

KUWAIT UNIVERSITY LECTURE
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A BRITISH PERSPECTIVE OF
KUWAIT

By
Olga Maitland

Assallam alaikam – warahmato alla wabarakatoh

Peace to everybody – the grace of God and his blessings.

In the Old Testament Bible, the Book of Proverbs says: “There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.”

I would like to think that the bond, loyalty and friendship between my country, Great Britain and Kuwait is all of this.

HISTORY

Our links began with a common interest – trade; long before the fruits of oil development were even thought of. More than 200 years ago in 1793 the British Factory, a semi-official trading company moved temporarily to Kuwait to avoid problems in Basra which was under Ottoman control.

British Factory officials found a safe haven from pirate attacks in the thriving international trading port where ships from Europe, India and Arabia called. So began a flourishing trading relationship.

And out of trade, drinking coffee and breaking bread together personal friendships developed. They had after all mutual interests – both had suffered from piracy. The

Anglo-Maritime Truce was signed in 1841 for our two countries to work together countering the bandits and ensuring that long-distance trade could flourish.

This developed into a agreement in 1899 binding the two countries ever closer with the added responsibility of Britain committing herself to Kuwait's defence.

We sent a gunboat, the HMS Lapwing to prevent a naval attack from the Turks that year. More gunboats followed two years later. In 1920 British warships, planes and armoured cars went to the defence of Kuwait when threatened by the Ikhwan of Najd. Royal Marines landed in 1928 to give more support.

By 1961 it was felt that the 1899 Agreement needed updating. Kuwait was not after all, and never had been a colony. It was a proud, and highly independent country with a good ally in the British. Therefore together we drew up a mutual friendship agreement with all the same commitments. And indeed this too was amended in 1968 with an 'Exchange of Notes.'

To seal the friendship the Queen and Prince Philip made a State Visit to Kuwait in 1979. Government ministers make regular visits here, including Prime Ministers Mrs. Thatcher, John Major and Tony Blair – not to mention members of our Royal Family including Prince Charles, Princess Anne and the Duke of York.

GULF WAR

With such a history, it is not at all surprising that on the 2nd August 1990 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher holidaying in Colorado called up President George Bush, Sr. as soon as she saw the Iraqi tanks roll into Kuwait. It was a brutal attack on a country which threatened no-one – indeed the assault was all the more painful bearing in mind the support Kuwait had given during the Iraq/Iran War.

Typically Lady Thatcher telephoned President Bush, "Now don't go wobbly George. We have to act." To emphasize the point, she broke her holiday and flew to Washington.

Sadly she was never able to see it through personally. Prime Minister John Major her successor was quick to follow suit – and we were able to share your joy with the Liberation which took place in February 1991.

You do not need reminding that Britain sent 47,000 men to assist in the great fight back. We had to plunder all our reserves including stripping equipment in Germany in order to do so, but we were more than happy to do so.

There can never be a price on freedom. A Czech dissident Josef Josten jailed for many many years by the Communists said, 'You can never really value freedom, until you have lost it.' We did not hesitate to pledge our support to the cause of Kuwait's freedom.

MY INVOLMENT

But the Gulf War was not just about armies facing up to each other. It was about people, and how they responded.

I was on holiday with my family in Greece in August 1990 when I read of the massive build up by the Iraqis on the Kuwaiti border. Then there followed a phony and terrible silence. Assurances were sent out that Saddam Hussein had no intention of invading. Kuwait carried on its normal business, a threat to no-one.

Yet on August 2nd the tanks rolled in with 100,000 troops. From afar it looked brutal and determined. It was

only later that I would learn the very depths their depravity could sink to.

But from my perspective I could sense something else. We all had to join in. This was not just a fierce battle that the Kuwaiti people alone were fighting far away in their home land. I felt it was important that we should raise the public awareness in Britain that this invasion was ‘our’ war too, not just a matter of Government to Government.

I recall how the British press focussed almost entirely on the plight of British citizens in hiding in Kuwait. Many very brave Kuwaiti families at great risk to their own lives sheltered them in their homes; up in attics, in broom cupboards – protecting them from Iraqi soldiers determined to root them out.

There were many extraordinary examples of courage during those dark days.

