ABDULLAH MUBARAK AL-SABAH

The TRANSFORMATION *of* KUWAIT

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Preface

The inspiration for this book came to my mind in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The occupation authorities declared Kuwait to be the '19th province of Iraq' and its political autonomy was denied. The destruction that ensued during the occupation was accompanied by an almost systematic campaign of pillage and plunder throughout most areas of Kuwait.

The ordeal left a lasting impact on my thinking. It brought home to me the importance of documenting the modern history of my country, which I felt as a sort of moral and ethical duty. I was an insider to many events that I thought should be brought to light. However, this book is not a compilation of personal memories and recollections. I studied carefully almost all previous works in Arabic and English on Kuwait during the lifetime of Sheikh Abdullah Mubarak Al-Sabah and I interviewed a lot of people who worked with him or served under his command. I also researched British, American and Kuwaiti archives. The first edition of this book appeared in 1995. After five reprints and three editions in Arabic, I thought it should be made available to a Western audience.

The book focuses on the life and history of Sheikh Abdullah Mubarak Al-Sabah, who was a prominent Kuwaiti statesman. He served as Deputy Ruler of Kuwait during most of the 1950s until his resignation in 1961. These times were characterized by

rapid social change; a traditional society was shaken from its roots under the impact of the newly founded oil wealth – and the foundations of modern and independent Kuwait were laid during that decade. The book analyses the role of Abdullah Mubarak in the context of a changing Kuwait. I believe that the quality of leadership makes a difference, especially in times of turmoil and uncertainty. I have tried to underline the role of the Sheikh in dealing with the accelerated changes that swept Kuwait in all walks of life during that period. At times he managed the changes well, at other times he initiated the changes, and at others he steered Kuwait and its people into a safe haven.

I thank all my friends in Kuwait, Cairo and London who helped me in the preparation of this study. Their continuous help and support were essential in order to complete the work.

I hope that this book will be useful to all those who seek to understand the modern history of Kuwait.

Souad Al-Sabah
Kuwait, October 2014

Introduction

This book describes the history and life of the prominent Kuwaiti statesman Sheikh Abdullah Mubarak Al-Sabah, whose contribution was instrumental to the founding of a modern independent Kuwait.

The strength of his role stemmed from three major sources. First, he enjoyed distinguished status within the ruling Al-Sabah family – he was the only living son of Sheikh Mubarak the Great (Mubarak Al-Kabir), the founder of the state (reigned 1896–1915). Thus, he was 'uncle' of all rulers and dignitaries of Kuwait from 1915 onwards.

Second, over the years, Abdullah Mubarak was trained in different administrative, security and political positions. When he was 14 years old he was tasked with administering one of the 'gates' of Kuwait: at that time the city was surrounded by a number of gates that were kept open during daylight and closed by night. Abdullah Mubarak fought smuggling, protected borders and preserved law and order in the desert separating Kuwait from Iraq. The book records many details about his role and responsibilities.

Third, in the 1950s he assumed the position of Deputy Ruler and developed excellent working relations with the ruling sheikh (who was in fact his elder nephew, Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem), for whom he acted as trusted right-hand man.

The significance of Abdullah Mubarak's life can best be appreciated against the context of social and economic change that took place in Kuwait from the late 1940s onwards.

From traditionalism to modernity

During the first four decades of the twentieth century, life in Kuwait was generally traditional and simple. Kuwait was relatively open to the outside world due to its strategic position, its tradition of pearl fishing and its commercial links to India. Nevertheless, its people maintained Kuwait's traditional mode of economy, politics and culture.

The discovery of oil and the export of the first cargo in 1946 upturned this traditional equilibrium. All aspects of society started to undergo fundamental and rapid change as a result. Thousands of people of different nationalities, ethnicities and religions flocked into the country searching for work and to settle. Kuwaiti culture and ways of conducting life were now subject to external influences. At the same time, the Kuwaiti Government recognized the importance of education and sent missions of young people to study at universities in Egypt and Iraq.

In the 1950s, change permeated the whole of Kuwaiti society. New roads were built and modern buildings were constructed. Schools were opened and for the first time Kuwaiti girls were able to enrol. Cars, electrical appliances and home equipment became popular among Kuwaiti families.

Transitional periods are, by definition, difficult times. This was even more true in the case of Kuwait because of the tempo and scope of change there. Abdullah Mubarak occupied a senior position among the Kuwaiti ruling elite who were in charge of managing and steering that process of change.

Although Abdullah Mubarak grew up in the desert and maintained great respect for Bedouin culture and traditions, he nevertheless understood the needs of the changing times. Rather than resist change he saw the opportunities to be gained. A new, better world was opening up and Kuwait had a part to play in it.

