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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Ulrichsen, K. C. (2017). Walking the Tightrope: Kuwaiti-Iranian Relations in the Aftermath of the Abdali Affair. *IndraStra Global*, 8. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53497-1>

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Walking the Tightrope: Kuwaiti-Iranian Relations in the Aftermath of the Abdali Affair

indrastra.com/2017/08/Walking-the-Tightrope-Kuwait-Iran-Abdali-Affair-003-08-2017-0016.html

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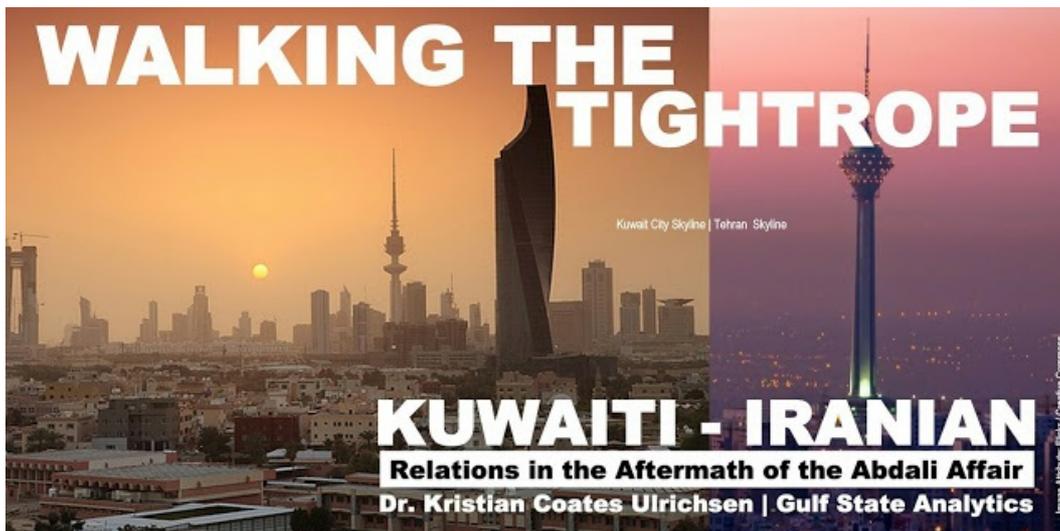


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Kuwait has expelled fifteen Iranian diplomats and submitted a formal letter of protest to the Lebanese government as the fallout from the 'Abdali affair' reverberates around the state. Fourteen members of the suspected terror cell, charged with stockpiling large quantities of weaponry in Kuwait and receiving training from Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), disappeared in mid-July. The supreme court in Kuwait had overturned an earlier acquittal and sentenced them to between five and fifteen years' imprisonment. The diplomatic rift marks a turnaround from Emir Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah's early 2017 outreach to Iranian President Rouhani, when the Emir sought to identify the parameters of a possible strategic dialogue that could dial down tensions in the Gulf. In addition to impacting the bilateral relationship between Kuwait and Iran, the affair underscores Kuwait's vulnerability to external fissures that connect domestic Kuwaiti politics with broader regional upheaval.

Periodic Tensions in Bilateral Relations

The bilateral relationship between Kuwaiti and Iran has had fewer flashpoints in recent years, owing to the greater integration of Kuwait's Shi'ite communities into political and economic structures (comparable to those in other GCC states) and to the pragmatism and moderation of Kuwaiti foreign policy under Sheikh Sabah, who served forty years as Kuwait's Foreign Minister before becoming Prime Minister in 2003 and Emir in 2006. Some of the most prominent Shi'ite merchant families in Kuwait, such as the Behbehani and Dashti families, trace their ancestral roots to Iran and constitute an important source of soft commercial power linking Kuwait and Iran. (The origins of other large Shi'ite families in Kuwait, such as the Bukhamseen and Mazidi, lie respectively in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province and Iraq.)

It was not always thus, however, and ties between Kuwait and Iran reached a low point in the years immediately following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. During that period, the main focal point of Iranian-backed transnational Shi'ite activism in the Gulf was the *Shiraziyyun* movement, comprised of followers of Iraqi cleric Mohammed Mahdi al-Shirazi. Members of the

Shiraziyyun were particularly active in Kuwait, where al-Shirazi had settled with his family and entourage in 1971 following his exile from Najaf. From Kuwait, al-Shirazi built up a network of followers in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and parts of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), utilizing connections among transnational Shi'ite merchants whose commercial interests spanned the Gulf. Al-Shirazi **moved to Iran** after the revolution and his Movement of Vanguard Missionaries was at the forefront of the Khomeini regime's initial attempts to export the revolutionary upheaval across the region.

