

# An Emerging Philanthropic Superpower?

*Kuwaiti humanitarian efforts  
in Syria and beyond*

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## About the author

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# Executive Summary

*All states in the Gulf region are seeking to expand their economic, social and political 'footprint', by establishing themselves as industry-wide leaders or hosts of dedicated hubs (transportation, finance, tourism, etc.). However, Kuwait has prioritised its philanthropic efforts, seeing the perfection of its aid policy as a key means of strengthening its international presence.*

Kuwaiti humanitarian efforts, especially in Syria, are driven by the legacy of the Gulf War, when the country was subjected to immense deprivation during the Iraqi occupation. Having experienced such suffering first-hand, Kuwaitis have been among the most generous providers of aid and assistance to those suffering from contemporary conflicts.

Aid donated by Kuwait has provided immediate relief to Syrian refugees, and today supports the semi-permanent structures that offer a medium term solution whilst the Syrian civil war continues. Refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, and other programs designed to aid Syrians, are critically dependent upon Kuwaiti aid.

Kuwait has been a world leader in the dispensation of Syrian-related aid, both in absolute and relative terms. Its overall level of assistance is exceeded only by that of the United States and United Kingdom, and its share of assistance, relative to the size of its economy and population, is unmatched by any other donor.

Kuwait has facilitated a coordinated response to the Syrian civil war, marshalling the international community at three Kuwait-hosted international pledging conferences in 2013, 2014 and 2015, and co-hosting the 2016 conference in London. On each occasion, the conferences have raised records sums.

Iraq is also a key recipient of Kuwaiti assistance, via various UN agencies. In addition, over the last decade, Kuwait has repeatedly stepped forward to provide assistance to areas hit by natural disasters.

By adopting a diverse approach to the dispensation of humanitarian aid – providing material to international organisations, arranging for cash-based

transfers in other states and deploying oil to more developed countries – Kuwait has established an effective and efficient model of aid distribution capable of replication.

Kuwaiti pledges of aid have been honoured to a much higher degree than those of other states.

Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Emir of Kuwait, has been instrumental in guiding Kuwait's overall aid policy, frequently making personal donations that have encouraged others to follow suit, and investing diplomatic energy in securing the support of other countries for Kuwait's overall philanthropic efforts.



## Introduction: The origins of Kuwait's philanthropic focus

*In the first years of the new century, all states in the Gulf region have sought to expand their regional and global footprint, deploying significant resources and investing in initiatives that have the capacity to generate impacts beyond their borders.*

Through diligent efforts to advance the standing of its flag carriers, the United Arab Emirates has crafted a role for itself as the transportation hub of the Gulf region. For instance, Emirates Airlines has become a globally recognisable brand, whilst Etihad has engaged in a significant expansion that has seen it acquire a number of smaller airlines in Europe such as Air Berlin and Air Serbia.

By contrast, the state of Qatar has focused on establishing itself as the media hub of the region, through its efforts to position Al Jazeera as a globally competitive company. Over the course of two decades, Doha has cultivated the growth of the media conglomerate, opening over 70 international news bureaux, second only to the BBC. As a result, Al Jazeera is now the most widely followed Middle Eastern news outlet in international circles.

As has been the case for decades, Saudi Arabia remains a dominant force in the international oil industry, guiding global supply and prices. Yet in more recent years, it too has sought to shift its focus. Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's domestic reform efforts, commonly known as Vision 2030, prioritise the establishment of an indigenous defence industry, a burgeoning tourism sector, and the creation of a powerful sovereign wealth fund. As with the steps taken by the UAE and Qatar, these moves are geared to strengthening Riyadh's 'soft power' beyond its borders.

### *Yet what of Kuwait?*

Overlooked by many analysts has been the country's efforts to affect change in the broader Middle East and beyond, through philanthropy. Though less eye-catching than some of the steps taken by its neighbours, the impact of this work has been just as pronounced, if not more so. Indeed, a survey of global aid and donor activity reveals the importance of Kuwait's deployment of much-needed resources to conflict zones and areas affected by natural disasters. As a consequence, Kuwait has steadily crafted a role for itself as the 'go-to' donor in times of crisis, a role that has won it international acclaim from NGOs, aid agencies and international organisations. This paper explores Kuwait's efforts to play a leadership role in humanitarian endeavours, most notably with respect to its work in Syria, and highlights the reasons why Kuwait's efforts often succeed where those of others fail.



