintains relatively normal economic and political relations with Iran so as not to provoke it to take military action or to provide material support to pro-Iranian elements inside Kuwait. Regional issues were the focus of meeting between the Amir of Kuwait and President Obama on September 13, 2013, during the Amir's visit to Washington, DC.

Domestically, Kuwait's political system has been in turmoil since 2006, taking the form mostly of opposition by many parliamentarians to the political dominance of the Al Sabah family but also broadening to visible public unrest in 2012-13. The disputes have produced repeated constitutional dissolutions of the National Assembly, which trigger new elections, the latest of which were held on July 27, 2013. The July elections followed a six-month period of significant public protests that challenged the Sabah regime's unilateral alteration of election rules to shape the prior elections (December 1, 2012) to its advantage. The July 2013 elections produced a pro- government Assembly more amenable to working with the ruling family, apparently ushering in a period of renewed legislative and governmental action on longstanding issues.

The ruling establishment in Kuwait was able to calm the unrest—although not necessarily eliminate its underlying sources—because the government retains substantial assets. Kuwait remains a relatively wealthy society where most citizens do not want to risk their economic well- being to try to bring about the downfall of Al Sabah rule. Reflecting that sentiment, the opposition has largely confined its demands to limiting Sabah power rather than ending the family's rule. The government has been able to use financial largesse—budgets replete with subsidies and salary increases—as well as some repressive measures as well as legal prosecutions to limit opposition. But, many years of political paralysis have led to economic stagnation, particularly relative to Kuwait's more economically vibrant Gulf neighbors such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. The lack of economic vibrancy led to strikes in several economic sectors in 2012.

On regional issues, Kuwait generally acts in partnership with some or all of its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Kuwait is procuring missile defense technology that furthers the U.S. goal of a GCC-wide missile defense network. On the uprising in Bahrain, in March 2011 Kuwait joined a GCC military intervention on the side of the Bahraini government. Kuwait joined Saudi Arabia and UAE in supporting the decision of the Egyptian military in July 2013 to remove elected president and senior Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammad Morsi from power. Kuwait supports the Sunni-led rebellion in Syria, although Kuwait has largely confined its support for rebellion to humanitarian and financial aid. Kuwait has tended to defer to de facto GCC leader Saudi Arabia in offering proposals to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

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