This book demonstrates how the Sheikh was a pioneer in accepting new ideas and ways of doing things. For instance, in the face of opposition he spoke out to encourage girls' education and initiated the plan to establish a Kuwaiti university. He encouraged young people to enjoy modern sports and was a patron of many educational incentives such as school athletics competitions.

On a personal level he was open-minded. This is reflected in his family life. His wife pursued a university education at Cairo and Surrey universities and she became the first Kuwaiti woman to hold a PhD in economics. Not only that, but since she was also a poet, he encouraged her to make public appearances in Kuwait and abroad to recite her poetry. The same was true with the rest of our family; he was committed to offering us the best education available.

Institution-building

Abdullah Mubarak built institutions. He understood that institutions guaranteed continuity and endurance because they outlive individuals. For this reason the book explains in detail his role in areas such as security, the army, civil aviation, education, broadcasting and non-governmental associations.

His most lasting influence was in the area of security and the military. Entrusted with various security responsibilities during World War II, he was decorated by the British Government in

1945. Before independence, he perceived the threats to Kuwaiti national security and the importance of establishing a strong army for his country. He subsequently laid the foundation of the Department of Public Security, which later became the army of Kuwait. This book shows the challenging negotiations he held with the British Government to acquire new advanced weapons.

Similarly, he took a keen interest in civil aviation and, realizing its importance, he established a club to encourage the young people of Kuwait in this activity. He foresaw the importance of training Kuwaitis as civil pilots as a preliminary step for their military role. In the same vein, he started to modernize and expand Kuwait's airport and to establish a national airline.

Quest for independence

In 1899, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah signed a treaty with the British Government, according to which Kuwait became a British protectorate. London was responsible for conducting Kuwait's foreign affairs, while domestic matters were the domain of the Kuwaiti Emir. The British appointed a 'Political Agent' to act as their diplomatic representative. In many cases, the Political Agent went beyond his jurisdiction, which created frictions with the Emir.

Abdullah Mubarak understood the importance of maintaining the link with Great Britain as a counterbalance to Iraqi territorial ambitions in Kuwait. At the same time he was a patriot who opposed British intervention in the domestic affairs of his country. This book considers the difficulties inherent in keeping a balance between the two and, in this, relates many examples that touch on his assertion of Kuwaiti autonomy.

For example, in the late 1940s, he ordered the entry of Arab citizens into Kuwait without a visa and accepted a Lebanese medal without the prior consent of the British Government. As a result, his relations with the British were ambivalent. On the one side, the British authorities admired his strong personality, which was a guarantee for order and stability against subversive activities. On the other side, they disapproved of his support of Nasser's Egypt and the Algerian revolution. They were equally puzzled by his call in 1958 for Kuwait to join the League of Arab States, three years before independence.

Political succession

British diplomatic correspondence is full of accounts and rumours about conflict within the Sabah family over the political succession. When Sheikh Ahmed Al-Jaber passed away in 1950 while his heir Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem was abroad, the Political Agent wrote about different scenarios including the possibility of having a coup engineered by Sheikh Abdullah Mubarak. The book records all the details of this incident and shows that these scenarios were entirely fictitious and had no basis in reality.

Throughout the 1950s, Political Agents' reports frequently referred to the political ambitions of Abdullah Mubarak and cast doubt on his plans and intentions. Yet, as will be explored throughout this book, the accounts made in these reports were often motivated by suspicion as to his stance on, in particular, the communist activities at that time. Although Abdullah Mubarak held all the instruments of military power, he never used them as a card in domestic politics. As an example of this, when he disagreed with the Emir in 1960 on a number of policy issues he resigned and left the country quietly. For the following

31 years, he observed Kuwaiti politics, gave his advice when sought and supported Kuwaiti and Arab causes to the best of his abilities.

This book tells the story of his life and work, as a statesman who practised politics in difficult and changing times. It is to his credit that he helped to bring about the development, independence and stability of Kuwait today.

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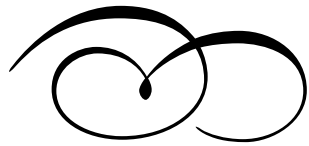
Abdullah Mubarak: The Formative Years



Sheikh Abdullah Mubarak Al-Sabah was the youngest son of Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah, the founder of modern Kuwait who was known as Mubarak the Great by his contemporaries. Between his accession in 1896 and his death in 1915, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah created a secure future for a small state sandwiched between two large and powerful neighbours, the future Saudi Arabia and the future Iraq. His youngest son, Abdullah Mubarak Al-Sabah, the subject of this book, was born in 1914, a year before his father died, and went through life with no personal recollection of him. Whatever he knew of his father he acquired through his branch of the Al-Sabah family and other contemporaries who knew his father and his remarkable career at first hand. Only one of his older brothers, Hamad, born in 1894, lived long enough to pass on memories of their father. Yet Abdullah Mubarak idolized his father, and the evidence of his political life clearly shows that the youngest son made sustained and determined efforts to follow the causes that had been central to his father's life.

Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah was a pioneer in his ideas of Arab identity, although, perforce, the Ruler of Kuwait had to remain on good terms with the Ottoman rulers to the north, with the intent of keeping any Ottoman involvement in Kuwait at arm's length. At the end of World War I, all dimensions of politics had altered in Kuwait. The Ottoman Empire had ceased to function, and the British became the unquestioned and dominant imperial presence in the region. The British took no more benign a view of Arabism than the Ottomans had done, yet in pursuing this political course in the decades that followed, Abdullah Mubarak would have an easier task than his father. Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah had been compelled to maintain Kuwait's independence by juggling relations with the British and the Ottomans: Abdullah Mubarak never had this complex double task. He had only to confront a determined and powerful British administration, even if this was ultimately less malleable than its Ottoman predecessors.

After his father's death, the infant Abdullah Mubarak was in an anomalous position. The new Ruler of Kuwait was his elder brother, Jaber II, who was born in 1860. Sheikh Jaber died in 1917 and his younger brother Salem II (born in 1864) succeeded him. Yet he had only a brief period of power, dying in 1921. By 1921, only two of Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's sons were still alive: Hamad, by then 24, and the seven-year-old Abdullah Mubarak. Kuwait was under threat from many enemies, and a young and inexperienced ruler could have been disastrous. The Al-Sabah family took much less account of heredity than weightier considerations: who would be the most effective ruler? Neither an inexperienced young man (Hamad) nor a minor (Abdullah Mubarak) would do. Thus the succession passed to the elder son of Jaber, Ahmed II, the nephew of Abdullah Mubarak, but nonetheless more than 35

years his senior. Ahmed II ruled Kuwait for more than 30 years until 1950. On his death, his cousin Abdullah III (the elder son of Salem II) ruled until 1965, when his brother Sabah III succeeded, and ruled until 1977. At that point, the succession returned to the other main branch of the family, to the grandson of Jaber II, who ruled as Jaber III until 2006.

In this complex pattern of dynastic movement, Abdullah Mubarak's position was unique. He was (after Hamad's death in 1938) the sole surviving son of the founder of the nation; he also seemed to have inherited his father's talents. His own family quietly noted his acute political sense and determination, as well as his dedication to both the nation and the Arab cause.

In understanding Abdullah Mubarak's career, both his personal, family background and the nature of change in Kuwait are of equal importance. For over half a century after 1940 Sheikh Abdullah Mubarak was either Deputy Ruler at the heart of Kuwait's political life, or, when out of office, a loyal supporter of both the Kuwaiti people and the ruling family. He was an eyewitness to many momentous events; and contributed to the making of many others. He came to know the leading Arab and foreign politicians and statesmen, as well as kings, presidents and senior officials; in his long career, he became completely at home with the challenging complexities of Arab politics. Like his father, he believed intuitively in the ideals of Arabism, becoming over time a powerful and effective advocate for those ideals, which were central to Kuwait's development during the 1940s and 1950s.

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In this period, Abdullah Mubarak tackled energetically the problems of Kuwait's relative underdevelopment; yet in British records of the period, we see mostly distrust of him and his

assumed motives. There were few local records (other than the press) or Arab memoirs to provide a corrective of Kuwait at that time. Thus, we have no alternative but to use the comprehensive records held in the British National Archives in London and the US National Archives in Maryland. Both, however, need to be used with great care. The early reports were often based on gossip and self-interested hearsay, at least until 1904 when British officials were first based in Kuwait and could judge events at first hand. However, even after 1904 British officials were in no sense independent observers of any matter that touched the political and economic interests of the United Kingdom. It is a measure of how highly successive governments in London rated the importance of Kuwait that so tight a control was imposed upon the small emirate.

The signing of an oil concession agreement in 1934, and the first discovery of oil in 1938, marked Britain's increasing interest in Kuwait: the contract was with a company jointly owned by the US Gulf Corporation and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which took the name British Petroleum in 1954. On 30 June 1946, when Sheikh Ahmed al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Ruler of Kuwait, turned the wheel that started the flow of Kuwait's first crude oil into the holding tanks aboard the tanker *British Fusilier*, the transformation of Kuwait's economy became possible. However, it came at the price of an even more insistent British determination to exercise greater control.