# Kuwaiti aid and assistance in response to the Syrian conflict

*To understand why Kuwait has emerged as a primary source of philanthropic funding within Syria, one needs to go back a quarter of a century. For most high-ranking Kuwaiti officials, the defining event of their careers was the invasion and occupation of their country by Iraqi forces. Though much international focus and attention continues to dwell on the multinational coalition that ejected Iraqi forces from the country in the Gulf War, domestic memories tend to be shaped much more by the six month occupation, rather than the six week military campaign which brought it to a close.*

During that time, the country's capital was subjected to intense bombing, the government was forced into exile, and protracted fighting erupted between Iraqi forces and Kuwaiti resistance fighters. Moreover, once the occupation was completed, the country was subjected to looting as Baghdad sought to extract the funds it had failed to secure through threats issued during the antebellum period. As a consequence, Kuwait became the first post-conflict society of the post-Cold War era – militarily ravaged, and economically weakened.

Understanding this frame of reference helps to explain why Kuwait has taken a leadership role in humanitarian efforts, at a time when warfare and economic hardship again plague large parts of its region. In short, Kuwaitis tend to feel a unique sense of responsibility to come to the aid of those affected by the Syrian civil war, having suffered through similar difficulties in their own lifetimes. Indeed, Kuwait's status as a post-conflict state and society helps to explain why its philanthropic efforts have prioritised helping citizens of nations currently lodged in conflict, as well as projects aimed at aiding the transition to a more stable situation in which the safety and security of those people is secured.

Kuwait was a swift entrant in the field of Syrian aid and assistance, with the Kuwaiti Red Cross Society commencing in-country operations in February of 2012. Early assistance took the form of material deliveries, such as food, blankets, clothes, and other immediate essentials. However, as the Syrian conflict progressed towards a full civil war, Kuwaiti funding priorities shifted so as to underpin a more permanent and programmatic form of assistance. By 2013, Kuwait had donated over \$2 million to enable the opening of two medical clinics for Jordan-based refugees, both of which were operated by the UN International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF).

Providing for the ongoing needs of displaced persons has now become a guiding feature of all Kuwait’s Syria-focused aid. For instance, Kuwait has moved to provide a significant proportion of the housing needs of those forced to resettle beyond Syria’s borders. Three pre-fabricated Kuwaiti villages have been constructed to house refugees, most notably at the Zaatari and Azraq refugee camps in northern Jordan. Since 2013, Kuwait has provided an additional \$350 million to the UN Refugee Agency (the UNHCR), enabling additional support for refugees in Lebanon in addition to those in Jordan. These funds provide schools, housing and job training to the approximately 4.8million people Syrian refugees currently registered with the UNHCR.



... **The Zaatari refugee camp in northern Jordan, a key recipient of**  
... **Kuwaiti philanthropy**

**“Kuwait has recognised its humanitarian duty in both regional and international surroundings, and sought to provide assistance bilaterally and internationally to mitigate the effects of natural disasters and crises, either directly to the affected countries, through the appropriate international agencies, or by organising and hosting several conferences for donors”**

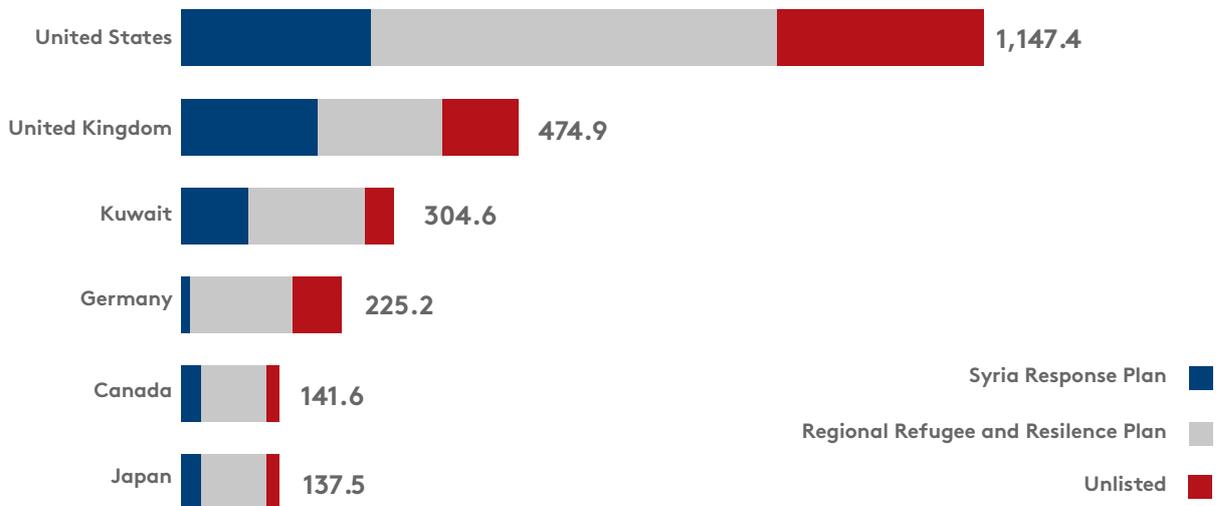
*- Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Emir of Kuwait*

