



NATO Parliamentary Assembly

COMMITTEE ON THE  
CIVIL DIMENSION OF SECURITY (CDS)

SUB-COMMITTEE ON  
NATO PARTNERSHIPS (PCNP)

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## MISSION REPORT

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### KUWAIT

13 – 15 NOVEMBER 2017

## I. INTRODUCTION

1. Kuwait's foreign and security priorities and its relations with NATO were on top of the agenda of a visit by a delegation of NATO Parliamentarians to Kuwait from 13 to 15 November 2017. Other topics that featured prominently in the exchanges were the volatile security situation in the Gulf, the threat posed by Daesh and the latest developments in the region, including in the field of human rights.

2. The delegation consisted of 16 legislators from 9 NATO member states, representing the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's (NATO PA) Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security (CDS) and the Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships (PCNP). Led by NATO PA Vice-Presidents Vitalino Canas (Portugal) and Metin Lütfi Baydar (Turkey), the parliamentarians met with senior Kuwaiti officials, including the speaker of the National Assembly, H.E. Mr Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanim, the Assistant Foreign Minister for International Organisations, Ambassador Nasser Al-Hayen, and the leadership of the National Security Bureau of Kuwait. A visit to the new NATO-Kuwait ICI Centre was also on the group's agenda and additional meetings included exchanges with experts of the Saud Al-Nasser Al-Sabah Diplomatic Institute and the American University of Kuwait Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI), the leadership of Kuwait Red Crescent Society as well as civil society representatives.

The key takeaways for the parliamentarians were:

- The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) remains the main focus of Kuwait's foreign and security policy; further deepening of the partnership with NATO is also in Kuwait's interest;
- Security in the Gulf region remains volatile, even though the military campaign against Daesh in Syria and Iraq is winding down;
- Regional competition between GCC member states and Iran has increased recently, manifesting itself in Syria and Yemen, and threatening to spill over to Lebanon;
- Kuwait is actively pursuing diplomacy to lower tensions, but its options are limited. Progress in overcoming deep-seated mistrust among Gulf littoral states will take time and effort.

## II. DOMESTIC ISSUES

3. Kuwait is a complex society in terms of population, tribal relations, and religion, the delegation learned. Maintaining national cohesion is a key issue for the country and the leadership. Diplomatic observers emphasised that the political leadership of the country wants to preserve its delicate social balance and that it has been overwhelmingly successful so far.

4. Kuwait is stable, "the eye of the cyclone", as a diplomatic observer noted. While Kuwait is not immune from terrorism and some elements among the young generation have been radicalised, the country has not been the target of many terrorist attacks. This is partly due to Kuwaiti counter-terrorism efforts which are, according to an independent expert, relatively effective. The relationship between the Sunni and Shia communities were described as good, and speakers stressed the important role the Emir plays for domestic as well as regional stability.

5. In terms of domestic issues, speakers repeatedly emphasised that Kuwait is the most democratic country in the region. Established by Kuwait's November 1962 constitution, the National Assembly is the longest serving all-elected body among the Gulf monarchies. Fifty seats are elected, and up to 15 members of the cabinet serve in the Assembly *ex-officio*. The National Assembly enjoys more scope of authority than any other legislative or consultative body in the GCC states.

6. Host country interlocutors and diplomatic representatives ascribed both Kuwait's political stability and its good relations with its neighbours to the Emir. Personalities matter, particularly in Arab countries, as one diplomat from a NATO member country noted. Having previously served as Kuwait's Foreign minister for 40 years, the Emir is the most experienced political leader in the region.

7. It is estimated that Kuwait's oil reserves are the sixth largest in the world, which could be worth between USD 500 to 600 billion. The economy of the country is very dependent on oil extraction, which generates approximately 90% of fiscal revenue, the delegation was informed. Kuwait's society and economy are heavily subsidised, according to a diplomat. Congruent with its aim to ween off Kuwait from its dependency on oil revenues, the political leadership pursues the ambitious aim to establish Kuwait an international commercial hub according to its "2020 Vision", the delegation learned.

