

Speech: Maintaining commitment to Kuwait's security since 1899: speech by Michael Davenport

Your Excellency Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Hamad Al-Sabah; Your Excellency Deputy Head of the Amiri Diwan Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah; Your Excellency Minister of Information, Minister of State for Youth Affairs Mohammed Nasser Abdullah Al-Jabri; Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of Her Majesty's government I should like to express our heartfelt thanks to the government of the State of Kuwait, and to their Excellencies the Deputy PM and the Minister for Information personally, for hosting today's event to mark the anniversary of the first treaty between our two countries, signed on this very day 120 years ago.

This treaty, kept secret at the time, was enormously significant for both our countries. It was in fact, according to contemporary records, the first formal engagement ever executed between a ruler of Kuwait and the government of any country.

Only days after the signing of the treaty, on 4th February 1899, the British government issued instructions to deploy naval force to prevent an attack on Kuwait. And in the 120 years since 1899 Britain has maintained a lasting commitment to Kuwait's security.

Britain's intervention in defence of Kuwait in 1920 also marked the first ever overseas deployment of the newly formed Royal Air Force.

The British commitment to Kuwait continued beyond Kuwait's independence in 1961. In that very year Britain responded to His Highness the then Amir's request for military support, fulfilling its enduring commitment to Kuwait by deploying armed forces amounting to half of a brigade under Operation Vantage.

When your country was invaded, overrun and occupied by Iraq in August 1990 Britain under PM Margaret Thatcher played a leading role in securing a UN mandate for an international coalition to be formed for the liberation of Kuwait.

Britain was proud to be a member of that international coalition. And we are proud to this day of our armed forces who served bravely alongside coalition and Kuwaiti friends and succeeded in restoring Kuwait's sovereignty and independence. I am especially pleased that Lt Gen Sir John Lorimer, Defence Senior Adviser to the ME, is with us today in recognition of our continuing commitment to Kuwait.

Our two countries have changed radically since 1899. That was the year in

which the first motor bus hit the streets of London. Britain moved closer to the Continent when the first radio signal was transmitted across the English Channel. Kuwait's economy was of course dependent on trade, especially with India, and pearl diving. Some things do not change, however. Especially generous Kuwaiti hospitality. Stuart Knox was the first Political Agent to be appointed to Kuwait after the 1899 treaty. What he reported back sounds very familiar – “My private reception”, he wrote, “has been most kind and cordial. The Sheikh has set aside large rooms for me and my servants. He insists on feeding me – and my servants – while I am staying with him... The feeding is distinctly good !”

Kuwaiti-British relations stretch back, of course, way beyond 1899, well into the 18th century. When the British East India Company ran into difficulty with the Ottomans in Basra it should come as no surprise that Kuwait, with its openness to trade and its excellent natural harbour, should have offered an attractive refuge.

But the 1899 treaty ushered in a period of extraordinary expansion in the relations between our two countries and peoples. Throughout the 20th century and right up to this day.

Our leaders sealed these relations through historic visits: notably Viceroy of India Lord Curzon in 1903, shortly before the political agency was established; HH Sheikh Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, who visited London just after the First World War; and in more recent times the state visits by HM Queen Elizabeth II and His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

In recent decades Britain has become a home from home for many Kuwaitis. Many Kuwaitis I meet seem to know London much better than I do! Kuwaitis invest in properties all over the United Kingdom not just in London, and there are now more Kuwaitis studying at British universities than ever before. Indeed more Kuwaitis are now travelling to Britain than ever before.

In 1952, Britain was poised for an extended period of economic growth. But with rationing and shortages still in place after the Second World War, that seemed far from obvious. So Kuwait's decision in that year to establish the Kuwait Investment Office in smog-bound London, was a resounding vote of confidence in the United Kingdom as a sound place to invest.

The KIO was the first such office of any Sovereign Wealth Fund, later managing Kuwait's investments right across Europe. And Kuwait's investments in the UK, from both the KIO and the private sector, have continued to grow exponentially since then. We warmly welcome and encourage further such investment because it is both responsible and for the long term.

A key outcome of the State Visit to Britain by HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah in 2012 was the establishment of a new framework for our bilateral relations in the form of the Joint Steering Group, as part of my Government's new Gulf Strategy.

This Joint Steering Group – or JSG – is helping us to deepen our co-operation

in those areas where we are already working together – and to broaden our co-operation in pastures new.

The JSG has helped us to deepen our defence and security co-operation. In the year ahead our armed forces will be exercising and training together more than ever before. We are close allies in the international Counter-Daesh Coalition.

At a government to government level we are working together in highly sensitive areas, for example to safeguard passengers flying out of our airports and to protect the integrity of our data and communications against cyber attacks.

Last week's visit by the Lord Mayor of the City of London highlighted new opportunities in trade and investment – in both directions – including in support of His Highness the Amir's exciting new plans for Hareer Territory, in pursuit of Kuwait's Vision 2035.

We are sorry not to have HE the Minister for Education & Higher Education with us today, but I am happy that this is because he is attending the Education World Forum in London, where he is also holding consultations on co-operation in the area of curriculum reform.

And in the cultural sphere the 120th anniversary has helped to stimulate fresh co-operation in music and the arts between the British Council and the National Council for Arts and Literature. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra will be making its first ever visit to Kuwait in April to perform at the remarkable Jaber Al-Ahmed Cultural Centre. Britain and Kuwait enjoy distinguished and exceptionally special relations. Many of us are witness to this every day. Our duty and our challenge will be to ensure that our relations endure to keep pace with regional and global developments, and that they are fit for purpose in the twenty-first century.

We are well placed together to fulfil this duty and to meet such a challenge side by side. Not only do we have a strong bond of friendship. This is matched by a close and rare identity of interests and values, which helps to strengthen our co-operation in many fields. Whether in the UN Security Council, where we are delighted to be working with our Kuwaiti colleagues. Or tackling global environmental challenges, such as the menace of marine pollution. Or working together to bring security and stability to this precious but troubled region.

So I feel confident in wishing our two countries not only a happy anniversary, but also a further 120 years of partnership and friendship, well into the next century!