The scale and impact of these efforts is considerable. Though less directly impacted by the knock on effects of the Syrian conflict than other states in the region, Kuwait’s donations mean that it has emerged as by far and away the most generous regional contributor to refugee relief efforts. Citing UN figures in late 2015, the development portal Devex assessed Kuwait to be the third largest donor to all Syrian aid projects, behind only the United States and the United Kingdom. It also identified Kuwait as the third largest donor – and by far the

largest in the region – to the UN’s Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, commonly known as 3RP, which seeks to provide aid to four countries directly impacted by the Syrian refugee crisis: Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt.

The absolute level of aid provided by Kuwait not only outpaces that of others, but is also evidence of the country ‘punching above its weight’. In 2016, the UK-based charity Oxfam published its ‘fair share’ analysis of Syrian aid donations, which ranked the donations of countries according to the “level of funding each country makes available for the aid response, relative to the size of their economy (based on gross national income)”.

**Top donors to the Syrian refugee crisis  
IN US\$ MILLION**



Source: U.N. OCHA

Based on an assumed overall need of \$8.9 billion dollars, Kuwait was ranked first, with its aid contribution assessed to constitute to 554% of its total 'fair share'. By comparison, the next closest nation was Norway, which was adjudged to have met 385% of its 'fair share'. The UK was adjudged to have met 237% of its burden.

In addition, Kuwait has been able to leverage its own donations by acting as a convener of international aid conferences. This is especially true with respect to its efforts to secure pledges for Syrian reconstruction and humanitarian efforts. Kuwait played host to the first three International Humanitarian Pledging Conferences for Syria, sponsored by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). At the 2013 conference, the international community collectively pledged over \$1.5 billion in assistance for projects in Syria, the largest-ever amount secured by a UN sponsored conference. Subsequent conferences in Kuwait achieved yet more results, with \$2.4 billion being raised in 2014, and a further \$3.8 billion being raised in 2015.

Kuwait also acted as co-host for the 2016 London pledging conference in conjunction with the UK, Germany and Norway. On that occasion, pledges totalling over \$10 billion were secured. Kuwait's role in providing support for the pledging conference process, and its efforts to secure commitments from other states, were singled out by the then-United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki moon, who highlighted the "life-saving leadership" that Kuwait had shown, and praised the "enormous good that Kuwait has done for Syrians who are suffering through no fault of their own."



# Kuwaiti humanitarian assistance beyond Syria:

*Whilst Kuwait's funding of humanitarian assistance for those affected by fighting in Syria accounts for by far the bulk of its overall humanitarian efforts, it would be a mistake to assume that its overall aid efforts represent a contingent response to a single regional crisis.*

*Instead, the Syrian conflict has arisen alongside a concerted effort by Kuwaiti officials to position the country as a leading international donor, not only in the region, but also in other areas of the world that find themselves in desperate need of immediate assistance.*

In addition to supporting those displaced by the Syria conflict, Kuwaiti funds also underpin a number of vital aid programs in Iraq, such as those operated by the World Food Program (WFP). However, unlike the assistance provided to Syria, which often comes in the form of material such

as pre-fabricated shelters, Kuwaiti assistance to Iraq is geared towards cash-based transfers, which are better suited to areas in which the needs of the local population are more diffuse. As a result, Iraqi aid recipients are able to exercise greater choice over how they use the funds they receive, affording families greater control when contending with the difficult circumstances wrought by ISIS' stranglehold on areas of the country.



⋮ **Iraqi recipients of Kuwait aid in the city of Mosul.**

In addition, Kuwaiti funding has been used to underpin reconciliation processes aimed at tackling the root causes of violence – often sectarian in nature – in addition to tending to the victims of the fighting itself. For instance, since February of 2006 Kuwait has initiated and led a series of programs aimed at rebuilding and reconstructing places of worship and other holy sites in Iraq, damaged or deliberately targeted during years of conflict. The Al-Askari and Al-Hadi holy Shi'ite shrines in Samarra, have been allocated over \$10 million, and a further \$5 million has been donated to repair other sites across the country, in an effort to resolve grievances that threaten to provoke follow-on attacks or reprisals.

