History of Kuwait

Archaeological evidence indicates that Kuwait has been populated for several thousand years and that its inhabitants traded with Mesopotamian cities. The area supported only small settlements until the 1750s, when villagers on the site of modern Kuwait City established a sheikhdom under the leadership of the al-Sabah family, whose descendants continue to govern Kuwait today. The village quickly grew into a prosperous trading port and was able to remain largely autonomous from the region’s major power, the Turkish Ottoman Empire.

As the Ottomans sought more control over Kuwait at the end of the 19th century, Sheikh Mubarak al-Sabah al-Sabah appealed to Great Britain for help. The British, with strategic and commercial interests in the Persian Gulf, agreed to make Kuwait a protectorate in 1899. This relationship continued until 1961, when Kuwait was granted independence. In the meantime, huge oil reserves were discovered in the 1930s and began to be exported after World War II. This new oil wealth vastly improved Kuwait’s standard of living and the quality of its education and health care over the decades that followed.

Upon Kuwait’s independence, Iraq asserted claims to Kuwaiti territory, but dropped them when faced with opposition from Britain and Arab nations. Relations between Kuwait and Iraq improved during the 1980s (when Kuwait supported Iraq in the Iran–Iraq War), but in 1990 Iraq accused Kuwait of exceeding oil production quotas and stealing oil from a contested reserve on their border. Iraq invaded in August that year, quickly defeating Kuwait’s overmatched forces. Most residents fled to Saudi Arabia or other countries. Several thousand were imprisoned.

When Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein refused to comply with a UN resolution ordering his forces to leave Kuwait, a U.S.-led coalition launched air strikes against Iraqi targets beginning in January 1991. The conflict, known as the Persian Gulf War, ended with a four-day land campaign that expelled Iraq’s troops from Kuwait in February. Kuwait’s exiled population returned soon after. Retreating Iraqis set fire to hundreds of oil wells and much of Kuwait’s infrastructure had to be rebuilt. Iraq became the target of economic sanctions and UN weapons inspections for more than a decade. Amid allegations that Saddam Hussein had developed weapons of mass destruction, a U.S.-led coalition used Kuwait as a staging ground for the invasion that overthrew his government in March 2003.
**History of Kuwait**

Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who ruled Kuwait as emir for nearly 30 years, died in January 2006. The poor health of his successor, the crown prince, prevented him from taking the throne, and the next in line, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, was appointed emir. Sheikh Sabah previously served as prime minister and has overseen the introduction of political reforms. In 2005, his government appointed the nation's first female cabinet member, and the National Assembly approved a bill granting women the right to vote and hold political office. When the next elections were held in June 2006, women participated for the first time.

**References:**