But I knew that we in Britain had to think further than the fate of the hostages. I knew we had to rally the British people to support the idea of sending our forces down to Kuwait as participants in the rescue operation.

FREE KUWAIT CAMPAIGN

My first step was establish contact with the Free Kuwait Campaign. I was given an introduction and arrived at the Campaign's office in a large house in Bayswater.

The emotion in that house is hard to describe. It was always packed with people – Kuwaitis, men and women,

all wearing plain, sombre clothes – black polo necked sweaters being prevalent. And absolutely no jewellery at all! Not a sparkle. Not a ring.Nothing.

They had a bank of telephones, computers and television sets and were monitoring events from afar. CNN was on non-stop. Then carrying the news to the media – tv crews , radio journalists and pressmen poured in and out to be briefed.

Marlboro cigarettes did a lively trade, so too, Coca Cola cans – they were everywhere. A sign of the tension.

And as a backdrop were horrific, bloody photographs of recent victims of rape, torture and death. Then drawings were circulated by survivors. They were

unimagined horrors. I remember speaking to relatives of victims who were fortunate to survive and come home. It would be fair to say that I grew up in coming to terms with human depravity; let alone learning first hand of the sheer courage demonstrated by so many.

I have nothing but praise for the Free Kuwait Campaign. Everyone there was dedicated, efficient, rolling up their sleeves, making themselves useful. There was no ceremony. No protocol. Social status was not an issue. In fact so much so that it was only after the Liberation that I learnt the identity of many of the Free Kuwaitis Campaigners.

They organised one freezing day a march from the Embassy in Queens Gate down to Trafalgar Square. It took all morning and was then followed by a rally.

I was enormously proud to be among the first of British citizens to stand among you that day –shoulder to shoulder. And when my turn came at the microphone I said the British people had no hesitation about their sons flying out to Kuwait. ‘Our Johnny will suffer the same risks and fate as your Abdul’.

At that time British servicemen were being flown out to Kuwait – soldiers, airmen, sailors. Huge preparations were being made. Tornados flew low over Iraq on bombing missions paving the way for the land assault.

A few weeks later the Free Kuwait Campaign held a big rally in Hyde Park. It was still freezing, but everyone came. Up on the platform I was joined by Lord Howell now Foreign Affairs spokesman in the House of Lords.

They were anxious days. At that time Saddam Hussein was promising the ‘Mother of all Battles’. We had no idea what lay ahead – carnage or victory. What we did know is that Saddam had a vast army which he was willingly prepared to sacrifice.

I knew how vital it was to rally British public opinion. I took part in television and radio discussions. I also started a campaign through my own organisation then known as Families for Defence to support our servicemen; so that they knew we were all behind their endeavour.

Greetings cards companies sent me boxes and boxes of cards which we signed and sent out to the men in Kuwait. Their letters back were moving and appreciative. In short we were all in it together.

When the news of the deaths of our servicemen came through, we laid flowers on war memorials for them – including a ceremony at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. You see we shared with you the distress of losing a member of the family.

In St. Paul's Cathedral they prayed for peace at half hourly intervals.

But what irritated me were the arguments from the left-wing who suggested that because Kuwait was an oil state, she did not merit the international support she gathered. Why should an oil state be deprived of its lands

and its rights? On that argument the only states to enjoy the world's protection would be those with no natural resources at all.

In truth Kuwait was and is a sovereign state, a member of the United Nations. It was fully entitled to the full protection of international law.

Personally I had no faith at all in the idea that economic sanctions on Saddam Hussein would work. Diplomacy was given a chance but in the end there had to be firm action by the armed forces.. If the international will had not been there, Kuwait today would have remained utterly and completely destroyed.

If no action had been taken Kuwait would have been entitled to ask the world to consider the consequences of leaving Saddam victorious. Ultimately everyone would have suffered. There would have been a massive build up arms all round the Gulf. Almost certainly a huge permanent western army would have been stationed. And Saddam would not have stopped there. The threat to the wider international security was very real.

Mercifully when the big push came, it was over faster than we had ever dared hope. A price had to be paid. Among the British forces as we pushed forward in tanks and flew more scary low flying missions, 48 were killed. And on this point may I extend a thankyou for the support you have given those families. But of course that was not the end of it. The scars on Kuwait remained.

