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## **The attitude of Sheikh Mubarak towards the development of the American role on Kuwait's territory, 1896–1915**

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This study aims to trace the early beginnings of one facet of Kuwait's international relations. It attempts to reveal the circumstances of this relationship between Kuwait and the United States during the reign of Sheik Mubarak Al-Sabah (1896–1915) and expounds this relationship through various axes.

### **Introduction**

There is no doubt that the vagueness that characterizes some eras in history is the greatest motive that drives scholars to try to explore and discover the causes of this vagueness. To us, the scholars of Kuwaiti history, Kuwait's international relations remain a rich subject to investigate in order to reveal its content, denotations, significance, and consequences, especially in those periods when the Gulf area began to acquire its position as one of the most important regions, in and around which there were conflict, priorities, and interests of many great colonial powers. Hence, these early ties, whether political, social or otherwise, set the basis for and played a clear role in Kuwait's foreign relations. This study aims to trace the early beginnings of one facet of Kuwait's international relations. It attempts to reveal the circumstances of this relationship between Kuwait and the United States during the reign of Sheik Mubarak Al-Sabah (1896–1915) and expounds this relationship through various axes:

- What is the nature of the relationship between the two parties, and was Mubarak's permission for Christian missions political or social?
- What is the effect of this relationship on the local powers and Kuwaiti society? And did it have an effect on the societal mobility?
- What are the most important consequences of this relationship in the light of the policy adopted by Mubarak at that time that was described by many people as a dual policy.
- Although Mubarak aimed at securing some interests for his emirate by signing a protection agreement with Great Britain in 1899 and accepting the status quo policy it adopted on his territories, he was often driven by different policies of a long-term political nature. This makes one wonder if allowing the Americans to work on his territory was aimed at confounding the British as he thought.
- Was the British presence an obstacle in the path of developing American–Kuwaiti relations, or did he not count much on them in the political field?

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- Did Mubarak try to invest this relationship politically, as he had invested it socially, in spite of the pressures he was exposed to? This explains why the American–Kuwaiti relations did not develop further in the era in question.
- As this relationship was largely limited to missionary activities and humanitarian aid, the question that can be raised here is how Mubarak, then ruler of Kuwait, could have ignored the United States. As a great power, it could have curbed the other powers if used properly, given the British fear of the United States stepping in and competing with its presence in the region.

Sheikh Mubarak's policy and his attempt to exploit the conflict of the existing powers to serve indirectly the interests of Kuwait could provide answers to these questions.

### US interest in the Arab Gulf region

For the United States, the Arab Gulf region was different from the Middle East, Latin America, and the Far East, as it did not pay due attention to it from the political and commercial point of view during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contrary to what it had done with other regions.<sup>1</sup>

It is argued that the oldest US interest in the Arab Gulf goes back to the first quarter of the nineteenth century, after some American merchants had managed to establish commercial ties with Masqat.<sup>2</sup>

However, the United States, which had no extensive activity in the Arab Gulf region, may have reluctantly and informally tried to do so. It introduced itself to the Arab Gulf region through Christian missions, but it soon became involved in its internal problems,<sup>3</sup> and accordingly the way in which it dealt with many of the Gulf countries and emirates was limited to the missionary and cultural affairs, which was an angle through which it saw the situations and affairs of the region.<sup>4</sup> In addition, since 1823, the influence of those missionary groups coming into the region became clear, but the British consuls who took care of the interests of those individuals sponsored this.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to this informal activity, voices of some political undertones called for securing the sponsorship by the government, which was then expressed by a military commander while helping their nationals working in some Arab countries, including the Arab Gulf countries.<sup>6</sup>

Thus we can say that the clearest contact in the Arab Gulf region and the Arabian Peninsula was the one practiced by merchants and missionaries in particular, though

<sup>1</sup>The American activity in the commercial area led to increasing US activity, especially in the Mediterranean region and to a great extent; Ahmad Abdel Rahim Mostafa, *The Arab–American Relations in the 19th Century* (Kuwait University, Thatussalassel 1978) 364.

<sup>2</sup>An American officer called Mahan described the region at that time as “rough and inhospitable”; Michael Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833–1992* (Al-Ahram Foundation, Egypt 1995) 11.

<sup>3</sup>The United States has entered consecutive phases of internal problems related to its development since its independence in 1776.

<sup>4</sup>Mohammad Mahmoud Al-Nairab, *Introduction to the History of the United States of America till 1877* (Dar Al-Thaqafa Al-Jadida, Cairo 1997).

<sup>5</sup>Especially in the crises they might encounter.

