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Introduction

In the world of diplomacy, the intricacies of first state visits and ceremonial gestures hold profound significance. State visits are meticulously choreographed to make a lasting impression on both the involved nations and the global audience, serving as a reflection of the value countries attach to their bilateral ties.

Just days before Kuwait's National Day, Emir Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah embarked on a GCC tour, marking his first since ascending to the throne in December following the passing of his half-brother, Sheikh Nawaf. With all eyes on Kuwait's new leadership, his visits and the receptions he received at the GCC capitals, along with the topics discussed, provide valuable insights into the country's future relations with its GCC counterparts.

In a departure from the conventional practice of prioritizing visits to Western allies, Sheikh Mishal chose to focus on GCC member states. This decision underscored Kuwait's commitment to Gulf unity and sought to garner support from the member states for his regional foreign policy,

particularly regarding issues involving Iraq and Iran. This tour also held significant importance in reaffirming Kuwait's stance and forging stronger ties within the GCC region.

In each of Sheikh Mishal's visits, a special focus was directed towards Iraq and Iran, emphasized with joint statements issued by the GCC leaders. The importance of Iraq's respect towards Kuwait's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as per the commitments that set the land and sea border between Kuwait and Iraq, was particularly stressed. GCC leaders called Iraq to adhere to the agreement on the Khor Abdullah waterway, [signed](#) between Kuwait and Iraq, and urged Iran to engage in negotiations on the maritime Divided Zone, including the entirety of Al-Durra gas field, which is a [source of contention](#) between Iran and GCC states, namely Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Kuwait, along with Saudi Arabia, asserts that the entire gas field is situated within the neutral zone, with Iran having no rights over it. Thus, bringing the disputes with Iraq and Iran on the agenda during his visits, the Emir aimed to garner support from fellow GCC member states for his regional position, in specific to issues concerning

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Iraq and Iran, and its commitment to pursue the main pillars of Kuwait's regional foreign policy.

Highlights from the Visits to GCC Capitals

At the end of January, Sheikh Mishal [undertook](#) his inaugural official visit to Saudi Arabia, seen as a gesture to uphold strong relations between the two GCC monarchies. A cordial welcome awaited him as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) greeted him at the airport with a warm reception. On behalf of King Salman, MbS [bestowed](#) upon the visiting leader the Order of King Abdulaziz in a notable ceremony. The Saudi Foreign Ministry, in a [post](#) on the social media platform X, extended an invitation to the Kuwaiti leader, referring to the kingdom as his "second home." Given his extensive involvement in Kuwait's security and defense apparatus prior to assuming a public role, Kuwaiti Emir considers relations with Saudi Arabia a top priority for regional security and stability. He aims to affirm continuity in Kuwait's traditional foreign policy, particularly in its focus on relations with Riyadh. Notably, Kuwaitis also hold a favorable opinion of relations with the kingdom, as [indicated](#) by a Gallup poll in April 2023, where 65% expressed approval of Saudi leadership.

Oman [marked](#) the second destination on Kuwaiti Emir's itinerary. A grand reception took place at Al Alam

Palace, [attended](#) by over 600 male and female citizens, with folklore bands lining the passage, chanting welcoming slogans for the visiting emir. The visit was seen as a fresh chapter in the relationship between the two nations under their new leaderships, with both Sheikh Mishal and Sultan Haitham aiming to chart a new course in regional affairs, distinct from their predecessors' foreign policies. A pivotal aspect of the visit was the [official inauguration](#) of the Al-Duqm Refinery and Petrochemical Industries in Al-Duqm. Valued at \$9 billion, this refinery stands as the largest investment project between two Arab Gulf countries in the sector. This milestone marked the beginning of a new era in 'oil diplomacy' in the region, signaling Kuwait's expansion of diplomacy beyond foreign aid and diplomacy, as the Al-Duqm Refinery and Petrochemical Industries represent a significant investment endeavor. Both nations, being small states, have strategically diversified their relationships with regional actors to safeguard their sovereignty and stability.