POWS

I was horrified to learn that 600 civilian Kuwaiti citizens were taken prisoner by the Iraqis, removed to jails in Iraq and then just disappeared. As you know they ranged from men in their 70s to teenagers – and some women.

On my first visit to Kuwait Shaikh Salem took me to visit the POW Committee and families who had lost fathers, husbands and sons. Today sons and daughters have grown up without the love and protection of their father. Many tears were shed from distressed mothers, wives and sisters. We hugged each other. The contact was important. For me it was enormously moving – and

somehow all the more terrible when a country which should have been rejoicing at their freedom, was still in deep mourning for those who either perished or failed to come home.

I must pay a real and heartfelt tribute to Shaikh Salem. For his drive, energy, commitment and experience ensured that these victims would never be forgotten. He became the embodiment of the spirit that drove the Kuwaiti National Committee for Missing and POW Affairs forward. He drove and inspired me as well.

At his request I was more than happy to be the British arm of the POW Committee. By that time I was a Member of Parliament. I organised the launch of the British committee at the Grosvenor House in London where our

then Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd made the keynote speech.

Other initiatives followed. We took the case to all our party political conferences, the Labour Party in Brighton, the Conservatives who met in Blackpool. I arranged meetings in the House of Commons for Shaikh Salem to meet Members of Parliament. At my instigation our former Sir Edward Heath intervened and contacted the Iraqi foreign minister Mr. Aziz.

In short I was able to make the case of the missing ones known to government ministers, in the House of Commons and to the public at large. It was important that the world did not forget there was still important unfinished business.

In proportionate terms, 600 missing Kuwaiti people are the equivalent of 57,000 British nationals, or quarter a million Americans. However you look at it, this is a vast figure, searingly hurtful for a nation – leaving a gap which can never be forgotten.

Our biggest effort was when Shaikh Salem and I organised a two day international conference in London attended by hundreds of people and addressed by Baroness Thatcher and President George Bush, Sr. All the leading names of the day were involved including General Sir Peter de la Billiere and our defence minister Sir Malcolm Rifkind.

On February 27th in the House of Lords, I have arranged a dinner to mark the Tenth Anniversary of the Liberation. I am proud that Shaikh Salem will be there as

our keynote speaker. He will be supported by General Patrick Cordingley who lead the armoured division during the War.

Ten years may seem a cruelly long time. It is natural to wonder if any good may come of our campaigns. But people should never despair. Families should note the experience of Iranian jet fighter General Hossein Lashkari, shot down by the Iraqis 1980, tortured, kept prisoner, survived a decade in solitary confinement and then suddenly released after 18 years. All this after Saddam Hussein had claimed he no longer held any prisoners. Families should never lose faith.

Ten years is a dangerous date. Unless we are careful, from now on the world will pass us by moving on to new horrors, new wars forgetting the victims of past ones.

This is where old friends are so important. It may be in my case, I will be of more use to you, in the event I win my campaign in the forthcoming General Election likely to be in May where I am fighting to win back the Parliamentary seat I lost in 1997

. I hope that fortune will smile on me, that I will be elected once again to Parliament and once again have the means to keep your concerns at the fore front.

In any case, I take pleasure in the knowledge that Britain as a nation, irrespective of which party is in government, holds our friendship in the highest regard.

These are not times to be complacent. To relax your guard would be highly dangerous. Vigilance is essential, and the will to act when threats do appear.

Hence the importance of our aircrews patrolling the skies in their Tornados based at Ali Al Salem air base keeping a watchful eye on events on the ground in Iraq.

There was no shadow of doubt in our minds to move fast as we did with Operation Desert Fox in 1998 when with the Americans we demonstrated that we can and will act where necessary to combat the threat Saddam poses.

And I have no hesitation in supporting the decision to bomb five radar sites in Iraq yesterday. It was a joint effort – six British Tornados took part alongside the Americans. The provocation from the Iraqis has been

building up for some time, firing surface to air missiles and anti-aircraft rockets at our planes policing the No Fly Zones. We tolerated a certain increase of activity, but last month these increased by ten-fold, creating a real threat to the aircrews. Enough was enough. President Bush acted, his first major decision since entering the White House. A clear message – don't mess with me.

