



## German-Kuwaiti Relations: From Their Beginning To The Reunification Of Germany

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*This article discusses the development of German-Kuwaiti relations from the late eighteenth century to the reunification of Germany.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1752, the Al Sabah family from central Arabia established a trading post in the Persian Gulf. Shortly after Sabah bin Jabir was elected as the first emir in 1756, Europeans discovered "the Little Fort."

The German explorer Carsten Niebuhr mapped it as "Koueit" in 1772, referring to it as "A township a three-day trip away" from Zubair.<sup>2</sup>

Another German explorer, Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, mentioned a British trading post there, while geographer Karl Ritter marked Kuwait's land in 1818.<sup>3</sup> Travelers also recorded religious conflict in the region, such as disputes in Karbala and Najaf between Shi'a, who had roots in Kuwait, and Sunnis.

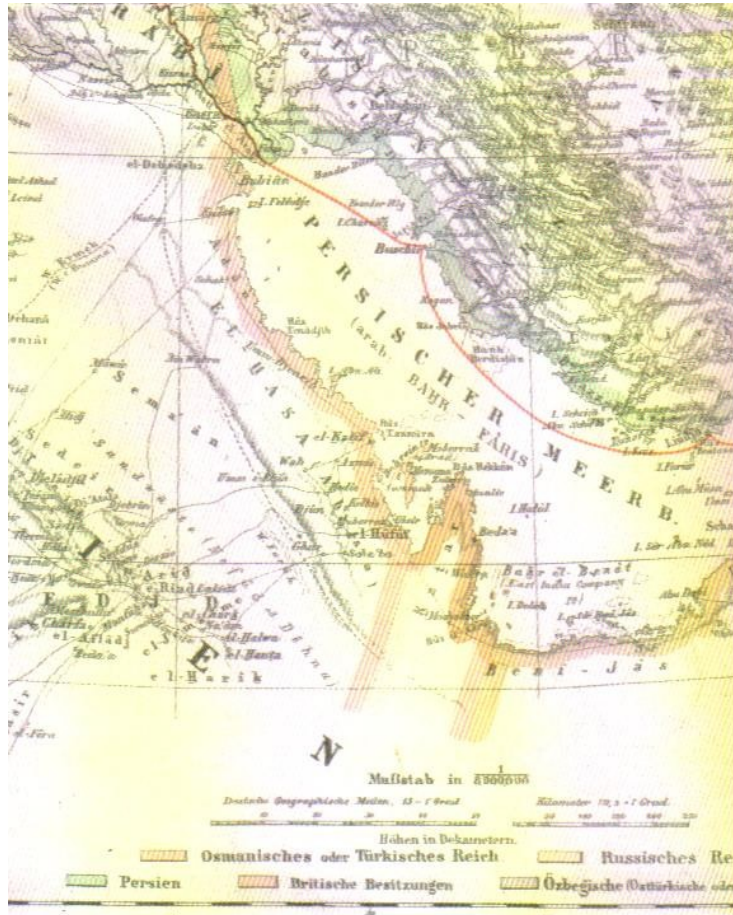
The headquarters of the British East India Company were, in 1821, relocated from Basra, Iraq, to Kuwait, then part of the declining Ottoman Empire, being ruled from the governorate of Baghdad and later, from 1884, from Basra.<sup>4</sup>

Kuwait's economic activities included fishing, pearls, spice and other caravan trading to the Gulf, shipping along the East African coastline--from Zanzibar to India--and ship construction, including *dhau* sailboats.

Soon the sailors also faced competition with steamboats. Steamers, for instance, transported horses from Basra to India. This was a good deal for the British East India Line, wrote the traveler Max Freiherr von Oppenheim.

Oppenheim, a future German diplomat, had traveled from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, passing through Kuwait, which he called on his 1893 map, "Kuet."

Oppenheim also wrote of how members of the Saud family had taken refuge in Kuwait on numerous occasions--after the Egyptians drove them out of the Wahhabi al-Dir'iyya, Mecca, and Medina in 1818, and again in 1871.<sup>5</sup>



**German explorer and future diplomat Max von Oppenheim traveled from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf in 1893 (route in red). He marked "Kuet" as a "British Territory of the Ottoman Empire." Source: Max von Oppenheim's Diary Vol. II (Berlin: 1899)**

## BEFORE WORLD WAR I

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 led to competing railway projects in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The British tried to secure their lines of communication both by sea and by taking over lands on the way. Egypt was occupied by the British in 1882 and Sudan in 1898. In 1904, Captain S.G. Knox was made British political resident of Kuwait.