<sup>6</sup>In 1850, an American admiral sent a message to the US missionaries telling them that there was a frigate to secure their safety, provide them with supplies, and make sure they were safe; A.L. Tibawi, *American Interests in Syria, 1800–1901: a study of educational, literary and religious work* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1966) 128.

informally, especially in the areas they used as centers for their activities like Masqat<sup>7</sup> and neighboring countries. This shows that missionaries preferred carrying out their tasks in the region without the formal assistance of their governments<sup>8</sup> which were not interested in deepening this relationship, especially when the general policy of the United States towards the Arab Gulf region retained its traditional position based on noninterference in other people's affairs, which did not lead to providing political support to those efforts of either merchants or missionaries.

It seemed that the American politicians and generals perceived the nature of the distinguished position of Britain,<sup>9</sup> and accordingly there was no need for creating a conflict with it, since there were no political or commercial interests to be protected. But there was need for this later on,<sup>10</sup> especially in the wake of World War I during which the United States began establishing the foundations of its policy in the region. Even the American demands began to rise, calling for Britain to apply the open door policy. For American foreign policy, considerations of economic interest were more important than cultural interests and missionary activities. Thus, achieving national security required the presence of a diplomatic policy that gave priority to considerations of securing economic interests.

### Kuwait and the United States

The Emirate of Kuwait is located at the head of the Arab Gulf on the northeast side. The strategic location it occupied, in addition to the nature of its population and their knowledge of the principles of commerce and shipping, encouraged trade to flourish and secured stability, law and order there. Therefore, the Danish traveler Carsten Niebuhr in 1765 praised the Kuwaiti seamen, and said that the society there was constantly developing.<sup>11</sup> Kuwait was considered one of the most important caravan stations for travelers, which meant it enjoyed a degree of stability, especially in living and security affairs. This was emphasized by Knipphausen, Director of the Dutch East Indian Company in 1756,<sup>12</sup> and later by the American traveler Lowsher in his 1868 trip, as he referred to the hospitality and generosity of its ruler.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, all historical sources, old and contemporary, maintain that the Al-Sabah family had enjoyed from the very beginning durable stability during its successive

<sup>7</sup>Mostafa (n 1) 371.

<sup>8</sup>They received it from the British political agents.

<sup>9</sup>Mostafa (n 1), 3, 365.

<sup>10</sup>After the discovery of oil and the change in international political affairs, a shift in the power balance followed, especially after World Wars I and II. This situation created new interests related to American political and military presence in the Arab Gulf region, so much so that it became an inherent part of their politics. The matter became remarkably clear later when American bases were established in the region and thousands of troops were stationed on its territory. Moreover, some economies of those countries were tied to the American economy either directly or indirectly. This enhanced and extended the American influence in the region resulting in American–Gulf relations becoming the most important and remarkable motives of world politics in general.

<sup>11</sup>Najat Abdel Qader Al-Jassem Al-Khussossy, *A History of Ship Building in Kuwait* (The Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences 1982) 183–4; also Gamal Zakariya Qassem, *The Arab Gulf: A Study of the History Emirates in the Periods the First European Expansion* (Dar al-Arab Thought, Cairo 1985) 387.

<sup>12</sup>Khaled Saud Al-Zaid, *Kuwait in The Gulf Guide* (material collected from Lorimer, Gulf Guide, Kuwait 1981) 981.

<sup>13</sup>A Locher, *With Star and Crescent* (Aetna, Philadelphia, PA 1891) 65–63.

reigns, which helped to fulfill the interests of the emirate's society and population, as the political system they represented was based on the principle of *attaradi* (mutual consent) and *al mussawah wal shura* (equality and deliberation).<sup>14</sup>

A number of sheikhs from the Al-Sabah family had successively ruled Kuwait until the reign of Sheikh Mubarak (1896–1915) who was born in 1844. Before assuming power, he used to be responsible for retaining the security of the desert during the reign of his brother, Sheikh Mohammad (1892–96);<sup>15</sup> he then ruled alone in 1896 after making a coup d'état in which his two brothers, Sheik Mohammad and Sheikh Jarraah, were killed in 1896.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, the United States was still following its formal policy of non-interference in the region's affairs.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, some missionaries began to be interested in the region. On the other hand, the situation of American trade in the area had not made progress such as the missionaries who established themselves in the region and created opportunities for their presence in Gulf territory. The government of the United States did not favor interfering in the tangled issues there, while realizing the complicated situation of the Ottoman Empire and British influence, and without ignoring the problems between the Ottoman Empire and the Christian minorities, especially the Armenians.

The United States and its successive administrations of William McKinley (1897–1901), William Howard Taft (1909–13), and Woodrow Wilson (1913–21) introduced legislations and made important reforms in the economic sphere of the nation.<sup>17</sup> All these internal affairs might have reduced the ability of the governments to compete with Britain, with the exception of some informal and societal activities there. Nonetheless, the United States in 1898 was waging a war against a European country (Spain) and incurred casualties of 2446 killed soldiers;<sup>18</sup> hence, it was not reasonable to enter a new conflict.