Kuwait's initiatives in Iraq are notable for two reasons. Firstly, that Kuwait has taken steps to invest in the reconstruction of the country at all, when memories of the first Gulf War remain so pronounced, shows a far-sighted approach. In addition, the use of 'Sunni' funds to rebuild Shi'a sites demonstrates a willingness to use aid money to bridge sectarian divides. Such an approach magnifies the effect of philanthropic giving, by exhibiting a symbolic commitment to rise above current levels of polarisation in order to promote political reconciliation. At a time when Sunni-Shi'a tensions are as high as they have ever been, such efforts offer a model by which escalatory cycles can be broken.

Evidence for Kuwait's wider effort to position itself as a leading philanthropic power can also be found in the frequent donations it has made to disaster relief. On repeated occasions over the last decade, Kuwait has been an early donor when regions have been visited by unexpected trauma. For instance, Kuwait provided \$10 million to support Bangladesh in 2007 when nearly 3,500 people were killed as a consequence of cyclone Sidr. An additional \$10 million was also set aside for the Philippines in 2014, when typhoon Haiyan became the strongest storm ever to make landfall. Building upon this record, the country now commits \$1m each year to the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund, which is designed to ensure that sufficient funds are available to relief workers in the immediate days following a natural disaster. Indeed, this approach has been written into Kuwait legislation. Similar to the International Development Act (2015), which enshrined the UK's commitment to give 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) to international aid, Kuwait passed legislation in 2008 obligating 10% of its overall aid spending to be devoted to UN organisations or other agencies that work to provide disaster relief.

In addition to these single-incident situations, Kuwait has also established a regular pattern of giving to alleviate poverty in parts of the developing world. Across North Africa, states suffering from droughts, famine, conflict and deprivation, have all been recipients of aid, including Mali, Niger,

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<sup>3</sup> "UK passes bill to honour pledge of 0.7% foreign aid target", Mark Anderson, *The Guardian*, March 9th 2015

Benin, Chad, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Sudan. Somalia in particular has been a key recipient, receiving a \$10 million dollar injection of funds in 2011. In addition, Kuwait has provided over \$5 million to the World Health Organisation (WHO) in order to aide its campaign to prevent the Ebola virus spreading beyond affected countries.



## Ensuring the effectiveness of philanthropic efforts

*The amount of money Kuwait has set aside for charitable causes is considerable. However, more relevant for those seeking a model for future philanthropic efforts is the manner in which that aid has been deployed, and the innovative steps Kuwait has taken with respect to fundraising.*

One of the aspects of Kuwaiti assistance that tends to make it more effective than that provided by other states is the ways it is tailored to recipients' needs, something that maximises its effect. For instance, at the 3rd Arab-Africa Summit in 2013, Kuwait announced that it would make available over \$1 billion in 'soft loans' to African nations, in order to help expedite the continent's economic development. Making financing available on more favourable terms than would be possible under pure market conditions, is a uniquely well suited approach to the developing countries of the region, which tend to fall within the 'aid and trade' gap. Unencumbered by the need

**"Kuwait's Leadership and funding has saved tens of thousands of lives, and has galvanised others to participate in coordinated international action. At a time when so many of our appeals are under-funded, it is good to know we can count on Kuwait's generosity".**

to grapple with severe deprivation, many developing countries are considered too rich to receive large grants from charities. At the same time, they are simultaneously assessed to be insufficiently developed to be prioritised