During the Ottoman *tanzimat* era provincial governments were reformed as well beginning in 1853. Thus, "in 1870 Sheikh Abdallah Al Sabah accepted a contract as district director of Kuwait in Basra Province, with assurances of self-rule and exemption from taxes."<sup>6</sup>

In 1899, the Germans began regular shipping from Hamburg to the Mediterranean with the German Levante Line, thus promoting exploration of the land bridge toward India via Iraqi Mesopotamia and Iran. Oppenheim's journal also speaks of German entrepreneurs in Mesopotamia, Jewish and Christian quarters in Arab towns, Islamic fanaticism, steamers, railways, and the Europeanization of Asia. The three decades preceding World War I could be considered the founding years of German Middle East activity.

Oppenheim, for example, noted that in 1884 Karl Richard established a German consulate in Baghdad, where some 50 Europeans were living. British Consul-General Colonel Edward Mockler<sup>7</sup> was political resident for the Indian government there. The Russians and Americans also had consulates in Baghdad, considered a center of the Ottoman Empire with many governmental and commercial connections to Kuwait and the Gulf.<sup>8</sup>

During this time, Berlin also pursued commercial penetration of the Ottoman Empire. Kaiser Wilhelm II. visited the region twice, once in 1889 and again in 1898. With each visit, Berlin advanced obtaining the right to build railroads there.<sup>9</sup> In December 1899, an agreement on the Baghdad railroad was concluded between the speaker of the Deutsche Bank, Georg von Siemens, and Ottoman Minister Zihni Pasha.<sup>10</sup>

The kaiser, who had launched his Islam policy the year before, foresaw a network of railroads that connected Central Europe and the Middle East as a strategic tool, a profitable investment, and an important stabilizing factor for the Ottoman Empire.

London, suspicious of these developments and hoping to prevent its rivals from penetrating India, concluded a secret agreement with the ruler of Kuwait on January 23, 1899.<sup>11</sup> The British had learned that German planners wanted to extend the railroad from Basra to the Kuwaiti port of Kazima.

Thus, a German railway commission visited Shaikh Mubarak Ibn Sabah in September 1899. Sabah, however, opposed the line and refused to sell or rent part of his land, which, according to previous agreement, he was not allowed to do without first consulting with the British political resident in Kuwait, Malcolm John Meade.<sup>12</sup>

The Germans, however, were optimistic that they could get Sabah change his mind, at least through Ottoman influence:

*There are 25,000 inhabitants living in Kuwait. Their Arab ruler shaikh Mubarak is only nominally a subject of the Ottomans. The locals are fisherman. A couple of thousand boats swing in the port. Many Kuwaitis are engaged in pearl-diving and Gulf trade. They make a good living and enjoy some wealth.*

*The port town of Kazima belongs to shaikh Mubarak. There is no doubt that it belongs to the Ottomans. And it would be easy for them to realize their interests by force. This does not seem to be necessary though, for shaikh Mubarak recognizes the sultan not only as his godly but also as his worldly lord.<sup>13</sup>*

Like shaikh Mubarak, the British too opposed the railroad. While the main British concern was growing German power, Sabah's worry was that the railroad would let the Ottomans exercise more power over him.

The Ottomans in Basra had indeed made territorial claims over Kuwait, considering it part of the Ottoman Empire. The Kuwaitis and the British argued that it was better to transport goods via ship rather than by rail. Eventually, however, during the years preceding World War I, cooperation was established between the British and the Germans, with the Germans bringing some British into the management of the railway company.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, one element of German policy was starting to think of the potential of Islam as a political tool, considering the possibility--having seen the mahdi's revolt in Sudan and the rise of pan-Islamic thinking--that an Islamic revolt in India would lead to the downfall of the British there. In an extensive report from Cairo on pan-Islamism and the *jihadization* of Islam in 1898, Max von Oppenheim advised the kaiser that in a future European war, raising such a revolution in the colonial hinterland of Germany's enemies would be a good tactic.

German explorer Hermann Burchardt, who was received in 1903 by shaikh Mubarak during his travels in the Gulf region, described the shaikh as "unusually well informed" and majestic.<sup>15</sup> As Berlin pushed ahead with its "peaceful penetration" of the Ottoman Empire, the British-French Entente Cordiale took actions to block these advances.



**The explorer Hermann Burchardt's photograph of shaikh Mubarak Ibn Sabah, December 6, 1903, in Kuwait.**

In 1907, Kuwait's neighbor, Iran, was divided into a northern zone under Russian influence and a southern zone under British influence. In 1909, the British founded the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company in their area. Four years later, the British secured potential Kuwaiti oil fields.<sup>16</sup> That same year an Anglo-Ottoman agreement recognized Kuwait as an autonomous entity, an effort in which Sir Percy Cox, the British Persian Gulf resident, participated. Cox worked to block German ventures, especially in Iraq and Iran. On November 3, 1914, Great Britain recognized Kuwait as an independent state under British protection.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, the Germans had no colonies in the Middle East, instead favoring a policy of economic penetration. They argued that there was a "natural alliance of interests" between the Germans, Ottomans, and Arabs, in contrast to British imperialism.<sup>18</sup>

They realized that Kuwait's shaikh, however, would never turn in a war against his Ottoman masters, ask a Christian power for help in doing so, or obtain support from his subjects for any such action.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, as British-German relations cooled and World War I approached, the British were able to block strong relations between Germany and Kuwait.