Since its independence in 1776, the United States had been engaged in tasks mainly interested in what was relevant for the public good, concentrating on internal matters, and enhancing the American economy, without being involved in armed conflicts. Hence, most successive governments adopted policies suitable for internal American society and not for its foreign relations.

Therefore, the most significant threads of the relationship between Kuwait, in the reign of Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabbah, and the United States were embodied in the Christian missions with their cultural, medical, and educational tasks and services.

### Sheikh Mubarak and the Americans (caution and opposition)

The relationship between Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah and the American mission was not always good. Although the missionaries were not keen on interfering in the political or

<sup>14</sup>Sociologists Association, *An Anthology of Lectures of the 13th Season of Sociologists Association for 1995* (Sociologists Association Publ., Kuwait City 1985) 10–13.

<sup>15</sup>Youssef Ibn Eissa Al-Qenaei, *Pages from the History of Kuwait* (Press Government of Kuwait, Kuwait 1968) 25; Abdel Aziz Al-Rasheed, *A History of Kuwait* (Publications Library Home Life, Beirut 1971) 137.

<sup>16</sup>Dhafer Al-'Ajamy, *Kuwait's Army in the Reign of Mubarak Al-Sabbah 1896–1915* (I 1, d. N, Kuwait 2000) 55.

<sup>17</sup>Allan Nevins and Henry Steele Commager, *A Pocket History of the United States* (Arabic trans Mohammad Badr El Din, International House for Publishing and Distribution, Cairo 1990) 453.

<sup>18</sup>Claude Julien, *Dreaming and History: 200 Years of American History* (Arabic trans Nakhla Kallas, 2nd edn, Talass for Studies, Translation and Publishing, Damascus 1989) 277.

internal issues of Mubarak, it seemed that he did not welcome them in the first place. He might have been afraid that the presence of the Americans in his territory may result in relations between them and the British or any of the local governments, and this could create problems for him. However, it should not be forgotten that Mubarak might have considered what had happened in 1895 when chaos spread in the Ottoman Empire, missionaries were killed, and their possessions destroyed. At that time missionaries asked for reparations, but the government of the United States did not interfere politically in that affair.<sup>19</sup>

What reassured Mubarak in the first place was realizing that those missions were operating with the material and moral support of some churches in their countries without any formal coverage. He also knew that they did not achieve success in the areas adjacent to his territory, nor could they have a clear impact on the society, especially in the cultural and religious spheres.<sup>20</sup>

It may be considered that the most important beginnings of missionary activity in Kuwait were with the arrival of Samuel Zwemer and his team,<sup>21</sup> who landed in Bahrain harbor on December 7, 1892. He was among the earliest American missionaries who later played a great role in the missionary activity.

Sources mention that the first visit made by Zwemer to Kuwait was in 1896. It was followed by many visits,<sup>22</sup> but it is not known whether Zwemer met Mubarak, as the visit coincided with the most important event in the history of Kuwait since its establishment, i.e. the assassination of 1895.

Zwemer stayed in Kuwait for about a week and then left. James Mordike arrived some years later to visit Kuwait, but it is not known whether he met Mubarak. It is not clear whether there are indications that Mubarak was in coordinated contact with the members of those missions. However, there are some indications that there was an arrangement to rent the lot of the library opened by the missionaries in the main marketplace of the capital in 1903,<sup>23</sup> which means that somebody made those arrangements. In fact, this was approved by the ruler who controlled everything in his territory.

After starting the American activity through the library, Mubarak began to be aware of the effect of the introduction of cultures that were strange to his conservatively religious community. It can even be said that Mubarak might have felt that it was necessary to stop that cultural activity and the attempted preaching among the people of Kuwait and ordered the closing of the library and he told the Americans that they were *personae non grata* and asked them to leave.<sup>24</sup>

He might have been influenced in this incident by what had happened at the beginning of 1896 when the Ottoman government issued a decree asking all individuals

<sup>19</sup>The American President Cleveland declared clearly in his annual message to the Congress in February 1895 that non-interference tradition would not be violated; Thomas A Preson, *The US Diplomatic Relations with the Middle East from 1784 to 1975* (Arabic trans, Talass for Studies, Translation and Publishing, Damascus 1985) 29.

<sup>20</sup>Khaled Al-Bassam (trans), *Caravans: The Trips of the American Missionaries in the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula 1901–1921* (Sar Qortass, Kuwait 2000) 100.

<sup>21</sup>It may be some time before when dozens of British, French, and Dutch missions arrived; *ibid.*

11.

<sup>22</sup>Zobaida Ashkinani, *From the American's Window* (Dar Qortass, Kuwait City 1995) 4.

