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КУВЕЙТ НА ПЕРЕПУТЬЕ: МЕСТНАЯ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКАЯ САМОСТОЯТЕЛЬНОСТЬ И ИМПЕРСКОЕ СОПЕРНИЧЕСТВО В КОНЦЕ XIX – НАЧАЛЕ XX в.

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Аннотация. Рассматривается политическая трансформация Кувейта в конце XIX – начале XX в., особое внимание уделяется роли шейха Мубарака ас-Сабаха и взаимодействию местной политической субъектности с имперским соперничеством. При помощи анализа договоров, дипломатической переписки, консульских отчетов и архивных материалов развитие Кувейта помещается в более широкий контекст децентрализации Османской империи и усиления интересов Великобритании, Германии и Российской империи в Персидском заливе. Изучаются ключевые события истории Кувейта, в том числе подписание Англо-кувейтского соглашения 1899 г. и неудачная османская военная интервенция 1901 г., в целях оценки их влияния на политический статус страны. Утверждается, что стратегическое положение Кувейта и прагматичная дипломатия шейха Мубарака ас-Сабаха позволили эмирату обеспечить де-факто автономное положение, несмотря на формальные притязания Османской империи и конкурирующие имперские стратегии.

Ключевые слова: Кувейт; шейх Мубарак ас-Сабах; имперское соперничество; баланс сил; местная политическая самостоятельность.

КУВЕЙТ НА РАЗДАРОЖЖЫ: МЯСЦОВАЯ ПАЛІТЫЧНАЯ САМАСТОЙНАСЦЬ І ІМПЕРСКАЕ САПЕРНІЦТВА Ў КАНЦЫ XIX – ПАЧАТКУ XX ст.

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Анацыя. Разглядаецца палітычная трансфармацыя Кувейта ў канцы XIX – пачатку XX ст., надаецца асабліва ўвага ролі шэйха Мубарака ас-Сабаха і ўзаемадзеянню мясцовай палітычнай суб'ектнасці з імперскім саперніцтвам. З дапамогай аналізу дагавораў, дыпламатычнай перапіскі, консульскіх справаздач і архіўных матэрыялаў развіццё Кувейта змяшчаецца ў больш шырокі кантэкст дэцэнтралізацыі Асманскай імперыі і ўзмацнення інтарэсаў Вялікабрытаніі, Германіі і Расійскай імперыі ў Персідскім заліве. Вывучаюцца ключавыя падзеі ў гісторыі Кувейта, у тым ліку падпісанне Англа-кувейцкага пагаднення 1899 г. і няўдалая асманская ваенная інтэрвенцыя 1901 г., для ацэнкі іх уплыву на палітычны статус краіны. Сцвярджаецца, што стратэгічнае становішча Кувейта і прагматычная дыпламатыя шэйха Мубарака ас-Сабаха дазволілі эмірату забяспечыць дэ-факта аўтаномнае становішча, нягледзячы на фармальныя дамаганні Асманскай імперыі і імперскія стратэгіі, якія канкурыравалі паміж сабой.

Ключавыя словы: Кувейт; шэйх Мубарак ас-Сабах; імперскае саперніцтва; баланс сіл; мясцовая палітычная самастойнасць.

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KUWAIT AT THE CROSSROADS: LOCAL AGENCY AND IMPERIAL RIVALRY IN THE LATE 19th AND EARLY 20th CENTURY

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Abstract. The article examines the political transformation of Kuwait in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with particular attention to the role of sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah and the interaction between local political agency and imperial rivalry. Drawing on treaties, diplomatic correspondence, consular reports, and archival materials, the study situates Kuwait's development within the broader context of Ottoman decentralisation and the intensification of British, German, and Russian interests in the Persian Gulf. The analysis focuses on key episodes, including the Anglo-Kuwaiti agreement of 1899 and the failed Ottoman military intervention of 1901, in order to assess their impact on Kuwait's political status. It is argued that Kuwait's strategic position and sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's pragmatic diplomacy enabled the emirate to secure a de facto autonomous position, despite formal Ottoman claims and competing imperial strategies.

Keywords: Kuwait; sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah; imperial rivalry; balance of power; local political agency.

Introduction

At the end of the 19th century, Kuwait occupied a strategically sensitive position at the intersection of Ottoman administrative authority and intensifying European imperial competition in the Persian Gulf. The gradual weakening of Ottoman control in Arabia, combined with the growing involvement of Great Britain and other European powers, transformed the emirate from a peripheral settlement into an arena of geopolitical interaction. These developments unfolded within a broader context of imperial rivalry, in which maritime routes, political influence, and control over the gulf acquired increasing strategic importance.