## **ADVERSARIES IN THE GREAT WAR**

Mubarak Ibn Sabah became Kuwait's ruler in 1896. Having spent his youth in Mumbai, India, he had had close contact with the British, with whom he sided in World War I.<sup>20</sup> The kaiser sided with the Ottomans.

The Saudis, who Mubarak had helped twelve years earlier to capture the city of Riyadh, also sided with the British. Some Arab tribes, led by Sharif Husain Ibn Ali of Mecca, joined forces with the British against the Ottomans and the Germans. Oppenheim warned of the danger the Saudis and Kuwaitis posed to the Ottoman sultan-caliph.<sup>21</sup>

The Germans watched unhappily as the Ottoman Empire disintegrated. The kaiser's circles regarded "Islamic fanaticism" and "anti-Christian brotherhoods" in Islamic lands as a way to help the Ottomans survive, by mobilizing support from their subjects against the British, and to raise revolts in British colonies.

Baron Max von Oppenheim forwarded to the kaiser a detailed extensive plan for "revolutionizing our enemies' hinterland."<sup>22</sup> Turks and Arabs were to be reunited as Muslims through Islamic war propaganda and jihadi revolts in British India and Arabia, French North Africa, and Russian Asia. Oppenheim's secret plan also declared oil installations as legitimate war targets.<sup>23</sup>

In order to secure the railroad from Berlin via Istanbul to Aleppo, Oppenheim suggested replacing Syrian Christian engineers, train workers, and station officials with Germans, Turks, and Austrians and also to ensure the workers' good behavior "by the threat of punishments against their family members."<sup>24</sup> In addition, Oppenheim established 75 propaganda centers--called "reading rooms"--throughout the Ottoman Empire.

Yet like Sharif Husain of Mecca, the Sabah family followed the British lead rather than the Ottoman one. In 1915, Mubarak Ibn Sabah died and his successors, first Jabir and then in 1917, Salim, continued to side with the allies, though the British were somewhat irritated by their trading with the Ottoman enemy.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Kuwait served as a refuge for fighters from both sides who entered its territory at will.<sup>26</sup>

German agents arrived in Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala, Tehran, and Bushir hoping to turn the Shi'a against the British. Men such as Oskar Ritter von Niedermayer, Werner Otto von Hentig, and Friedrich Klein traveled through Iraq and Iran to Afghanistan seeking to stir revolution there and into India. In Shiraz in southern Iran, Wilhelm Wassmuss attempted to turn the tribes against the British. Despite the Ottoman and German advanced into Iraq and Iran in 1916 and 1918, respectively, the Kuwaitis were more concerned with local tribes and border disputes.<sup>27</sup> Some claimed that jihad was about to destroy the British empire.<sup>28</sup>

The British knew about these efforts, for instance describing how Oppenheim himself had preached jihad in Beirut and Damascus.<sup>29</sup> After joining the war as a British ally on April 6, 1917, the United States gathered information on German plans as well.<sup>30</sup>

## **THE INTERWAR PERIOD**

Following its defeat in World War I, Berlin saw the Middle East as a very secondary area for its policy.<sup>31</sup> In order to travel by train from Baghdad to Basra or Kuwait, a British visa had to be obtained in advance. London was even suspicious of Arab alumni at German universities, viewing them as a potential fifth column.<sup>32</sup> In 1920 and 1921, London became the mandatory power for Palestine and Iraq, respectively. The British made Kuwait an independent shaikhdom under their protectorate. At the 1922 Uqair Conference, held by London's high commissioner in Iraq, Sir Percy Cox, Kuwait lost part of its land to the Saudis, and a neutral zone was established.

Within Kuwait, the Kuwaiti Council Movement called for the election of officials and for power-sharing with the ruler. Eventually, a legislative Majlis was established in mid-1938 but lasted a mere six months. In March 1939, the Consultative Council was founded, made up of four shaikhs from the Sabahs and nine notables.<sup>33</sup> It too was short-lived.

During the interwar period Kuwait experienced difficult times. Tensions between the Sabah and Saudi rulers led to economic hardship. From 1923 to 1937, the Saudi emir, Abd al-Aziz, imposed a boycott on Kuwait over taxation disputes.