We are quite determined that Iraq should be prevented from rebuilding an arsenal of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. We have seen the way he has used chemical weapons against his own people and threatening regional stability. A man such as Saddam Hussein – a detached and evil man who brutally strikes at humanity killing all before him, even members of his own family can

never be regarded as a rational man we can do business with. We can't. We never will.

We therefore have no choice but to be utterly resolute in our dealings. We have made it clear we will have no hesitation in taking action again if the Iraqi regime tries to do so, or if it tries once again to threaten Kuwait or its other neighbours.

I am therefore disappointed that Russia and China should condemn the bombing. They are quite happy to sit on the UN Security Council, receive its benefits, and call upon U support when it suits them

UK INPUT TODAY

We do take our responsibilities very seriously indeed. We have an active role as a member of the Tripartite Commission which meets periodically to review progress of the International Committee of the Red Cross (although at present Iraq refuses to participate.)

The 1992 UK-Kuwait Defence Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding is the under-pinning of our current day working relationship.

The provision of Joint Command and Staff training through the Kuwait Staff College which with British input has turned it into a college has made it much sought after by other GCC countries.

The ongoing work of the British Military Mission, the way our two armed forces continue to work together, live together, train and exercise together not only bring a new team spirit, but provide extremely valuable and practical experience of working alongside each other in operational environments. This harmony is so very important if our armed forces are ever called upon to work alongside each other again to counter an external threat.

Indeed British troops have had a continuous presence in Kuwait since the Liberation, and currently stand at almost 600 largely in support of the squadron of Tornado ground fighter bombers at Ali Al-Salem Air base. They are ready and vigilant for any Iraqi threat.

We are proud that our Desert warrior vehicles and the Starburst Air Defence Missile system is contributing to your defence.

At a business level around 60 British companies have offices in Kuwait and some 5,000 British expatriates work here. The Britain in Kuwait trade fair last year was an opportunity to take our business relationship forward.

Our oil companies make no secret of their willingness to help the Kuwait Oil Company update its technology, increase production and reduce costs.

SANCTIONS

Let me turn to the issue of sanctions. Britain has consistently said that all the UN Resolutions must be upheld. With a seat on the UN Security Council, and therefore a major voice, we have no hesitation in not only insisting that the international community pays full regard to the UN Resolutions but also to sanctions against Iraq.

This I have to say is no easy matter. The sanctions are not water tight. In fact they leak like an old sieve. There are appalling breaches in the sanctions.

Journalists witness every day oil tankers leaving Iraq, the profits of which go straight into the pockets of Saddam's cronies; the shops are overflowing with high grade luxury goods for government officials. A colleague of mine on the Daily Mail stood at the border crossing from Jordan into Iraq and saw a trailer loaded with a red high performance Rolls Royce – sale price £200,000 (Check Kuwaiti dinars) enroute to Baghdad for Udday Hussein. He has such a passion for these cars that there is a steady trail of them going through.

Those who trade with Iraq illegally bolster Saddam and contribute to his ability to ignore the international community. With no control over the illegal revenue, there is a strong risk of it going into his illegal arms programme. In any case we know that illegal oil revenue is spent on building new palaces, theme parks,, Saddam City is a massive luxury resort for Saddam's cronies, which contains stadiums, an amusement park, a safari park with deer and elephants grazing on lush vegetation grown with the latest irrigation systems.

For his birthday last year Saddam held spectacular celebrations. His birthday cake was three metres high. Its ingredients could have fed 100 orphans for 30 days. In a typical month Iraq imports over 300 m. cigarettes, 28,000 bottles of whisky, over 115,000 litres of beer, 40,000 litres

of vodka and 19,000 bottles of wine. By our estimate illegal exports of Iraqi oil outside the UN programme reached half a billion dollars last year.

Meanwhile what of the plight of the ordinary people who are desperate for the very basics of life, be it food or medicines. Why is it that despite the \$16b. permitted by the 'oil for food' programme the people's lifestyle becomes more desperate every year? Britain played an active role to ensure that the UN Security Council lifted the ceiling on the amount of oil Iraq can sell in order to buy food and medicines but the tragic plight of ordinary people continues.