Abdullah Mubarak was born into a society taking the first steps towards modernity. During his long life he played many different roles that consolidated this process. Generations of British officials in Kuwait recognized that he was incorruptible, diligent, self-willed, single-minded and unusually well-informed. All these qualities made him a potential threat, but most dangerous of all was that as a senior member of the ruling

family he carried real authority: he could not be marginalized or overruled as could lower ranks of officialdom. It is remarkable how far his influence and experience extended. He directed public security and the Police Department, founded Kuwait's army, established civil aviation, supervised the Council of Education, radio and passports. More than any other member of the ruling family, he understood in detail – and in practice – how Kuwaiti society functioned.

We know tantalizingly little about his childhood and even less about his development before he first appears in the British reports from Kuwait. Abdullah Mubarak spent his early childhood years entirely within the Bedouin structure of life and traditions. The tribes of the Arabian Peninsula shared a common heritage and social ethics, but the opportunities offered by the Gulf for fishing and, later, pearling, meant that a number of tribes led a 'double life' according to the season. Kuwait looked both outward to the Gulf and maritime trade, whilst also northward into modern Iraq. The great scholar of the Bedouin, Jibrail S. Jabbur, points out that while not all Arabs lived off the desert, it was the land in which they were formed: 'The traditional life of the Arabs had strong roots in nomadism; and even today the Arab sedentary mentality is firmly bonded to that of the Arab Bedouin … The Arab does not know himself or understand his unique qualities and the range of his capacity for development, if he does not know that the way that he lives has its roots in the desert.' [Jabbur]

In the case of Abdullah Mubarak, his sense of the tribal spirit, deep need for family solidarity, and even his desire for positions of authority and leadership, can be traced back to the influence of Bedouin life. He grew up as a Bedouin. After his father's death he was cared for by his 'milk mother', 'Nuwair', wife of Mutlaq Abu Hadida, who at the same time nursed her

own daughter, Haya. According to prevailing custom, the Abu Hadida family of the Al-Rashaida tribe took him to grow up in the desert. Haya became his 'milk sister', which constituted a powerful connection in Bedouin society. The best Western writer on Kuwait, H. R. P. Dickson, described how he experienced a similar kind of childhood: 'Firstly, I was wet-nursed by an Anizah woman of the Misrab section of the Ruwala [Bedouin] and can claim milk-brotherhood with them. Secondly, the fact that I have spoken Arabic from childhood.'[1] Dickson learned the hidden and often unspoken aspects of Bedouin culture, and his analysis gives us a powerful insight into the formation of the young Abdullah Mubarak. Indeed, he specifically mentions Abdullah Mubarak's position in the tribal system:

> A woman who suckles two children of opposite sexes, one her own and the other a child of another, makes those children blood brother and sister. They can never marry each other and the boy throughout his life can look upon the face of the girl who nursed with him. They have become foster brother and sister. For example, Abdullah al Mubarak Al-Sabah is foster brother of the daughter of a Rashida woman, the wife of one of the shaikh's *fidawis* [bodyguards], by name Abu Hadida. I know both personally [Abdullah Mubarak and Haya Abu Hadida] and though Abdullah is the son of the late Ruler of Kuwait, he treats the Rashida girl in true foster brother fashion, quite charming to see, and often goes in spring to camp with her father and mother, and is on the friendliest of terms with his foster-sister.[2]

Dickson knew Abdullah Mubarak well, and makes it very clear that he found him 'charming', respectful to his foster parents, and full of brotherly affection for his foster-sister. Brought up in

the Bedouin tradition this bore its mark – as Jabbur suggests – throughout his later life, this early cultural influence explaining many of his character traits. As an adult, Abdullah Mubarak was renowned for his generosity. While some city dwellers found this odd, and even an unnecessary extravagance, every Bedouin tribesman would see it quite differently. Dickson explains its significance unequivocally:

> In the piping times of peace, the shaikh must prove himself literally 'the father of his people'. He must know the family troubles of every man and must give good and fair decisions when cases are brought to him for settlement. Above all he must not be miserly, and must keep open house. No name has a more unworthy meaning or leaves a nastier taste in the mouth of the Badawin than the epithet *bakil* or 'stingy one'. Once this name sticks to a chief, his influence is at an end.[3]

Abdullah Mubarak's father had been an exceptional product of a Bedouin warrior culture. Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah could take harsh decisions without remorse; he was feared and respected, ruthless in war and in politics. Above all, he had a clarity of vision about the best future for Kuwait. The harshness and rigour of this desert life shaped the behaviour of both men, father and son, in later years. In Abdullah Mubarak's case it was very much like the Jesuit maxim, 'Give us a child before he is seven and he is ours for life'. His character developed during those times spent moving from one grazing ground to another. He learned to be patient, to value generosity in others and to be generous himself. Above all he learned the need for courage, and not to let others deflect him from the path he had chosen. He too could take hard decisions unflinchingly. In the tribal