In 1932, Iraq gained independence from the British, and Saudi Arabia became a unified kingdom. Berlin established commercial and diplomatic relations with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

The two decades of stagnation and depression following World War I finally came to an end. The Kuwait Oil Company was established in 1934 and, four years later, explorers discovered the Burqan oil field<sup>34</sup>--though commercial production only began some twelve years later.

## **ARABS, JEWS, AND HITLER**

For Germany, however, the region remained a secondary priority.<sup>35</sup> When Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, he left the Middle East to London, Paris, and Rome for some years. He allowed some 60,000 Jews in the Haavera(Transfer)-Agreement to emigrate to Palestine.

Nevertheless, contacts between Germans and Kuwaitis did exist. Berlin's ambassador to Baghdad and later to Saudi Arabia, Fritz Grobba, closely followed developments in Kuwait. In 1938, he reported of the aspirations of some Arab tribes to establish the *United Arab Shaikdoms* as a union of the smaller states under Saudi leadership. The idea, however, was rejected by London, much to King Abd al-Aziz's disappointment.

As the Germans received reports on the situation in Kuwait, so Kuwaitis were informed by other Arabs of developments with the Nazis. Germany and Saudi Arabia had had a treaty of friendship since 1929, which led to full diplomatic representation in 1939.

That year, the German chancellor received Saudi envoy Khalid Abu al-Walid Al Hud. Hitler spoke to him of his "warm sympathy for Arabs" and explained that the Germans had no territorial claims in the Middle East. He further argued they had a mutual enemy--the Jews--whom they must fight together.

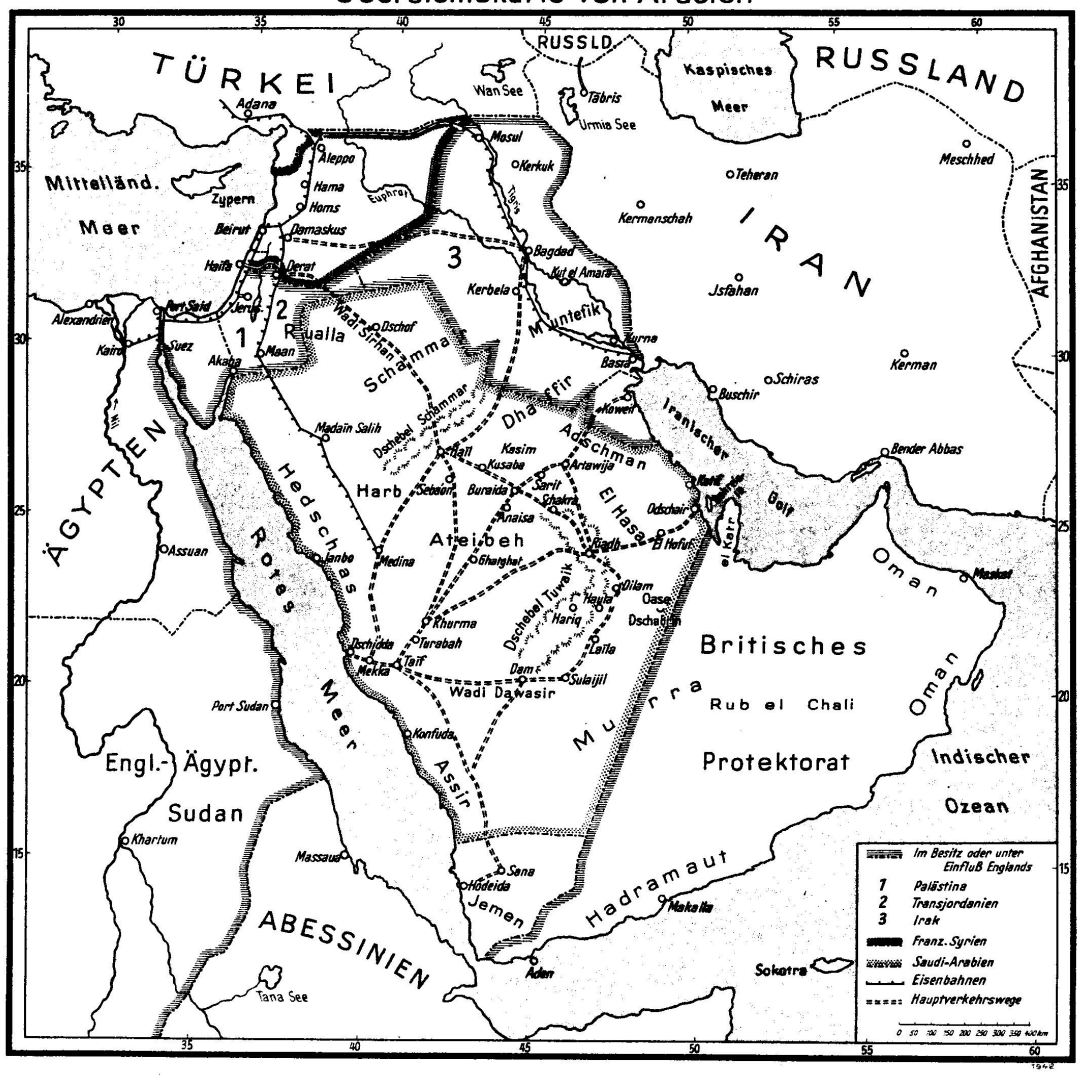
Hitler stressed that he would not stop until the last Jew was driven out of his own country. Khalid, referring to the prophet Muhammad as a great religious leader and statesman, told of how Muhammad had driven the Jews out of Arabia. Adolf Hitler's response promised support.