The accession of sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah in 1896 [1, p. 44] marked a decisive turning point in Kuwait's political development. His rise to power coincided with a period of accelerating Ottoman decentralisation and expanding European presence in the region. Operating under conditions of limited military and economic resources, Mubarak Al-Sabah pursued a pragmatic political course aimed at strengthening Kuwait's autonomy without provoking direct confrontation with imperial authorities. Rather than relying on coercion, he employed diplomacy, selective alliances, and political maneuvering to safeguard both his position and the emirate's interests.

In historiography, Kuwait's political transformation at the turn of the 20th century was long interpreted primarily through the lens of great-power rivalry. Earlier studies, particularly in mid-20th-century Soviet and Western scholarship, emphasised British and German

imperial policies in the Persian Gulf, often portraying local political actors as reactive and subordinate. More recent research has revised this perspective by focusing on Ottoman decentralisation and the role of regional elites, highlighting the capacity of local rulers to maneuver within imperial structures. National historiography of Kuwait has further contributed to this shift by emphasising the internal dynamics of the emirate and interpreting the 1899 agreement with Great Britain as a pragmatic response to an asymmetric balance of power rather than a loss of sovereignty. Russian diplomatic sources add an important complementary perspective, documenting sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's attempts to diversify his external relations beyond the Anglo-Kuwaiti framework.

Despite this reassessment, the concrete mechanisms through which a small gulf polity with limited resources was able to exploit imperial competition in order to preserve de facto autonomy remain insufficiently explored. In particular, the interaction between local political agency and the structural constraints imposed by competing empires requires closer examination.

This article addresses this gap by analysing how sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah utilised imperial rivalry to strengthen Kuwait's political position at the turn of the 20th century. By situating Kuwait's experience within the broader processes of Ottoman decline and great-power competition in the Persian Gulf, the study highlights the role of local political agency in shaping regional outcomes under conditions of imperial constraint.

Materials and methods

This article is based on a qualitative method of historical research aimed at analysing Kuwait's political role and relations from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. It primarily applies the method of historical-

political analysis, drawing on a combination of historical primary sources, diplomatic documents, official correspondence, as well as scholarly and analytical works, all approached through critical reading and interpretation.

The study focuses on the interaction between local political agency and imperial power structures, examining the motivations and strategies of sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah alongside the geopolitical interests of the Ottoman Empire, Great Britain, and Russian Empire in the Persian Gulf. Particular attention is paid to how local actors operated within, and at times exploited, the structural constraints imposed by imperial rivalry.

Results and discussion

Imperial rivalries and sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's quest for autonomy. Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's foreign policy was shaped by Kuwait's limited material resources and its position within a competitive imperial environment. Constrained by its small coercive capacity, Kuwait relied on diplomatic maneuvering rather than direct military confrontation, turning great power rivalries into a political resource. By selectively aligning with Great Britain while signaling openness to Russian involvement, Mubarak Al-Sabah's exploited asymmetries among competing powers to limit Ottoman options and deter intervention. From a realist perspective, this was not reactive improvisation but a calculated strategy of external balancing: Kuwait acted as a microbalancer within the Persian Gulf regional security complex, influencing imperial behaviour despite its material limitations.

Of the late 19th century, as the Arabian Peninsula became a key theater of competition among European states. The construction of the Baghdad railway by Germany, which was planned to extend to Al-Kuwait [2, p. 158], exemplified this rivalry. Mubarak Al-Sabah perceived the railway as a direct threat to his independence and territorial ambitions, fearing that it would facilitate Ottoman and German encroachment into the gulf. His concerns were astutely exploited by Great Britain, which sought to counter German influence and expand its own strategic foothold in the region.

The interplay of local and international dynamics created an opportunity for a closer relationship between Kuwait and Great Britain. In 1897, a British representative in the Persian Gulf visited Al-Kuwait, where sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah expressed his willingness to accept British patronage. A similar declaration was made by sheikh in 1898 [3, p. 187], culminating in the signing of the Anglo-Kuwaiti secret treaty¹ on 23 January 1899 [4, p. 121]. Under the terms of this treaty, Great Britain guaranteed the territorial integrity and security of Kuwait. In return, Mubarak Al-Sabah agreed not to establish diplomatic relations with any other state or allow foreign powers to use Kuwaiti territory without British consent [5, p. 32].

While the treaty effectively placed Kuwait under British protection, it also marked a turning point in Mubarak Al-Sabah's foreign policy. The agreement limited his ability to engage independently in international affairs, aligning Kuwait's external relations with British

The analytical framework of the article draws selectively on realist perspectives in international relations, especially the concept of balance of power. In this context, sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's foreign policy is interpreted as a strategy of limited external balancing, whereby alignment with Great Britain and diplomatic engagement with Russian Empire served as instruments for preserving Kuwait's autonomy rather than pursuing power maximisation.

strategic interests. However, the treaty formally preserved sheikh's autonomy in internal governance and his dealings with neighbouring Arab states.