*- Ban Ki-Moon,  
Former UN Secretary-General*

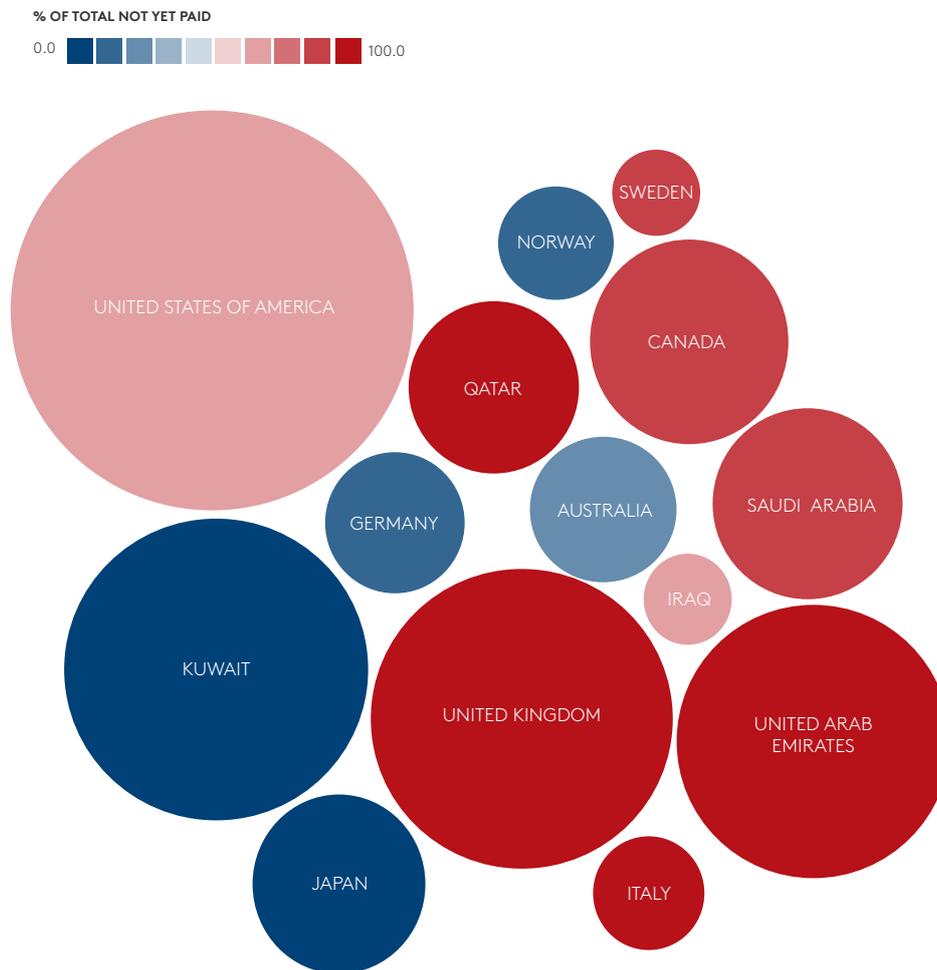


for investment and financing by developed nations and firms. Financing provided by external patrons therefore represents a vital lifeline.

Likewise, when large portions of Japan's eastern coastline was devastated by the Tōhoku earthquake and resulting tsunami in 2011, Kuwaiti officials were quick to recognise that simple dispatch of funds would be less helpful than the provision of additional fuel. As a result, Kuwait made a one-time donation of five million barrels of crude oil, which would have commanded a market price of \$500 million at the time. By determining the kinds of assistance that are likely to be required before proceeding, Kuwait has shown how inefficiency – a challenge that plagues international development policy – can be minimised.

In addition, Kuwait has found a formula to follow through on its commitments, to a degree that has made it the poster child of effective fundraising. For example, not only is Kuwait the most significant regional donor to Syrian aid projects, but it also outpaces almost every other nation in quickly fulfilling the pledges it has made.

In September 2013, eight months after the First International Humanitarian Pledging Conference for Syria, the Guardian noted that Kuwait had proven to be a far more dependable provider of aid than almost all other major donors, having met over 95% of its aid pledges. (Please see visual representation below):



*Specific figures (% of pledged aid not yet fulfilled):*

**Japan 3.8%, Kuwait: 4.4%, Norway: 28.4%, Germany 28.5%, Australia 32.2%, United States 56.5%, Canada 68.2 %, United Kingdom 75.4%, Saudi Arabia 75.9%, Qatar 90%, United Arab Emirates (UAE) 97.3%**

Invariably, some states are able to marshal aid at different speeds than others, and delays should not be a reason to discount the generosity of major donors. However, aid tends to be most effective when it can be assembled swiftly, and tied to a designated project. By contrast, delays result in inefficiency, with funds often going unused until alternative projects can be found, prompting yet more delays as political approval is sought for a repurposing of the original donation. By establishing an efficient ‘pipeline’, and ensuring that the aid it pledges ‘today’ is available ‘tomorrow’, Kuwait is bolstering the effectiveness of international aid agency operations, who can proceed with the confidence that the projects they line up will not suffer or

collapse due a lack of financing. This is especially true with respect to natural disasters, when the speed of response can often make the difference between life and death.