The third segment of the Kuwaiti Emir's tour [took him](#) to Bahrain, where he was warmly welcomed by His Majesty King Hamad bin Al Khalifa upon his arrival. A traditional Bahraini Ardha performance marked the occasion, celebrating his visit. In a symbolic gesture of gratitude for the Emir's efforts in strengthening bilateral ties, the King [honored](#) visiting Emir with the Order of Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa and

presented him with the esteemed Bahraini Sword. This gesture underscored the deep understanding in the GCC diplomatic tradition. Kuwait's amicable relations with all GCC members and its equitable stance toward each have enabled it to maintain a neutral position. Despite its firm stance on the Palestinian issue, Kuwait's relations with GCC states that have normalized relations with Israel, including Bahrain, remain unaffected. The Emir's visit to Manama reaffirms this stance. Kuwait adamantly refuses to partake in the trend of normalizing ties with Israel, asserting that Arab nations should refrain from such steps unless Israel offers tangible concessions to the Palestinians, in coordination with the Palestinian Authority. Despite past strains in Kuwaiti-Palestinian relations, stemming from Yasser Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein during the 1990-1991 invasion, Kuwait has consistently positioned itself as a Gulf Arab state dedicated to a permanent solution of the Palestinian cause.

The Kuwaiti Emir's last visit took him to Qatar, where he was [received](#) by Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, who bestowed upon him the Sword of the Founder, Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammed bin Thani, as a token of appreciation for the esteemed status of the Emir of Kuwait. The presentation of this sword holds significant meaning, as it is the highest national condecoration carried by the Emir of Qatar. Despite lacking a shared border, Kuwait and Qatar share

important historical milestones. Kuwait was the first Arab nation and the third globally to recognize Qatar's independence and establish diplomatic relations in 1971. Another pivotal moment in their relationship occurred during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 when Qatar provided military and political support. Notably, Qatar sheltered over 9,000 Kuwaiti families during the invasion and stood as a prominent advocate for Kuwait's liberation on the international stage. Qatari forces also played a crucial role in Kuwait's liberation, starting with the Battle of Al Khafji, the inaugural significant ground engagement of the Gulf War in January 1991.

Since then, the relationship between Qatar and Kuwait has maintained stability over an extended period. However, Kuwait's diplomatic intervention during the Gulf crisis marked a significant milestone, propelling this relationship to unprecedented heights and reshaping the histories of both nations. Kuwait's mediation efforts aimed at bridging divides and defusing tensions during the crisis, thereby averting the risk of military confrontation with Doha, have been widely lauded by both Qatari leadership and the public. Notably, Kuwait reaffirmed its [commitment](#) to hosting the 38th GCC Summit in Kuwait on December 5, 2017, with minimal representation and [only two](#) hosting heads of state: the Emirs of Kuwait and Qatar. Kuwait's support extended to

providing transit facilities for the Qatari people during the Gulf rift. During the daylong visit, both parties agreed to broaden the scope of bilateral trade relations and investments, which had [reached](#) \$1.94 billion by October 2023. Indeed, trade and investment between the two nations have witnessed a surge since the onset of the crisis. In 2017, a shipping line was [inaugurated](#) between Hamad Port and Kuwait's Shuwaikh Port to facilitate regular transport of goods between the two countries. The formal and public approach surrounding the visit of the Emir of Kuwait to Qatar clearly signal a notable elevation in bilateral relations following the Gulf crisis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recent Gulf tour of the Kuwaiti Emir Mishal underscore the intricate dynamics and the evolving diplomatic strategies of Kuwait under its new leadership. From the warm receptions in GCC capitals to the symbolic exchanges, each visit has offered significant perspective regarding consolidating the traditional Kuwait's foreign policy approach in the GCC region. Emir's last visit across the region will be to the UAE after the Holy month of Ramadan.

About the author

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