While the Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty formally restricted sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's freedom of diplomatic action, it simultaneously institutionalised Kuwait's security within the British imperial system. From a realist standpoint, the treaty represented a rational trade-off: limited external sovereignty in exchange for regime survival and territorial protection. Rather than signaling dependency alone, the agreement enabled Mubarak Al-Sabah to neutralise Ottoman military options and consolidate internal authority, thereby strengthening Kuwait's bargaining position vis-à-vis both regional rivals and imperial actors.

The treaty's deliberate ambiguity constituted its central strength. While Great Britain secured decisive influence over Kuwait's foreign relations, it refrained from formal annexation or protectorate status. Mubarak Al-Sabah, in turn, accepted constraints on diplomatic outreach but retained freedom of action within Arabia. This arrangement enabled both sides to pursue their strategic interests while avoiding premature confrontation with competing powers.

Having secured the support of Great Britain through the Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty, sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah intensified his efforts to assert dominance in central Arabia, particularly in the territories controlled by the Emirate of Jabal Shammar. This strategic push aimed to weaken the Rashids, who, as steadfast allies of the Ottoman Empire, posed a significant challenge to Mubarak Al-Sabah's ambitions. In 1900, sheikh escalated tensions by severing all trade relations with the Rashids and imposing an economic blockade on Hail, the political and economic centre of the Emirate of Jabal Shammar [3, p. 189]. This blockade was intended to destabilise the Rashids' economic base and undermine their ability to project power in the region.

Despite publicly emphasising their loyalty to the Ottoman Empire, the actions of Mubarak Al-Sabah and his ally, Abdul Aziz Al-Saud, were overtly anti-Ottoman in character. Their coordinated efforts against the Rashids not only weakened a key Ottoman ally in Central Arabia but also challenged Istanbul's broader strategy of maintaining control over the Arabian Peninsula through local proxies. The Rashids, in turn, relied heavily

¹The Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty was kept in secret until 1912.

on Ottoman support, receiving military and logistical assistance from both the governor of Basra and the central authorities in Istanbul.

The conflict reached its zenith in 1901 when the combined forces of Mubarak Al-Sabah and Abdul Aziz Al-Saud launched a military campaign against Emirate of Jabal Shammar. Initially, the allied forces achieved notable successes, gaining momentum in their offensive. However, the tide turned decisively in March 1901 during a major battle near Hail, where the forces of Rashid inflicted a crushing defeat on Mubarak Al-Sabah's troops [6, p. 111; 7, p. 206–209]. This defeat forced Mubarak Al-Sabah to halt his offensive and retreat to Kuwait, marking a significant setback in his campaign to expand his influence in central Arabia.

The 1901 military campaign exposed the inadequacy of Kuwait's military capabilities. While the defeat at Hail was a significant military failure, its political consequences were more complex. This event clarified the regional balance of powers and accelerated diplomatic engagement among external powers. Paradoxically, the military defeat served as a catalyst for diplomatic relations, forcing regional players to reconsider their interests in Kuwait.

Amidst these developments, an intriguing diplomatic episode unfolded involving Mubarak Al-Sabah and the Russian Empire. According to reports from Russia's diplomatic representatives, sheikh began to strengthen his contacts with the Russian consulate in Bushehr, particularly with consul M. Ovsienko. These interactions culminated in March 1900 with the arrival of the Russian gunboat «Gilyak» in Kuwait². This marked the first time a Russian warship entered the Persian Gulf, underscoring the growing strategic interest of the Russian Empire in the region.

The decision to send the gunboat «Gilyak» was not without controversy within Russian diplomatic circles. For instance, A. Adamov, the Russian consul in Basra, expressed concerns that such a move might provoke a strong reaction from Britain, potentially straining Russian-British relations in the gulf. Despite these reservations, the mission proceeded, and the reports submitted by M. Ovsienko and the crew of the gunboat «Gilyak» highlighted the warm reception they received in Kuwait. M. Ovsienko noted in his correspondence that sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah enthusiastically welcomed the arrival of the Russian vessel and expressed a strong interest in fostering closer economic ties with Russian Empire, including the presence of Russian merchant ships and goods in Kuwaiti ports [8].

Interestingly, M. Ovsienko's reports also revealed Mubarak Al-Sabah dissatisfaction with the concessions he had made to the British under the Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty. During their conversations, Mubarak Al-Sabah reportedly described his position as that of an inde-

pendent and hereditary ruler of Kuwait, emphasising his desire to preserve Kuwait's autonomy amidst the competing pressures of the Ottoman Empire, the Rashids, and British imperial interests³.