<sup>23</sup>Abdel Malek Al-Tamimy, *Missionary Activity in the Arab Gulf Region* (2nd edn, Dar Al-Shabab for Publishing, Translation and Distribution, Kuwait City 1982) 59.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*



participating in revolutionary activities to leave the country. This included the missionaries who were then distributing aid to the destitute.<sup>25</sup>

There might have been no justification for that position, but Mubarak feared the increasing missionary activity in his territory. It is clear that the opening of the library would not take place without his approval. Therefore, Mubarak might have seen that the activity of that American mission, which until then was only engaged in missionary activity and its simple complements, might make trouble because the natives rejected the ideas the missionaries were promoting.

On the other hand, the American mission's response to Mubarak's refusal to grant them permission to continue work in the library, and other facilities, was to turn to the British agent. Thus, they sent a message through the person in charge of the library asking him to help them to make an agreement with Mubarak about that issue.<sup>26</sup> Mubarak might have meant by his refusal to continue work in the library to show the Americans that it was he who could help them. Moreover, their presence on Kuwaiti territory was based on noninterference in its internal affairs, and not trying to impose any social reality inconsistent with the nature of the people of Kuwait and their adherence to their religion and Arab traditions.

Turning to the British consulate representative by members of the mission to settle the disagreement with Mubarak, while lacking any political cover provided by their government, was a clear proof that the United States was not until then willing to establish a serious political relationship with Kuwait. This issue was considered a diplomatic pressure card, though we do not see it this way.<sup>27</sup>

### Mubarak's permission for the Americans to work on Kuwaiti territory

The remarkable steps in the relationship between Kuwait and the Americans were clearer and more conspicuous in the social work, especially in the period following 1910. Mubarak had asked Dr. Binitt<sup>28</sup> to come to Kuwait after successfully curing his daughter while he was visiting his friend Sheikh Khaz'al Al-Ka'by (1897–1925), Emir of Al-Mohammarah.<sup>29</sup> Mubarak trusted Binitt after his successful operation and asked him to come and work in Kuwait. This incident might have been a milestone in the later development of the relations between Mubarak and the members of the mission, and it encouraged them to ask for building a hospital, which was approved easily by Mubarak who felt that there was an urgent need for efficient physicians to treat the population of his emirate. On this point, Dr. Stanley Mallory said that Mubarak was not shut off from average people and Bedouins in the desert,<sup>30</sup> which means that he was aware of the needs of the people of Kuwait, especially when the work of the mission began to appear more active in the medical field. In 1910 a plot

<sup>25</sup>Preson (n 19).

<sup>26</sup>It was traditional for American missionaries and members of the mission to turn to the British authority to solve problems wherever they stayed in the Gulf and to be under British protection.

<sup>27</sup>Protection and help were always granted to American missionaries in the region through the American agents or consulate there; Mostafa (n 1) 371.

<sup>28</sup>Dr. Binitt was a member of the mission.

<sup>29</sup>Moustafa Abdel-Qader Al-Najjar, *Arabstan Under the Reign of Sheikh Khaz'al Al-Ka'bi (1897–1925)* (Arab House for Encyclopedias i 1, Beirut 2009) 17; also Mohammad Al-Rumaihy (trans), *Pre-Oil Kuwait, Memoirs of Stanley Mallory* (2nd edn, Dar Qortass, Kuwait City 1997) 50.

<sup>30</sup>Al-Rumaihy (n 29) 50.

was allocated for the mission.<sup>31</sup> Then the members of the mission met Mubarak so repeatedly that some of them said they met him every morning.<sup>32</sup> Even in his absence, he ordered that they should be well received, as was the case with Dr. Bennings in 1910.<sup>33</sup>

This encouraged them to ask for permission from Mubarak to buy a plot in the west of Kuwait City to construct some buildings on it after the pattern of their stations in Bahrain and Basra.<sup>34</sup> The members of the American mission soon sent a committee to meet Mubarak and discuss the location of the hospital with him.<sup>35</sup>

It seems that Mubarak, after that long period through his reign, had no objection to the missionary work on his territory. He was convinced that this matter would not generate any political complexities then, while it would ensure special medical care for himself and his household.

Mubarak also realized the extent of British power in the region, and how they desperately strove to have influence in it. There is no doubt that he had previously known the American moves on the Persian side of the Gulf, which extended and reached the Ottoman Empire itself.<sup>36</sup> This indicates their reluctance to challenge the British on Kuwaiti territory, in spite of knowing that oil had flown in some nearby areas such as Solaimaniya Mosque and Al-Mohammarah.<sup>37</sup> Though it was incomprehensible to him, the Americans seemed to have no intension of challenging Britain to extend their influence to Kuwait, especially in the presence of the protection agreement.

It also seems that Mubarak aimed at benefiting militarily in his wars from the medical capacity of the American missionaries. The number of wounded soldiers in the wars waged by Mubarak steadily increased, which encouraged him to rent a house to the mission for five years. This was proposed by Mubarak himself in the political agent's office in Kuwait.<sup>38</sup>

Mubarak was encouraged by the American missionaries' commitment to relieve the difficulties arising from time to time, especially when they maintained that the mission's work would be independent of the Basra branch. The mission also pledged not to contact under any circumstances, directly or indirectly, the Turkish authorities or the consulate officials on the Turkish territories.<sup>39</sup>

After signing this commitment by the heads of the mission in Bahrain, the missionaries could continue their program in Kuwait at their new station, and with the Sheikh's approval they bought a plot to build a hospital and some other necessary buildings on it.