There was also talk of an arms' deal. At Hitler's Berghof retreat they discussed Khalid's idea of what would have happened in Europe if it had been conquered by the Muslims. They spoke of how Islam would have flourished there, "filled with Germanic spirit and dynamism."<sup>36</sup>

What Hitler did not tell his Arab visitor was that while he adored what he called "Islamic fanaticism," he disliked Max von Oppenheim's jihad idea, preferring to put his trust in Germany's own military might and distrusted "oppressed nations" who he saw as having "racial inferiority."<sup>37</sup>

While religious hatred of Jews had existed in the Middle East for ages, Hitler's racial antisemitism added a new dimension. Some were quick to adopt such ideas, including Grand Mufti of Palestine Amin al-Husaini and Iraqi Prime Minister Rashid Ali al-Kailani. Amin al-Husaini had already offered his services to Berlin right after the Nazis came to power.

## Übersichtskarte von Arabien



A 1939 German map of Arabia, marking Kuwait as a British possession

The mufti's aides also approached the Nazis. For example, in 1937, Sa'id Fatah Imam, leader of the Arab Club in Damascus, proposed German radio broadcasts to the Middle East. Two years later, Berlin began airing Arabic programs on six transmitters. Imam also forwarded the mufti's draft for an agreement suggesting joint propaganda centers in the region--an allusion to Oppenheim's World War I jihad network. Amin al-Husaini expressed his readiness to spread Nazi ideology and organization in Muslim Arab regions. He also suggested fighting Communism, the boycott of Jewish goods, and "acts of terror."<sup>38</sup>

In turn, Berlin would support Amin al-Husaini both ideologically and materially, recognizing the Arab liberation movement and providing weapons to fight the Jewish national homeland in Palestine. In addition to the mufti, Hitler's Nazism inspired many among the young Middle Eastern elites. In Damascus, for instance, the founders of the Ba'th movement, including Zaki al-Arsuzi, Michel Aflaq, and Salah al-Din al-Bitar adored Hitler.

Sami al-Jundi wrote: "We were racist admirers of Nazism and among the first to suggest the translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*."<sup>39</sup> In Cairo, King Faruq and officers, including Anwar as-Sadat, also sided with the Nazis in order to drive out the British.

Hitler was aware of the importance of creating disunity in the enemy's homeland through the media and by creating fifth columns. However, throughout World War II, the Middle East remained a side theater for Hitler. Only after the fall of Moscow did he plan to deal with the region directly. Still, he supported the anti-British coup by Rashid Ali al-Kailani in Baghdad and the mufti. When the British overthrew Rashid Ali al-Kailani, he invited both men to Berlin, where the grand mufti was received with all honors in his chancellery. There, in November 1941, Hitler explained to him that he would also ask "every non-European people to solve their Jewish problem" and would persecute the Jews in all the Middle East areas under British influence.



**1942: The mufti and Muslim soldiers in Berlin (over half a million served with Germans)**

In Berlin, as German troops advanced to the Suez Canal, Amin al-Husaini soon called for jihad against the allied forces and the Jews. He suggested an Arab Legion, enlisted Muslims for the Nazis, planned revolts in the Middle East, and tried to block the rescue of Jews from Europe to Palestine.

From 1942, the United States was also placed on his target list. In his "martyr speech," he called for all Arabs to rise against the Anglo-Americans, claiming they were puppets of the Jews. He described the British and Americans as Jewish ruled cosmic evils who are by race and nature the arch enemies of the Arabs and their liberation.<sup>40</sup>

Amin al-Husaini met with chief Holocaust technician Adolf Eichmann to discuss "the Jewish question in Europe." The mufti was so impressed that he asked for an advisor, a confidant of Eichmann, to help him take care of the Jews in Palestine after an Axis victory.<sup>41</sup>

As General Erwin Rommel's troops advanced into Egypt in mid-1942, a commando was ready to liquidate the Jews first of Cairo and later of Palestine following their projected capture by German forces. Meanwhile, Rashid Ali al-Kailani asked to visit a concentration camp to see how those methods could be applied in Iraq. In mid-1942, four Arabs from Rashid Ali al-Kailani and Amin al-Husaini's entourage visited a camp near Berlin where a gas chamber was in use.