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), a series of major terrorist attacks in Kuwait were traced back to Iran, including the bombings of the French and U.S. Embassies in Kuwait City in 1983 and the attempted assassination of Emir Jabir al-Ahmad Al Sabah in 1985. These incidents highlighted the interlocking trans-national threats to Kuwaiti domestic security, as the pro-Iranian Islamic Jihad **claimed** responsibility while the majority of those arrested were Iraqi Shi'ites. Later in the war, at the GCC annual summit in Abu Dhabi in November 1986, Kuwaiti officials requested the GCC provide maritime protection to Kuwait's oil and merchant fleet and station a contingent of Peninsula Shield troops on Bubiyan Island to counteract Iran's seizure of the nearby Faw Peninsula from Iraq the previous February. Yet their request was declined, owing to a lack of GCC consensus on whether to confront Iran politically or militarily. This left Kuwaiti officials with little option but to **reluctantly turn** to external powers to provide the maritime protection for its fleet, leading to the re-flagging and chartering of Kuwaiti vessels during the 'Tanker War' of 1987-88.

Kuwaiti Shi'ites, both of Arabian and Iranian origin, later played prominent roles during the resistance to the Iraqi occupation in 1990-91 when their associational infrastructure provided the backbone of an organized resistance movement against the Iraqi occupation forces. Sectarian tensions that had been inflamed by the terrorist incidents of the 1980s were **blunted** by this affirmation of loyalty to the state and to the ruling Al Sabah family at this most existential period for Kuwait. However, in 2004, the formation of *Kitaeb Hezbollah* as a Shi'ite militia and vehicle through which Iran's elite Qods Force could deploy its most experienced operators and sensitive equipment to Iraq again, raised alarms in Kuwait at the destabilizing threat from Iranian-backed regional militias.

During the height of Iraq's civil war between 2006 and 2008, the IRGC channeled considerable resources to *Kitaeb Hezbollah* and, by 2010, the group was in receipt of equipment commensurate with the IRGC in Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Particularly worrisome to Kuwait was the reappearance in *Kitaeb Hezbollah* of its leader, Basra-born Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (real name Jamal al-Ibrahimi). Al-Muhandis had been persecuted by the Ba'ath regime of Saddam Hussein and fled to Iran in the early-1980s, where he became a senior Badr Corps commander and subsequently **rose** to become the most senior Iraqi active duty member of the IRGC's Qods Force. Al-Muhandis was directly implicated in the Iranian-backed terrorist attacks in Kuwait in the 1980s, and had, in fact, been **sentenced** in absentia to death in Kuwait for his role in them.

Sectarian tensions in Kuwait again threatened to escalate in February 2008 when members of the Kuwaiti offshoot of Hezbollah, *al-Tahaluf al-Islami al-Watani* (the Islamic National Alliance), gathered in Kuwait City to commemorate the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, one of the leading figures of Hezbollah in Lebanon killed in a massive car bomb in Damascus. The gathering, during which participants chanted 'death to America, death to Israel', drew immediate controversy and anger from Kuwait's majority Sunni population, as Mughniyeh was widely believed to be the mastermind of the above-mentioned terrorist attacks in Kuwait the early 1980s. Vocal accusations in the Kuwaiti media, notably from more extreme Sunni Islamists, threatened to disrupt the delicate equilibrium in Kuwaiti society. The Speaker of the National Assembly, Jassim al-Kharafi, was instrumental in reaching out to the leaders of Kuwait's Shi'ite communities (which range across the political and religious spectrum) and calming tensions. The incident triggered a realignment of Kuwaiti Shi'ite MPs who became solidly pro-government in the face of the societal backlash from the Sunni majority in the country.

It is against this backdrop of the periodic reminders of past attacks that reiterate Kuwait's vulnerability to regional volatility that the Abdali affair has been unfolding since 2015. The affair began with the discovery in August 2015 of an enormous cache of weapons hidden on a farm in Abdali that reportedly contained enough munitions 'for a small army'. The size of the find and the intense media speculation linking it to Iran, whether directly or indirectly through Hezbollah, led the Kuwaiti Public Prosecutor to issue a gag order barring further discussion of the issue lest it inflames domestic political and sectarian tension. Less than two months earlier, an Islamic State suicide bombing had killed 27 people at the (Shi'ite) Imam al-Sadiq mosque in Kuwait City. Twenty-five Kuwaitis – all Shi'ite – and one Iranian were charged with working for the IRGC and Hezbollah and with smuggling explosives from Iran with the intent of carrying out 'hostile acts' against Kuwait. Twenty-three of the 26 were **convicted** and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment in January 2016 and the Iranian member was sentenced to death in absentia. Fifteen of the men were subsequently **acquitted** by the Court of Appeal in July 2016, only for the Supreme Court to reverse the acquittal in June 2017 and confirm their original sentences, prompting them to flee, presumably to Iran.

What Next for Kuwait-Iran Ties?