8. The country is the regional leader in developing democratic institutions and fostering the freedom of speech, the delegation was informed. At the same time, representatives of Kuwait's civil society suggested that more needs to be done in terms of political empowerment of women and bolstering the rule of law. A current priority for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is the campaign to abolish article 153 of Kuwait's penal code, which effectively gives men regulatory, judicial, and executive power over their female kin. An NGO representative said that article 153 is incompatible with Kuwait's constitution as well as international agreements on human and women's rights. Another NGO representative noted that Kuwait still lacks a formal commitment to put more women into leadership positions. There is only one woman among members of the National Assembly. More generally, lack of sufficient funding limits the effectiveness of some NGOs in reaching out to their constituents. However, NGO representatives and others generally expressed the view that change is underway, though it is going to take time.

### **III. KUWAIT'S FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES AND RELATIONS WITH NEIGHBOURS**

9. Kuwait's geographical position and its small size - in comparison with its direct neighbours - put it in a quandary. As one observer suggested, "Kuwait cannot afford to take sides because it is too small but it also cannot afford to be neutral", or as another host country official stressed, "Kuwait's first line of defence is diplomacy".

10. Kuwait is pursuing constructive relations with all regional powers, the delegation was informed. The GCC is the centre piece of Kuwait's foreign and security policy; the organisation is very important for Kuwait and for regional stability. This also explains why Kuwait is very concerned about the current crisis among GCC member states. Therefore, the government of Kuwait is committed to serving as an "honest broker" and to restoring the unity of the GCC, jeopardised by the rift between Qatar and three other GCC members.

11. With regard to Kuwait's ties with its neighbouring states, the delegation learned that bilateral relations with other GCC member countries are generally good. Kuwait-Iraq relations have been normalised, though some maritime demarcation issues remain to be solved. Vast amounts of reparations payments for the victims of the 1991 Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait have been made and only a relatively small amount remains to be implemented. Kuwait is very much interested in a stable Iraq and understands the need to stabilise and reconstruct the areas recovered from Daesh. This is one reason why Kuwait also provides financial and other support for the stabilisation of its Western neighbour. With regard to the Kurdish referendum, Kuwait holds the view that Iraq already has a lot of problems and does not need another one.

12. Kuwait recognises the leading role of Saudi Arabia in the GCC. At the same time, there have been tensions between Kuwait and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as well as the United Arab Emirates in the recent past, as both countries have accused Kuwait of being too close to Qatar, the delegation heard.

13. Commentators noted the efforts of Saudi Arabia's new leadership, particularly Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, to modernise the country and to address Saudi Arabia's pending problems. A few independent observers noted the large scale of the changes the Saudi leadership has initiated. They cautioned that it will be challenging to address so many issues simultaneously, even for a

country with the resources of Saudi Arabia. The successful implementation of reforms in Saudi Arabia will depend on many different factors, not least on the available resources and the sustained support from the country's religious leadership, commentators anticipated.

14. Discussions revealed a general consensus among host country speakers that the new leadership in Saudi Arabia is pursuing a more active and assertive policy, particularly vis-à-vis Iran. Independent observers reminded that these two countries clash in several areas, including Yemen. Kuwait's mediation efforts to end the conflict in Yemen were not successful.

#### **IV. IRAN**

15. Noting that Kuwait and the other GCC member nations face challenges from Iran several commentators expressed concern that lack of unity among GCC member states could be exploited by the regime in Tehran to its advantage.

16. The relationship between the GCC and Iran is characterised by deeply rooted mistrust, independent commentators suggested. To varying degrees, GCC member states suspect that the regime in Tehran is exploiting, and sometimes exacerbating, religious tensions among Shia and Sunni populations in their countries. GCC member states are also fearful of Iran's proxy influence in Yemen and Lebanon and are generally concerned about Iran's attempts to expand its influence in the neighbourhood. GCC member countries are also concerned about Iran's increasing military capabilities. Moreover, belligerent rhetoric has not been helpful in the past in building trust among Gulf littoral states either.

17. Among GCC member countries, Kuwait has the best relations with Iran, as one diplomatic representative suggested. Kuwait had originally not been in favour of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between Iran and the five permanent member states of the UN Security Council plus Germany. However, it now perceives that a collapse of the nuclear agreement would have a detrimental impact on regional security and stability.