In his radio addresses, the mufti mixed religious and racial hatred of Jews.<sup>42</sup> He underscored that Muslims and Nazis had much in common, the Arabs being "natural allies of the Germans." Hitler felt the same way.<sup>43</sup>



According to the mufti the fight was against "world Jewry as the arch-enemy of Islam." Germans were also the enemies of the British, French, and Soviets, and behind all of them were the Jews. According to Amin al-Husaini's memoirs, in 1943, Holocaust mastermind Heinrich Himmler secretly told him that some three million Jews had already been eliminated.<sup>44</sup>

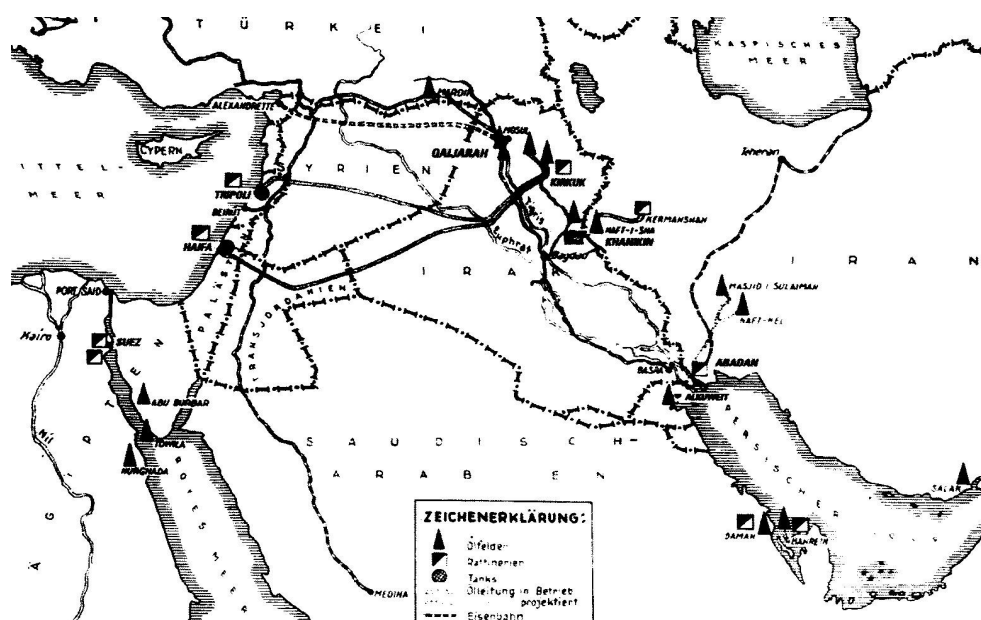
## MIDDLE EASTERN OIL

In 1942, the Germans began drafting war plans for Arabia and the Persian Gulf. After the fall of Soviet Russia the strategy was to institute a "pliers operation," one arm through Egypt and the other via the Caucasus into the Arab-Iranian area. Some tribes hated the Pahlevis and the Soviets; thus the Nazis took advantage of this to instigate revolts. In Iran, they installed a network of agents under Bernhardt Schulze-Holthus to work for a German-friendly regime.<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, the mufti called upon the Arabs to revolt against the British, explaining that if Germany was successful in seizing control of Egypt, the British would also be defeated in Palestine, Transjordan, and Syria. Rashid Ali al-Kailani had already asked that Kuwait be made future Iraqi territory and secured Benito Mussolini's consens for this annexation.<sup>46</sup> Berlin, however, felt that the Abadan oil fields of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company should remain in Iran but a pipeline would carry oil to Iraq that Berlin and Rome would share, as with the oil of Mosul.<sup>47</sup>

The Nazi leadership was composed of two factions concerning the Middle East. The first regarded Middle Eastern oil as very important for the German war machine and for their future empire. This group sent several envoys to the Middle East, including Fritz Grobba and navy commander Karl Doenitz, as well as officers from the ministries of warfare and economy.

Members of the second group viewed Middle Eastern oil as something to be denied to the enemy, as a war target to be destroyed, but not urgent for Berlin's warfare. Hitler, who relied on oil from Romania and hoped to obtain oil from Soviet Azerbaijan, belonged to this latter group. A special report advised blocking the Suez Canal and oil pipelines from Kirkuk via Haifa to Tripoli so that British would have no fuel in the Eastern Mediterranean. The report noted that an oil delivery from Kuwait to this area would be nearly impossible, as the British needed it in Iraq. Rather they would have to rely on small oil deliveries from Egypt (see map below).



A 1942 German map of Middle East oilfields, including Kuwait, showing oil pipelines.