**His Highness Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Emir of Kuwait, and former Prime Minister David Cameron, at the 4th Syrian International Humanitarian Pledging Conference for Syria (London, February 2016).**

What explains Kuwait’s ability to deploy aid so swiftly? Here, credit must be paid to the leadership of the Emir of Kuwait, His Highness Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In various ways, the Emir has provided strategic direction to Kuwait’s philanthropic efforts, driving forward an ambitious aid agenda. Primarily, the Emir has encouraged others by making significant number of large personal donations, which collectively total tens of millions of dollars. For instance, the Emir himself is a major funder of the Zaatari refugee camp. Large personal contributions, such as his 2013 donation of \$300 million for Syrian refugees living beyond its borders, are a key reason why Kuwait has been able to meet funding requirements at speed. Yet they have also set the tone for the country as a whole. For instance, they have added credibility to the Emir’s frequent appeals to fellow Kuwaitis – be they high net-worth individuals or designated charities – to give generously.

In addition, one of the reasons that the International Humanitarian Pledging Conferences for Syria have been such a success is the extent to which Kuwaiti officials, and the Emir personally, have afforded them such a high priority. By leveraging a vast network of international allies, cultivated in over four decades as Kuwait foreign minister prior to his current position, the Emir has succeeded in making them the focal point major government pledges. As a result, then - UN Secretary - General Ban Ki Moon praised the “exemplary humanitarian leadership” the Emir had shown at a ceremony in 2014 .




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<sup>5</sup> “Kuwait’s ‘Exemplary Humanitarian Leadership’ Has Saved Thousands of Lives, Secretary-General Says at Ceremony Recognizing Amir of Kuwait”, UN Press Release, September 9th 2014

# Conclusion

*With the passage of time, it is difficult to recall the level of intense opposition that accompanied the decision to deploy western military forces to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991. Opponents of using military force naturally feared the possibility of a long and drawn out conflict. Yet they also advanced the notion, sometimes implicitly, that restoring Kuwait's independence served no wider international interest. Kuwait, a small country with a population of just two million at the time, was regarded by some as requiring a degree of foreign assistance out of proportion to its importance on the world stage.*

The subsequent quarter-century has shown how flawed such assessments were. Kuwait has proven itself to be a major exporter of security and stability in its region, as its contemporary aid efforts more than demonstrate. Indeed, Kuwait has become a dependable first-responder at times of crisis. Be it by mitigating the humanitarian consequences of the war in Syria, contributing to the rebuilding of Iraq after years of conflict, or repeatedly stepping forward to mollify the effect of natural disasters around the world, the country has guided the affairs of the greater Middle East and beyond with an 'invisible hand'. Today, tens of thousands of people owe their livelihoods to the steps Kuwait has taken to support those most in need. That outcome represents the result of a concerted effort by HH the Emir and his closest officials, undertaken over many years, to position Kuwait as a 'philanthropic superpower'.

Moreover, not only has Kuwait made an enormously positive contribution to trouble-hit areas, but it has showcased new approaches to aid policy that can serve as a model for other states in the years ahead. By acting quickly to pledge funds, providing those funds without delay, and tailoring them to the needs of affected peoples, Kuwait has emerged as a national centre of excellence in the campaign to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and impact of charitable donations. As a result, the UN has designated Kuwait as an 'International Humanitarian Centre', a move designed to encourage other states to follow the example it has set.

The future of the Middle East remains uncertain. The Arab Spring has unleashed political volatility, economic hardship, and sectarian conflict across the region. The Syrian civil war has now continued for over five years, and ISIS retains a foothold in large parts of Iraq. The prospect of a region free of conflict remains a distant hope. However, what is certain is that the region will be in a much stronger shape if more countries model their approach to aid and philanthropy on that advanced by Kuwait.

At the same time, Kuwait's efforts to establish itself as a major humanitarian player make it all but inevitable that it will become a regular actor beyond its region. One of the abiding rules of humanitarian work is that it is almost impossible to tell where the next crisis will arise. Today, the civil war in Syria dominates the international agenda, and rightly so. However, in the coming years and decades, it is inevitable that other parts of the globe will find themselves in need of ongoing assistance.

As an international-minded and outward looking country, which has locked in a high degree of development spending via domestic legislation, the UK will invariably find itself alongside Kuwait on the humanitarian 'frontline'. Thus, as it plans ahead, policymakers in London should not only take steps to learn from the approaches Kuwait has adopted, but also consider areas in which it can strengthen bilateral co-operation. Maximising the effect of humanitarian assistance demands no less than closer partnership.