18. There is a general concern that sectarian tensions in the MENA and Gulf regions are becoming more prominent as the military operations against Daesh in Syria and Iraq are winding down.

19. One independent observer even suggested that "what we are witnessing in the MENA region is another thirty Years' War". To mitigate the impact of the numerous conflicts in the region, Kuwait is providing considerable humanitarian assistance, host country officials emphasised. For example, by 2016, the State of Kuwait had contributed USD360 million to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) for the latter's engagement in Syria and Iraq. In 2015, the country held the position of largest donor per capita and was UNHCR's sixth largest donor globally.

20. Kuwaiti officials recognise that tensions have risen dangerously in the Gulf region, but are hopeful that the mediation efforts led by the Emir of Kuwait will eventually succeed in calming the waters, the delegation of the NATO PA heard.

21. All speakers agreed that dialogue among Gulf littoral states was needed to lower regional tensions. However, several local and international interlocutors cautioned that it will take considerable time and effort before diplomacy can succeed. In addition to the already volatile situation in the Gulf, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which is already manifesting itself in Syria and Yemen, threatens to spill over to other regions, the delegation heard. In this context, several host country interlocutors expressed concern about the political situation in Lebanon. They pointed to the turmoil that has gripped the country following the flight of Prime Minister Hariri to Saudi Arabia and his subsequent resignation. One host country interlocutor even warned of the danger of a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Lebanon. Therefore, the international community as a whole needs to monitor the developments in Lebanon closely, the delegation heard. A diplomatic

representative highlighted the need to support Lebanon's state institutions and called for a long-term investment by the international community to ensure the country's stability.

## **V. ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

22. Host country officials also voiced concern over Israel's occupation of Palestine, which they considered a major reason for the persistent instability of the MENA region. Like the other Arab countries, Kuwait firmly supports the Palestinian cause in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the past, Kuwait's relationship with Palestine has been complicated, as many Palestinians had welcomed the Iraqi invasion of 1990, the delegation learned. After Iraqi forces were driven from Kuwait in 1991, the Kuwaiti government expelled hundreds of thousands of Palestinian workers. However, the bilateral relationship has been normalised in the meantime, as evidenced, for example, by the visit of Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority, to attend an international conference on the suffering of Palestinian children a week before the visit of the delegation.

## **VI. RELATIONS WITH NATO**

23. Kuwait is also a leading partner of the Euro-Atlantic community in the region. Kuwait was the first country to sign an Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme under NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative. Moreover, Kuwait hosts the first NATO-ICI regional centre. The centre, built at the expense of the State of Kuwait, was recently inaugurated and has already conducted three pilot projects, focusing on civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) and crisis management. Host country officials emphasised how much Kuwait values the partnership with the Alliance. Kuwait supports NATO's goals and is evaluating ways to strengthen the existing partnership further, the delegation learned. In the past, Kuwait has received assistance from NATO in the areas of border security, crisis management, and anti-terrorism, among others.

24. Kuwait also plays a significant role in the Global coalition against Daesh. The country hosts the military bases for the coalition's forces, as well as the meetings of the various Working Groups. Kuwaiti officials and independent experts stressed that the relationship between Kuwait and the West is underpinned by common values.

## **VII. OTHER MEETINGS**

25. Visits to the American University in Kuwait (AUK), the Red Crescent Society, and the Diplomatic Institute concluded the programme. At the AUK, the delegation obtained briefings by distinguished scholars on a broad range of issues and engaged in a discussion with students. At the Red Crescent Society, the parliamentarians toured the premises and obtained briefings on the organisation's activities and its Disaster Management and Operation Centre. The discussion and exchanges at the Diplomatic Institute covered regional security issues as well as NATO-Kuwait relations. Overall, the briefings and discussions during the visit provided the delegation with a good overview of Kuwait's foreign and security policy. In addition to providing valuable insights that will help them to better understand the challenges Kuwait is facing in this volatile region, the meetings reminded the participants of Kuwait's valuable contribution to stability and security in the region and beyond.