



Britannia Rejected?

The British Council and Cultural Diplomacy in Kuwait, 1955-1961

By Gerald Power

This article offers a brief overview of the British Council in Kuwait between 1955 until Kuwaiti independence six years later. It shows that the Council faced formidable obstacles on its mission of cultivating cultural and educational links between Kuwait and the UK, but that a combination of astute policies and an urgent local need for high-level skills and education resulted in impressive achievements: Kuwaiti independence was not a cultural rejection of Britain.

The British Council was established in the Arab Gulf in 1955—an outcome of the British Foreign Office's growing appreciation of the economic importance of the region. It was not an easy posting. A constant problem was the high proportion of foreign Arabs, mostly Egyptians, employed locally as teachers, administrators and in other professions. Recruited by a rapidly-developing state in dire need of expertise, these men were supporters of President Nasser of Egypt and the Arab Nationalist vision which he so fervently propounded. Unsurprisingly, many of them regarded Britain with suspicion or outright hostility.

The preponderance of Egyptians in the teaching profession was a potent tool in the propagation of Arab Nationalism and anti-Western sentiment, but there were other reasons why Kuwaitis resented the import of British

culture. The ruling Al-Sabah family was steadily moving towards political disengagement from the UK and was keen to assert Kuwait as culturally independent and staunchly Arab. Additionally, the expanding middle class – the chief target of the Council's educational services – were enthusiastic Arab Nationalists; many were impatient with the slow pace of domestic political reform and saw the 'imperialistic' British as the underlying cause of continued Al-Sabah authoritarianism.

Anti-British sentiment in Kuwait was most visible during the Suez Crisis, as Kuwaitis took to the streets in protest at this latest act of 'imperialism.' John Muir, then the Council Representative in Kuwait, wrote confidentially to London in November 1956 that 'It is impossible to say how far H.M.G.'s action has put me back and it may have done the Coun-

cil prospects irreparable harm.' Long after Suez negative perceptions of Britain and its culture lingered. This was partly due to Britain's 'imperialist' image, partly to its continuing military and economic ties to the country. Muir also asserted bluntly that 'Some of the ideas for which we stand, democracy, parliamentary government, an ordered way of life, do not arouse much enthusiasm in this area; indeed sometimes they are met with mild disgust.'

Despite such an unpromising state of affairs, there were grounds for optimism. The most important of these was the grudging acceptance of the high quality and value of British qualifications and expertise. Concerning language, for instance, it was recognised that the British Council was pre-eminent in 'ELT' (English Language Teaching); it was equally apparent that English was the global lingua franca and thus essential for the professional class of a modern state. Accordingly, demand for the Council's ELT services increased annually. 78 students were enrolled for advanced English in 1957, 364 in 1962 (in the same time frame membership of the Council library grew from 69 to 1131). British qualifications in other fields, such as teacher training, engineering and administration, were also highly esteemed. The 1960-1961 annual report (written just before independence) asserted that there was a 'real and increasing demand for what we have to offer and ... in a territory

where the people of the country, realising their own limitations and lack of qualifications and becoming increasingly irritated at their dependence on the foreign expert, are keen to improve their own education and equip themselves with the knowledge necessary to take over the running of their own affairs'. Again, statistics bear this out: in 1956 there were around 90 Kuwaiti students in higher education in the UK; by 1962 there were more than 200.

In terms of overcoming Britain's image problem, both Muir and his successor O.J.J. Tuckley were determined that British Council policy in Kuwait must be discrete: overt competition with the ascendant Egyptians would be suicidal, and it was considered tactless and counterproductive to try and impress the locals with pompous assertions of Britain's cultural achievements. Instead, the Council emphasised its role as a provider of language tuition and information to potential students interested in study in the UK. This non-intrusive approach appears to have paid dividends. Through diligence, resilience and undoubtedly a measure of charm, the Council won the trust of senior officials and members of the Al-Sabah family. Soon its ostensibly limited services were supplemented by a range of other activities. Council officers' expertise was called upon by several government departments: He-

alth requested instructional films for surgeons, Education needed advice on curricula and plays in English, recently-created Broadcasting and Television required guidance in assembling a library as well as a weekly television programme on the English language (the preparation of which took up the Council officers' one free day, Friday). ELT was provided to an impressive array of clients: bank workers, pilots, the director of the television station, a senior judge and elite officials at the Diwan (the Ruler's residence). Council officers' wives gave language classes to the wives and daughters of prominent Kuwaitis, including the Ruler's wife, Shaikha Najima.

Finally, the Council performed much unacknowledged work liaising between the Kuwait government and various international agencies: for a state with little experience of this kind of interaction, and yet which wanted badly to manage independently of the British government such mediation was extremely useful. Thus, the Council acted as informal intermediaries between the government and the Danish archaeological team, whose findings from 1957 at Failaka were given pride of place in the newly constructed National Museum: Muir's brief was to ensure that the Danes did not consider plundering the artefacts! During the Kuwaiti negotiations prior to joining UNESCO in 1960, Muir was obliged to entertain officials from the organi-

sation and to assist in the preparation of membership documents. Foreign diplomats were also referred to the Council for information and entertainment, as were officials from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

The period from the mid-1950s to 1961 was one in which the military and political bonds connecting Kuwait to Britain were increasingly irksome to the former. However, the case of the British Council suggests the advent of an independent Kuwait in 1961 cannot be explained in terms of a cultural as well as a political rejection of Britain. On the contrary, beneath the surface of a triumphant march to independence lay a less visible undercurrent of cultural and educational engagement with Britain that actually intensified as Kuwait joined the world stage in 1961.

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