On the other hand, the report claimed that Iraqi oil was only a supplemental source for the British, but it would soon become the main source for the Axis powers in the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. Thus, military action should be taken to secure those oil reservoirs.<sup>48</sup> Two months later, in May 1941, the British crushed Rashid Ali al-Kailani's coup in Iraq. The second half of 1942 marked a turning point. If not for Allied forces landing in North Africa and the Soviet victories in Stalingrad and the Caucasus, the Germans would have invaded the countries neighboring Kuwait and Kuwait would have been likely annexed by Iraq.

If the Nazis had come out victorious they would have established an Arab union of states including Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Transjordan, and the small shaikhdoms like Kuwait. Adolf Hitler would have implemented a Holocaust of all Jews in the Middle East, as discussed with the mufti and supported by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini.<sup>49</sup>

## **THE TWO GERMANIES**

Following its defeat in World War II, Germany was split into two countries: East Germany (with East Berlin as the capital) and West Germany (with Bonn as the capital). The division of East and West Germany marked the new European conflict between the Soviet influenced East bloc (based on the Warsaw Pact Organization) and the liberal West aligned with NATO.

Kuwait gained independence on June 19, 1961, when the Cold War was in full swing, as manifest by the building of the Berlin Wall that same year. The East Germans followed the Kremlin's foreign policy line, while West Germany pursued Washington's Middle East policy. Both German states expected the Arabs to side with them, each regarding itself as the only legitimate German actor in foreign affairs.

Kuwaiti rulers decided on neutrality to keep the Cold War out of their area. Unlike in the past, Kuwait's foreign policy was gaining significant importance due to its expanding economy. In 1946, Shaikh Ahmad turned on the oil tap. By 1952, the country had become the largest oil exporter in the Gulf. Kuwait attracted investments and foreign workers, among them Palestinians. In 1961, Kuwait also joined the Arab League.

During the early 1960s, Egyptian President Jamal Abd an-Nasir introduced Arab socialism in Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. With the nationalization of foreign capital came a growing influence from Moscow and its allies in East Berlin on Kuwait. In 1963, diplomatic relations were established between the Sabah rulers and Moscow. Bonn had a consulate in Kuwait since November 4, 1963, and, on May 13, 1965, they announced the intention to establish full diplomatic relations.

East Germany now waged a campaign of its own. In March 1965, Abd an-Nasir received East Berlin's head of state, Walter Ulbricht, in Cairo. Ulbricht also took the occasion to establish official relations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), under Ahmad ash-Shuqairi. Since Bonn had threatened other countries with a boycott should they establish full diplomatic relations with East Berlin, it now punished Cairo by canceling economic aid and announcing full recognition of Israel. In turn, Egypt and nine other Arab states severed ties with Bonn. Kuwait was among them.

Following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Bonn looked for alternatives to ease a threatened oil embargo by Kuwait, Iraq, Libya, and others. It thus agreed on new oil deliveries from the United States and Venezuela, though at 51 cents a barrel this oil was far more expensive than Middle Eastern oil, only 15 cents a barrel.

During the same period, Syrian leaders proposed a bargain with East Germany in which it would help in wiping out Israel in exchange for full recognition by all Arabs. The East Germans rejected this offer but did supply weapons in the period leading up to the 1967 war.<sup>50</sup> After the Arab defeat, however, at a Warsaw Pact meeting Ulbricht successfully proposed that five Soviet satellite states sever ties with Israel. Politicians in Bonn viewed this move as the Kremlin's attempt to radicalize the Arabs and distance them from America and the West.

Meanwhile, Kuwait employed 25,000 Palestinians, some of whom, under Yasir Arafat's leadership, founded the Fatah group. East Berlin, on the other hand, denounced Israel as an imperialist force in the Middle East,<sup>51</sup> thus gaining points with Kuwaitis. The first East Germans from the Chamber of Commerce visited Kuwait in 1968. In early 1970, East Berlin established a trade representation in Kuwait City, which was elevated to a Consulate-General, inaugurated by Walter Issleib in April 1971. Finally, on December 18, 1972, Kuwait simultaneously established full diplomatic relations with both Germanies.<sup>52</sup>

## **HONECKER AND ARAFAT**

In October 1982, after the Iranian revolution and in the midst of the Iran-Iraq War, East German Head of State Erich Honecker visited Kuwait. The war was a tremendous threat to Kuwait, which had helped initiate the Gulf Cooperation Council as part of its response.<sup>53</sup> East Berlin now had a greater motive for tightening relations with Kuwait, since Moscow had raised the price of its oil exports in 1982 to the international market value. East Berlin looked for new sources, but Kuwait's oil was too rich in sulfides for East German refineries.

