Kuwait Promises It Will Be 'The Last Arab State' to Normalize Relations with Israel

by Hugh Fitzgerald

In all the flurry of delight expressed both in Israel and the United Arab Emirates over their just-announced "normalization of ties," and the widespread speculation over which Arab countries might be next to follow the UAE's lead — will it be Bahrain, Oman, Morocco, Sudan, Saudi Arabia? — the greatest anger at the UAE's move has been expressed not by Arab states, but rather, by the non-Arab Iran and Turkey. Those two countries are outraged by the UAE's actions. Iran has

threatened the UAE directly, claiming it "will be made to pay" for its betrayal of the Palestinian cause. It's a threat that makes the UAE even more certain it has done the right thing in tightening its alliance with Israel, a friend indeed when it comes to defending against their common enemy, the mad mullahs of Tehran.

One Arab state has stood out, however, in insisting it will be "the last" Arab country to "normalize" relations with Israel. That county is Kuwait. In Kuwait, all the major political parties have joined in denouncing the UAE for recognizing Israel and normalizing its relations with it, describing the step as "treason" and "a crime against Palestine, its people, and the Arab and Muslim nation."

According to their statement, the Kuwaiti parties have claimed that such a step by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was taken "as the Zionist entity persists in its criminal practices against the Palestinian people, whether through direct or indirect aggression, arresting and humiliating the Palestinians, stealing their lands, desecrating the Aqsa Mosque, building settlements and displacing the local residents, amidst utter Arab silence except for limited faint voices."

The parties also said they unequivocally reject the normalization step taken by the UAE leadership, calling it "unjustified and useless to its people and the Arab and Muslim nations."

Kuwait's history with the Palestinians would not have suggested such loyalty to the Palestinian cause. When Saddam Hussein's troops invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the PLO endorsed the Iraqi move. There were 440,000 Palestinians in Kuwait when the fighting began. During the conflict and seven-month Iraqi occupation that followed, 200,000 Palestinians left Kuwait to get out of the way of the fighting. But when the Americans chased the Iraqi troops halfway to Baghdad, and

the conflict had ended in Kuwait, the Kuwaiti government refused to allow those 200,000 Palestinians back into the country. Furthermore, of the 220,000 Palestinians who had remained in Kuwait, 200,000 were expelled by the Kuwaitis, who accused them of "betrayal" because their putative leader, Yassir Arafat, had approved of the Iraqi invasion, and because many of them did indeed welcome the Iraqi troops. For several decades the relations between Kuwaitis and Palestinians remained poor.

It is not really loyalty to the Palestinians alone, or even mainly, that explains Kuwait's current insistence that it will be "the last" Arab state to normalize relations with Israel. Rather, there are several reasons for Kuwait's attitude. Having treated the Palestinians so roughly, in expelling 400,000 of a total of 420,000, some Kuwaitis may be feeling remorse, and are determined to show their support for the Palestinians today. But even more important is Kuwait's friendliness with, and unusual human ties to, Iran. Many Kuwaitis are the descendants of Iranian traders and merchants who since the late 18th century have been steadily moving to Kuwait to improve their prospects; some continued to marry fellow Iranians, while others intermarried with the local Arabs, but retained, and passed down to their children, their sense of an Iranian identity; this human link has not been forgotten.

When Saudi Arabia and the UAE organized a land, sea, and air blockade of Qatar to punish it for its continuing friendly ties with Iran and for its support of the Muslim Brotherhood, Kuwait refused to take part. Kuwait continues, too, to maintain diplomatic and trade ties with Iran, despite the disapproval of all the other Gulf states, save for Qatar.

In expressing its intention to be the "the last" to normalize relations with Israel, Kuwait has in mind not only, or even mainly, the desires of the Palestinians, but rather, the desires of the Islamic Republic of Iran that has made the

"cause of Palestine" – and the concomitant need to destroy Israel – its own. Kuwaitis of Iranian descent, many of them very well off, provide a unique human link to Iran. The extensive trade that has for so long been carried on between Kuwaiti and Iranian merchants and businessmen continues, despite what the other Gulf Arabs want. This does not mean that Kuwaitis, even Shi'a Kuwaitis, approve of Iran, or of the Supreme Leader. They do not. But some have blood ties that link them not to the despised regime, but to the people of Iran. These are different things.

And there is one more reason for Kuwait to toe Iran's party line against the "normalization" of relations with Israel. That reason is fear. Kuwait is much smaller, and without anything like the armed strength, in men and materiel, that both Saudi Arabia and the UAE possess. It has already experienced one invasion – that by Saddam Hussein – that demonstrated just how easy it was to take over the country. It took Saddam Hussein's forces only two days to conquer all of Kuwait. Iran's military is now many times more powerful than Iraq's forces were when they entered Kuwait in August 1990; such a conquest by Iran would take its army a day.

Kuwait does not dare to deviate from Iran's policies. It needs to march in lockstep with its mighty neighbor across the Gulf. When Iran denounces the UAE for its "betrayal of the Palestinian cause," Kuwaitis know they must go and do likewise. And they do.

First published in