Why is it that we still see pictures of malnourished and sick Iraqi children, pictures which rightly provoke our

sympathy and compassion? I feel angry for their suffering. With \$16b available under the Oil for Food programme Saddam has – three times the amount per head that every Egyptian spends on food and medicine every year – but it never reaches the desperate.

It is an outrage that the Iraqi government wilfully denies food and medicine to these children, and plays politics with their suffering.

It hopes that by doing so it can play on our emotions until we abandon the Security Council's resolutions and lift sanctions leaving Iraq free to redevelop its weapons of mass destruction and once more pose a threat to the region.

The abuses of the 'oil for food' regime makes your hair stand on end. We recently discovered hundreds of emergency asthma inhalers consigned to Iraq under the 'oil for food' on sale in Lebanon for the benefit of the Iraqi regime and its stooges. Right now there is over \$5b. in a UN account available for civilian goods if Iraq only ordered them.

Forgive me for dwelling so much on events in Iraq, but it has a purpose apart from shocking and angering you.

It is to stress how important it is not to allow natural humanitarian emotion to rule our heads when under pressure to relax our hold on both sanctions and UN Resolutions when faced with manipulative propaganda.

There has been considerable pressure by countries such as France and Russia to renew their old trading links. There is a mood among liberal minded people to say, the war was over ten years ago, people are suffering, it is time to move on and accept that Saddam is contained and we are now in a post war world. And in any case why continue to fret about the POWs – they must be all dead by now.

In my view such an attitude would be a grave mistake. For a start it would be defeatist. It would also signify that the right minded, law abiding peoples of this world have given up to aggression and evil.

Sanctions may not be perfect. They never are, but they carry a clear message that the world demands a law-abiding Iraq. They must respect its international

obligations. In any case, sanctions do work – at least partially, in containing the Iraqis. Without them they would have had a very free hand to act as they please – to the detriment of others, and certainly they would have increased serious instability in the region.

I am proud of the fact that the British Government is standing by the requirement that Iraq fulfills all its UN obligations be it for inspection of the its facilities for weapons of mass destruction or its requirement under UN Resolution 661 to return the POWs and other wise indicate exactly what did happen to those who perished.

We have no choice but to be utterly resolute and steadfast in pressing for the maintenance of sanctions and the upholding of UN Resolutions. Despite the huge

pressures, to do other wise would be a complete surrender to evil.

WOMEN

This is where I believe that the voice of all men – and women is required. No voice should be silent. No voice should be denied a platform to represent the views of the community.

Ever since I first encountered the hard working women in the Free Kuwait Campaign, I have been hugely impressed by their calibre. Hard working, dynamic, family minded, highly educated. Just what every country needs. Kuwait has a joyous well full of modest but able women highly capable in serving their country.

As a testament to that may as I may a tribute to Professor Dr. Rasha al Sabah. She is a worthy ambassador for her country, known and respected not only here but overseas.

By the same token you have many other high achievers. Take the Rector of the University Dr. Faiza Al-Khorafi and Her Excellency the Kuwaiti Ambassador to..... Women played brave and courageous roles during the occupation. They suffered torture and died like the men. At home they carry the heavy responsibility for nurturing the family.

They have however all one matter in common. None of them, no mother, daughter or sister has the vote yet in

Kuwait. I admire the Emir for proposing they should. A modern and forward thinking man. I trust that eventually wise counsel and courage will prevail among the Parliamentarians and they will grant the vote to women.

They should not fear the women. They should welcome them, as helpmates; to join in their deliberations. Kuwait is a beacon of modern government in the Gulf. Kuwait should continue to give leadership and include women in democratic decision making.

For me, it has been an enormous privilege to have served in my Parliament. I hope to do so again. And – inshallah – be able one day to welcome Kuwaiti women members of Parliament in London.

What is for sure is that our bonds and friendship stand strong and deeply enduring. I am here today among old friends – and new ones in the making.

When I look back on the past two hundred years, I have great pride in the knowledge that our bond took place when oil was not known, but respect for each other was held in the highest regard.

Time can never wither this. My only task is that we do not rest on our laurels, but regard today as just a step forward into the future. Holding hands and friendship together – keeping it fresh and alive, so that our children and grand children will ask of us, 'And what did you do next?'

Wassalam alaikam – waramato alla wabarakatoh