Honecker stressed to the Kuwaitis his country's anti-Israel credentials. He claimed that it was only the Warsaw Treaty Organization that had saved East Germany from a similar fate to that of the Palestinians. He also said he had told West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt: "One cannot be friends with the Israelis and the Arabs as well." Israel, he said, was an illegitimate state armed with money from Bonn under the guise of compensation for the Jews.

He also announced to Crown Prince Sa'ad Abdallah that East Germany was raising the PLO representation in East Berlin to a full embassy. The crown prince replied that the Kuwaitis knew East Berlin was helping the Arabs and Palestinians. As a small country, Kuwait was against use of force, with the exception of defending the rights of the Palestinians. The same day, Honecker met with Arafat in Kuwait, assuring him of East Germany's continued support.<sup>54</sup>



**Arafat, Honecker met in Kuwait and cooperated in Middle East affairs for two decades**

A year after East Berlin's diplomatic breakthrough in 1969, it delivered arms and ammunition for 5,000 soldiers of the pro-Syrian PLO as-Sa'iqa group.<sup>55</sup> There is also evidence that terrorists were armed by East Berlin to carry out attacks against Israelis and Jews in the following two decades, through Syria, the PLO, and European terrorist groups.

## **FAILED VENTURES**

Politicians in East Berlin viewed Kuwait as the gate to the Gulf region as well as a source of loans and investments. Kuwait gave the East German Foreign Trade Bank a \$22 million loan in 1978 and \$100 million in February 1987.

Kuwaitis participated in the Leipzig trade fair, hoping to enter the Soviet bloc's markets. East Berlin also exported machinery and medical training equipment to Kuwait in addition to offering educational programs for Kuwaiti students. Still, in the 1980s, Kuwait-East German trade was only one-quarter of that between Kuwait and West Germany.

Moreover, attempts to establish joint ventures failed. There were problems regarding ownership, profit sharing, and currency transfer from the closed East German market to the world markets. Following Honecker's visit to Kuwait, his ambassador there, Arne C. Seifert, complained about the many bureaucratic hurdles. According to Seifert, Kuwaitis felt that the East Germans did not know enough about the world market and considered the East German market as insecure.

As the Soviet Union and Soviet bloc simultaneously opened up and declined in the late 1980s there were new efforts at economic cooperation, including joint investment projects. One idea was for Kuwait to replace Soviet oil deliveries to India, South Asia, and Yemen, while Moscow was to take over Kuwaiti oil deliveries to Western Europe. None of these projects came to fruition.

Meanwhile, Kuwait was gaining a large surplus of currency from its more successful economic relations with Bonn. This money was used to invest in Volkswagen and other large West German companies.

Despite their turbulent relationship, Bonn remained Kuwait's third largest trade partner (after the United States and Great Britain). In addition to economic ties, other ties, including political and cultural, were established on a large scale. While the Kuwaitis also cultivated their somewhat narrow relations with East Berlin, inter-German competition in Kuwait continued to demonstrate the potential of an open, democratic society in Bonn versus the limits of a closed dictatorial order in East Berlin

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, East and West Germany were once again unified. The lucky and democratic Germans did not hesitate to side with Kuwait during the coalition war against Iraq shortly thereafter.<sup>56</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Updated and adapted from the author's articles: Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, "[Al-Alaqaat as-Siyasiyya Baina Almaniya wa al-Kuwait](#)," [Political Relations between Kuwait and Germany] in Abd ar-Rasul Ali al-Musa (ed.), *Qira'at Fi Jughrafiyya al-Kuwait Wa Jumhuriyya Almaniya al-Ittihadiyya* [Readings in Geography of Kuwait and the Federal Republic of Germany]. (Damascus: Khatawat Lil-Nashr wa at-Tausi', 2007), pp. 121-31, Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, *Staatsfalke, Reichsadler und Ährenkranz: deutsch-kuwaitische Beziehungen* (Leipzig: Comparativ, 2006), Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 104-25.
- <sup>2</sup> Carsten Niebuhr, *Beschrijving van Arabie* (Kopenhagen: 1772); Ben J. Slot, *The Origins of Kuwait* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 103-05.
- <sup>3</sup> Ahmad Mustafa Abu Hakima, *The Modern History of Kuwait, 1750-1965* (Montreal: McGill, 1982), p. 119.
- <sup>4</sup> Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, *Vom Mittelmeer zum Persischen Golf durch den Hauran, die Syrische Wüste und Mesopotamien* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2004), II, map 281.
- <sup>5</sup> M. Şükrü Hanioğlu: A Brief History Of The Late Ottoman Empire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 12-13.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- <sup>7</sup> Oppenheim, pp. 259-60.
- <sup>8</sup> Frauke Heard-Bey, *From Trucial States to United Arab Emirates* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 279.
- <sup>9</sup> Friedrich Scherer, *Adler und Halbmond. Bismarck und der Orient 1878-1990* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001), pp. 490-508.
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