<sup>31</sup>Al-Bassam (n 20) 100.

<sup>32</sup>After arriving in Kuwait; Al-Bassam (n 20) 83.

<sup>33</sup>Mubarak issued his orders to prepare a room in his palace where to receive the mission members; *ibid.* 99.

<sup>34</sup>Bahrain was the second country in importance for missionary work. Thus, many American missionaries and travel caravans started to arrive; *ibid.* 81.

<sup>35</sup>The formation committee was comprised of John van Esse and Arthus Bennet; Al-Rumaihy (n 29) 54.

<sup>36</sup>In 1909–10, retired General Colby Chester, of the Association of American Companies, negotiated with Constantinople for the privileges of the railroad, mining, and oil. An American Company, Standard of Oil, actually got a license to search for oil in Anadol and Palestine; Palmer (n 2) 21.

<sup>37</sup>In the year 1908.

<sup>38</sup>Al-Bassam (n 20) 102.

<sup>39</sup>Al-Tamimy (n 23) 62.



The formal attitude, represented by Mubarak, encountered some opposition to the activities of those missions. He realized that some notables among the natives disapproved of their presence, as they were afraid that missionary thought might effuse among the simple people of Kuwait. They even tried, with Mubarak's knowledge, to thwart the work of its American members and resist them,<sup>40</sup> especially when some of them believed that the medical services provided by the hospital would have a direct religious impact on the inhabitants.

### **Between the Americans and Kuwaiti society: policy of mixing cards**

For Mubarak, the powerful ruler, that opposition did not matter. He was convinced that there was no influence on the religious side of Kuwait's people.<sup>41</sup> Being aware of the truth of what the people were doing,<sup>42</sup> Mubarak showed more sympathy with the natives in their attempt to blockade what the Americans were doing on Kuwaiti territory. He largely supported establishing a charity organization that was launched in 1912. This organization tried to provide some medical services for the Kuwaiti people, as well as a measure of knowledge by collecting books and making them available for the Kuwaitis. The headquarters of this organization consisted of two floors; the ground floor was dedicated to the students and the library, the second floor was for a physician and a pharmacy. The Kuwaiti people provided donations for the construction of the building.<sup>43</sup> Leaflets were distributed asking donors to contribute to funding that project,<sup>44</sup> and Mubarak himself donated Rs5000.<sup>45</sup> The charity consisted of:

- The Clinic: it was the first civil clinic. It hired a Turkish physician from Basra to treat patients. It also hired a pharmacist, and the charity brought the necessary medications and equipment.<sup>46</sup>
- The school: the charity hired Sheikh Mohammad Ashanqity<sup>47</sup> for preaching and guidance, and he also supervised teaching the illiterate how to read and write.<sup>48</sup>

Mubarak, who did not favor that civil trend, issued an order to expatriate the physician and to expel Ashanqity. Thus the charity was shut down.<sup>49</sup>

We can fairly say that Mubarak who welcomed the civil role played by the Americans did not on the other hand hinder the work of the charity. The expulsion of the Turkish physician and Ashanqity was for reasons that had nothing to do with foreign pressures; Ashanqity instigated the people against Mubarak.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Seif Marzouq Al-Shamlan, *Famous Men from Kuwait: Farhan Ibn Fahd Al-Khaled* (Kuwait 1985) 20–1.

<sup>41</sup>Ashkinani (n 22) 19.

<sup>42</sup>Al-Shamlan (n 40) 20–1.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. 39.

<sup>44</sup>Farhan Al-Fahd Al-Khodair, revised by Abdel Aziz Al-Rasheed, comments by Ya'qoub Abdel Aziz Al-Rasheed; Al-Rasheed (n 15) 374.

<sup>45</sup>Hussein Khalaf Al-Sheikh Khaz'al, *The Political History of Kuwait* (Library of Dar Al Hilal, Beirut 1965) 296.

<sup>46</sup>Abdullah Al-Nouri, *The Story of Education in Kuwait in Half a Century* (Thatussalassel) 95.

<sup>47</sup>Ashanqity is considered one of the most important enlightenment figures in Kuwait at that period; Al-Sheikh Khaz'al (n 45) 258.

<sup>48</sup>Al-Rasheed (n 15) 373.

<sup>49</sup>Al-Sheikh Khaz'al (n 45) 296.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid. 258.