The fallout from the Abdali affair considerably complicates the progress that had been made in Kuwait-Iran ties over the past

five years. Following the frostiness of bilateral ties with Iran during the Ahmedinejad era, Kuwait had been quick off the mark to revive political and commercial relations at the highest level following Iranian President Hasan Rowhani's election in June 2013 and the subsequent interim nuclear deal that November. In June 2014, the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah, paid his first official visit to Iran since assuming power in January 2006, alongside a Kuwaiti delegation that included the Ministers of Oil, Finance, Foreign Affairs, and Commerce and Industry. That visit – the first by any Kuwaiti Emir since the 1979 Iranian revolution – was significant as it came during Kuwait's rotating presidency of the GCC, and **represented** an attempt to contribute to a thaw in Iran-GCC relations.

Comments attributed in February 2014 to Khalid al-Jarallah, the Undersecretary at Kuwait's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, that **described** the relationship with Iran as '*excellent, historical, and developing*', illustrated the difference between Kuwait's approach to Iran and the far more confrontational stance taken by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Abu Dhabi in the UAE. Kuwait noticeably did not join Saudi Arabia and Bahrain in cutting off diplomatic relations with Iran after tensions surged following the execution of the Saudi cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, and the subsequent targeting of Saudi diplomatic sites in Iran in January 2016. Kuwait also has not been as heavily involved in the Saudi-led military operation in Yemen and **headed up** ultimately unsuccessful efforts in 2016 to try to reach a diplomatic settlement to the conflict between government-backed forces and Houthi rebels.

It was therefore not a surprise when Kuwait emerged at the forefront of an initiative to try and defuse tensions in the Gulf at the start of 2017. On January 25, Kuwait's Foreign Minister, Sheikh Sabah al-Khaled Al Sabah, visited Teheran and carried with him a letter from Emir Sabah to President Rouhani that sought to establish the 'basis for dialogue' between the GCC and Iran. At the time of his visit, Sheikh Sabah commented, 'There is a genuine willingness and desire to have normal and fair relations with Iran,' and added that 'opening a channel of communication will...bring benefit to both sides.'

The choice of Kuwait to send the message – and potential olive branch – from the GCC to Iran was no surprise. At 87, Emir Sabah was not only the elder statesman among GCC rulers but also a respected veteran of regional affairs from his forty-year tenure as foreign minister between 1963 and 2003. During his time both as foreign minister and Emir, Kuwait sought to avoid being drawn into battles that would require it to take sides and undermine the careful balancing of regional relationships. In addition to acting as a bridge between the GCC and Iran, Emir Sabah had also drawn upon his stature and experience as a regional mediator in the dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2014, and has done so, again, in the most recent standoff between the same states and Qatar that began on June 5.

On February 7, Iran's Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, responded positively to the meeting with Kuwait's Foreign Minister and to the Emir's letter, and stated that Iran was ready for dialogue and that 'we should aim together for a future that looks different.' President Rouhani then visited Kuwait (and Oman) on February 15, and Emir Sabah traveled to Muscat from February 20-22 to meet with Sultan Qaboos to discuss ways to dial down the tensions in the Gulf and build bridges between Iran and Saudi Arabia. During his time in Kuwait, Rouhani had waxed lyrical about the bilateral possibilities, **stating**, 'There are vast potentials for deepening and cementing relations between Iran and Kuwait in different aspects that can be tapped for the two nations and the region to benefit from.'

Although the initial responses to the Kuwaiti initiative were positive in tone, there was a little substantive follow-up in the five months between February and the downgrading of diplomatic ties in July. One reason was the lack of buy-in from Saudi leaders, given the depth of their involvement in Yemen and their unwillingness to support a policy that might imply a retreat in an increasingly zero-sum regional struggle with Iran. Coming so soon after the fall of Aleppo, symbolic of the defeat of GCC-backed policy in Syria, it was perhaps unsurprising that the Saudi leadership did not support any thaw that would have acknowledged, even legitimized, Iran's regional role. Another was the harder-line approach of the incoming Trump administration toward Iran's role in the Middle East, with the White House siding on the issue with regional hawks rather than doves.

Kuwaiti officials, therefore, confront a very different regional landscape than they did in January. While the crisis between Qatar and its GCC neighbors has exposed rifts in the Sunni Arab bloc that President Trump sought to mobilize against Iran during the Riyadh Summit in May 2017, the Iranian issue has not disappeared.

Iran's intervention in regional conflicts across the Middle East, through its political and military support of proxies such as Hezbollah and (to a lesser extent) the Houthi movement in Yemen, is perceived by GCC officials to pose the greatest and most direct threat to security and stability in the Gulf. For this reason, the flight of the Abdali fifteen has resonated strongly in Kuwait and its neighbors, with Bahrain synchronously accusing members of a Shi'ite cell detained in the Kingdom of maintaining links with Hezbollah in Lebanon and militants in Iran, including the al-Ashtar Brigade. Both the Abdali case and the emergence of the al-Ashtar Brigade in Bahrain (after 2011) will have fueled GCC officials' concern for the possible infiltration and militarization of elements of political and religious opposition to ruling families by movements with a growing sophistication and scale of operational intent and capability, and with clearer indications of external support from the IRGC and Hezbollah.

Gulf State Analytics ([@GulfStateAnalyt](#)) originally published this article on August 9, 2017.

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