### **Mubarak's allusion to an American role in the presence of the British**

There is no doubt that the British authorities felt uneasy about the mission's activity and its close ties with Mubarak. Britain saw that the educational or health services they provided, though scanty, might lead to stronger social or political ties that could affect its position in Kuwait. Thus the British tended to suspect everything related to the activity of the mission or its relationship with Mubarak. In fact, Mubarak might have over-bidden on the American missionaries and physicians for that relationship. When the problem of increasing the hospital area of land took place and Mubarak made an appointment for measuring the plot again, he also invited the British Political Agent to attend this appointment. After measuring the plot, Mubarak gave a significant speech in which he said, "I have lived up to my commitment to sell or rent lands to foreigners. You remember the German committee and their attempt to build railway roads." He finally said, addressing the Americans, "Those are not diplomats or politicians or merchants. They are building a hospital, and I will give them the land anyhow."<sup>51</sup> It was not a coincidence that Mubarak mentioned his negotiations with the Germans to build a railway in front of the British and the Americans. It is very probable that he wished to send a message to the British telling them that he had genuine pressure cards. He did that in public and in a speech, to which he himself had invited the natives to listen.<sup>52</sup> The Americans had already had a foothold on his territory, though it was preceded by attempts by the Germans and even the Russians.<sup>53</sup>

It is also improbable that Mubarak, in the presence of the British, referred to his negotiations with the Germans without knowing the consequences of that act. He even sent a message to the Americans telling them that he was willing to build a strong relationship with them if they wished, and he was able to do so. In front of Britain's representative on his territory he granted them a foothold, though under the disguise of a civil work.

Thus, Mubarak allowed the mission to stay and continue its activity over those years. That relationship might have played a role in the failure of the missionary process itself, as the natives viewed any political work or approach to Mubarak by the Americans as targeting the concentration of more interests for themselves on Kuwaiti soil, which they rejected.

### **Mubarak helped the Americans to provide medical and educational services in Kuwait (away from any political complications)**

The medical field had many privileges of which the most important is the psychological effect it had on society. In addition to the dire need of the Kuwaiti people for physicians and hospitals, there had to be a genuine health education, which they clearly found with

<sup>51</sup>Nour Al-Habashi, *The Story of the American Hospital in Kuwait* (Center for Research and Darsat Kuwaiti 2006) 27; also Ashkinani (n 22) 22.

<sup>52</sup>Ashkinani (n 22) 22.

<sup>53</sup>The Russian commercial interests constituted their most important base for their movements in Kuwait and the Arab Gulf region in general. Russian financiers and businessmen were largely interested in the political situations because they realized that the economic penetration based on carrying out great projects would give Russia a massive commercial presence hindering English trade in the Gulf, which was competing with Russian goods basically; Russian Foreign Policy Archives (Persian Division), File 4064, the review of the meeting of establishing direct commercial relations with the Arab Gulf harbors, from Bondarweski, *Kuwait and Its Relations During the Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century*, translated by Maher, safety (Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, Kuwait 1994) 218.

the members of the mission, as the physicians and the members of the American mission had medical means better than those of local therapists.

The Americans seriously began their medical activity after Mubarak's permission to open the hospital.<sup>54</sup> The American hospital was one of the early instances of American civil aid. It was opened in 1913, and the first physicians who worked there were Binitt, Eleanor Calverley, and Mary Allsen.<sup>55</sup>

It seems that the political attitudes of Kuwait and Mubarak, as well as the conflict taking place between the great colonial powers led by Britain and Germany, did not allow the United States or Mubarak to develop their relationship further. The American government was keen on maintaining its policy of non-interference, which made the framework of the relationship limited to missionary work and simple medical and educational assistance.

The fact remains that no historical sources proved any tangible signs of any political relations between Mubarak and the Americans through their governmental or diplomatic representatives. Most of the work done by the Americans revolved around services provided by members of the Christian missions.

After Dr. Binitt had started treatment in the early period in one of Mubarak houses, the hospital<sup>56</sup> was the culmination of the relationship between Kuwait and the United States.<sup>57</sup>

Success in treating and curing many people made Kuwaiti society view its services with satisfaction. A lot of people went to the hospital to be treated. Its Director, Mallory, said, "People began to be used to going to hospital. All this was supported and encouraged by Sheik Mubarak."<sup>58</sup>

In the educational field, the American mission tried to start its educational activity in Kuwait after Kuwaiti society became largely used to the satisfactory medical services provided. Therefore, the mission decided in 1913 to prepare for the opening of a school in the American hospital of the mission, but it later decided to open it in the house of a native person rather than the hospital. The school started with twelve pupils who learned English and Arabic. The members of the missions depended a lot on the work of the school. However, strong religious opposition among Kuwaitis led to the shutdown of the school and the pupils stopped attending it.

It can be presumed that Al-Mubarakiyah, one of the first schools to open in Kuwait, aimed basically at blockading the work of those American missions in the educational field, following the experience of the charity in the medical field. The idea of establishing the school emerged in 1910 during a party in the *dewan* of Youssef Ibn Eissa Al-Qenae'i, when most of the merchants and notables attending offered donations to the school. Mubarak vowed to provide money for the school, as well as to recruit teachers for it.

<sup>54</sup>In fact, the clash that took place between it and those powers started with opening its first missionary station in Basra at a time when the relationships between the different powers were complicated and difficult. The domestic and world powers entered an acute conflict to control the region. Russia began to attempt to create interests for itself. The Germans, with the support of the Ottoman Empire, began to promote commercial activities and building a railway. The conflict between Britain and the Ottoman Empire, which were among the main great powers in the region, began to be more acute.

<sup>55</sup>The Center for Kuwaiti Research and Studies, *A History of Education in Kuwait* (Center for Research and Darsat Kuwait-a. Abdulaziz Hussein et al., Kuwait City 2002) 125–6.

<sup>56</sup>Its Director was Stanley Mallory; Al-Habashi (n 51) 23.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid. 22.

<sup>58</sup>Al-Rumaihy (n 29) 73.

### Why American–Kuwaiti relations were limited to missionary activities in the reign of Mubarak

In 1900, the American Organization declared that there were 29 missions, 162 missionaries and 200 national assistants in the Ottoman Empire. The missionaries and other members of those missions were connected to many services in parts of the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the main complaint of those men was still the inaction of American diplomats in protecting the interests of the missions.<sup>59</sup> Hence, it can be stated that Kuwaiti–American relations in the reign of Mubarak did not develop, not because of domestic or societal obstacles, or even because Mubarak rejected their work on his territory, but rather because the US government at the time did not want further rapprochement with Kuwait. The Americans, who suffered much from the complaints of their missions' members in some countries where they functioned, had to ask for British diplomatic protection and suffered much from the indifference of the American diplomats.<sup>60</sup>

Mubarak sought also to benefit from the presence of the Americans on his territory away from the civil work. However, this never materialized into mutual political interests. Some report that Mubarak once sent an American physician to Ibn Saud's camp to treat his patients<sup>61</sup> as a sign of goodwill between Mubarak and Ibn Saud.

It is clear that the United States could always maintain its non-alignment with Kuwait. Although building the hospital represented the most important sign of a continued relationship between the two parties, it cannot be denied that this relationship did not go beyond societal and missionary work. The roles played by the Americans on Kuwaiti territory, and even their relationship with Mubarak, do not show clearly that the US government made Kuwait one of its priorities in the region.<sup>62</sup>

Until the early 1900s, most of what the US government provided for its missionaries and physicians in Kuwait was either financial or moral support. This proves that the development of US policy towards Kuwait in 1896–1915 had not yet shown signs of the form it took after the end of World War I.

This may be the answer to one of the questions set forth by this study: was there any political relationship between Mubarak and the United States? Nevertheless, it is alleged that there were political dimensions to missionary activity, and that they were seriously related to US foreign policy.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, the missionaries' work in Kuwait and their contacts with Mubarak cannot be considered to be on par with any political relationship between two states. The missionaries were working in Kuwait as missionaries and not as American citizens. They even turned to the British authorities to remove the obstacles that confronted them. Mubarak himself threatened to expel them and to annul all agreements whereby they had tried to build the hospital.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, the American–Kuwaiti relationship in 1896–1915 never exceeded medical and educational assistance. One cannot call it at all a political relationship or even a diplomatic representation of any kind. In general, the American policy towards

<sup>59</sup>After President William McKinley had assumed power in 1897, Ottoman–American relations were tense and the Sultan agreed to pay damages for the missionaries only in 1899; Preson (n 19).

<sup>60</sup>Ibid. 29.

<sup>61</sup>Al-Rumaihy (n 29) 82.

<sup>62</sup>Askinany, *From the window of Alammerakane* (Zubaydah Ashkanani, Dar Dar Qortass 1995) 15, though a missionary in Kuwait said that there were funds allocated in the treasury in New York.

<sup>63</sup>Al-Tamimy (n 23).

<sup>64</sup>Askinany (n 62) 18.

Kuwait and the Gulf in general at that time was not based on any economic, religious, cultural or military motives.

America at that time was driven – in formulating its policies towards any state in the world – by its interests that were based on motives, calculations, and domestic interests. The long reign of Mubarak was contemporary with more than three American administrations. Historical sources do not mention any political relationship or any correspondence between the two parties implying any intentions to boost bilateral relations as with neighboring countries such as the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and other countries.

Nevertheless, the American–Kuwaiti contact in Mubarak’s reign ensured some matters that constituted a sound basis for a strong relationship that has survived until the present time.

It can be said that Mubarak ensured for the Americans their informal presence on his territory. Because of the protection they enjoyed, missionaries and physicians continued to work in a safe atmosphere, especially in the medical field. However, that relationship was tainted by some caution on the side of the British authorities. That was natural, as the British constituted the almost sole power that completely dominated Kuwaiti politics regarding the international affairs affecting their interests, although the United States’ attitude towards some areas like Masqat was not so.

What helped the Americans most to work in Kuwait could have been their close relationship with Mubarak and the ruling family through the medical services they rendered to them, which gradually became indispensable, especially as such service were not available in the region.

As a result, missionaries acquired the land for building the hospital in addition to donations from Mubarak. The Americans staying in Kuwait had to be very cautious when understanding natives’ attitudes so as not to incite trouble for the ruler with his people’s traditional rulers. Some people believed that missionary work was dangerous, and that the government had to combat it. However, the rulers did not share the same feeling as they believed it was difficult to influence the natives and convert them to Christianity. However, Mubarak managed to convince the people that they were actually in need of the medical services rendered by the missionaries.

It was unfortunate for the Americans in Kuwait that they began their activity on Kuwaiti territory at the same time as when Western powers like Russia, Germany, and the Ottoman Empire were trying to find a foothold there. Political relations between the US government and Mubarak might have evolved under better conditions and reality. Mubarak had the courage to request an agreement ensuring more stability and security for himself and his emirate, such as what had happened in 1899 with Britain.<sup>65</sup> As shown by confidential Russian documents, Mubarak himself asked Russia to sign a similar agreement, in line with his repeated attempts to benefit from the power struggle.<sup>66</sup> There is no doubt that Mubarak was not seriously prepared for the presence of any power on Kuwaiti soil, or for his emirate to be a possible field for military clashes between colonial powers, whatever they were. He tried to adapt the events to his interests. If the Americans or any other power had a role, he tried

<sup>65</sup>The Protection Agreement (1899) is considered one of the most prominent international documents of the then Kuwait Emirate. That agreement was annulled when Britain recognized Kuwait’s independence in 1961; Quoting Bhundarevski, *Kuwait and international relations During the Nineteenth Century and Early Twentieth Century*, translated by Maher, safety (Center for Research and Studies on Kuwait, Kuwait 1994).

<sup>66</sup>Russian Foreign Policy Archives, the Embassy in Constantinople, file 1245, 201–02. Document no. 2, from Bondarweski (n 55) 457, appx 2.

to benefit from it as much as possible. Under the conflict that was taking place, the international conditions did not allow Mubarak to move domestically away from the orbit of British politics. Therefore, he tried to benefit as much as possible from any power offering assistance, even in the civil or societal field, as in the case of the Americans. He welcomed any rival power to relieve the pressure on his emirate. Through those relations with the members of the mission, Mubarak could declare that Kuwait had other options that it could choose at any time, although they looked ineffective. The American rapprochements to other countries near Kuwait, such as Iran and the Ottoman Empire, centered on the commercial and economic fields. This might have cautiously reassured Mubarak not to fear the Americans, and relieved his concerns, or even encouraged him not to break his commitments in the British protection agreement and to give the land to the Americans to build their hospital. It can also be stated that the lack of political conflict between the United States and Britain on Kuwaiti soil largely facilitated the work of those American missions.

An objective evaluation of the Kuwaiti–American relationship in the period in question maintains that Mubarak did not realize the importance of the United States as a political power. Of course, this was not a result of political miscalculation. The United States itself, until then, surely had not realized the importance of Kuwait in the Gulf region, contrary to what the other powers thought.

There is no doubt that interest in the American missions was not a priority on the agendas of the American administrations in Kuwait at that time. When the economic interests began to reach the ears of the American administration later on, these missionary groups received the attention of American diplomats, especially in 1920–45. During the 1920s, American diplomats used the open door policy to provide access to oil sources in the Middle East for American oilmen. The era of both World Wars was a watershed in the relationship between Kuwait and the United States, as mutual interests had already materialized after Mubarak's reign and the emergence of oil as a weapon.

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Americans tried to find a foothold for themselves in Kuwait. They sought to do that in various ways, but were met with civil resistance at the beginning, which they later overcame and coexisted with. Mubarak was never an obstacle in the path of the American presence on Kuwaiti soil after he realized the need of Kuwaiti society for individuals with the same medical efficiency as the American physicians.

Although the United States and Kuwait failed to translate their relationship into more than simple medical or educational assistance, they always retained a reasonable amount of social continuity that they developed later in the following decades. The United States became the greatest international power supporting Kuwaiti foreign policy in different fields. This proves that international politics change according to strategies and rules made by people and leaders endowed with the ability to lead the nation in the worst conditions and the hardest times.

It may be useful to show that the most important consequence of those relations was the presence of an untraditional social activity, especially in the medical field, which was greatly beneficial to the Kuwaitis.

The study showed that Mubarak Al-Sabbah, while complying with his agreement with Britain, did not count much on any real political American role in his territory. Although he looked keen on the presence of that relationship, it appears that he set his eyes on that relationship being mainly centered on societal and medical services.