The most striking revelation from M. Ovsienko's reports was Mubarak Al-Sabah's verbal proposal to the Russian authorities. According to M. Ovsienko, sheikh requested Russian support in preserving Kuwait's territorial integrity and even suggested the possibility of raising the Russian flag over Kuwait if necessary. This proposal, while seemingly incongruous given Kuwait's secret agreement with Great Britain, can be contextualised by Mubarak Al-Sabah's precarious position following his defeat in the war against the Rashids. Sheikh's disappointment with British policies, particularly their previous support for Yusuf Ibrahim – a rival claimant to power in Kuwait – further fueled his willingness to explore alternative alliances (F. Anscombe also testifies to the possibility of such a request from Mubarak Al-Sabah)⁴ [4, p. 119].

Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's overtures to the Russian Empire should be interpreted not as a genuine attempt to realign Kuwait's strategic orientation, but as an instrument of signaling within a competitive imperial environment. By engaging Russian diplomats and welcoming the gunboat «Gilyak», sheikh sought to demonstrate that Kuwait possessed alternative diplomatic options beyond exclusive British patronage.

While the plausibility of Mubarak Al-Sabah's request to Russian Empire is debatable, it reflects the fluid and complex nature of regional diplomacy during this period. The sheikh's overtures to Russian Empire illustrate his strategic maneuvering amidst a landscape dominated by imperial rivalries and shifting alliances. For Russian Empire, the Persian Gulf represented a theatre of growing geopolitical interest, offering opportunities to counterbalance British influence and expand its own strategic footprint in the region.

Although Russian Empire ultimately declined substantive involvement, this episode illustrates how local actors could manipulate great-power perceptions to enhance their own strategic autonomy. Even unrealised alliances functioned as deterrent signals, reinforcing Kuwait's position within an increasingly polarised regional order.

Ultimately, this episode underscores the multidimensional challenges faced by Mubarak Al-Sabah as he sought to navigate the competing pressures of local, regional, and global powers. It also highlights the broader interplay of imperial ambitions and local agency in shaping the political dynamics of the gulf at the turn of the 20th century.

From military confrontation to diplomatic stalemate. The aftermath of sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's defeat in his campaign against the Rashids marked

²Report of the titled adviser Ovsienko to the Russian Imperial Consulate General in Baghdad. 23 November 1900 // Arch. of the Inst. of Oriental Studies of the Nat. Acad. of Sci. of the Repub. of Armenia (here and further AIOS). 1900. Vol. 1, No. 291 (in Russ.).

³Report of the titular adviser Ovsienko to the Russian Imperial Consulate General in Baghdad. 20 April 1902 // Ibid. 1902. Vol. 1, No. 27 (in Russ.).

⁴Report of the titular adviser Ovsienko to the Russian Imperial Consulate General in Baghdad. 6 June 1901 // Ibid. 1900. Vol. 1, No. 19 (in Russ.).

a critical turning point in Kuwait's political trajectory. More significant than the military failure itself was its diplomatic impact, as it created a strategic opening for the Ottoman Empire to reconsider direct intervention in Kuwait. For Istanbul, Mubarak Al-Sabah's weakened position appeared to offer an opportunity to neutralise a local ruler whose actions increasingly challenged imperial authority.

Within the Ottoman administrative and military establishment, assessments of the situation in Kuwait were sharply divided. Mushir Ahmed Feyzi Pasha, commander of the 6th army corps in Baghdad, emerged as the most outspoken advocate of immediate military intervention. In his reports to Istanbul, Mushir Ahmed Feyzi Pasha consistently framed Mubarak Al-Sabah as the principal source of instability in northern Arabia, portraying the crisis not as a consequence of structural weaknesses in imperial governance but as a problem of personal insubordination and defiance of central authority. This interpretation led him to propose a straightforward coercive solution: the prompt occupation of Kuwait and the permanent neutralisation of Mubarak Al-Sabah political influence. Mushir Ahmed Feyzi Pasha argued that Mubarak Al-Sabah's recent military setback created a favourable moment for decisive action⁵. Such reasoning reflected a predominantly military logic that equated temporary battlefield weakness with political vulnerability, while underestimating both the diplomatic resources available to Mubarak Al-Sabah and the broader risks of internationalising the conflict.

In contrast, Muhsin Ferik Pasha, the governor-general of Basra, adopted a more cautious and pragmatic stance. Drawing on his extensive knowledge of the region's complex political dynamics, Muhsin Ferik Pasha warned against the potential repercussions of a military campaign. According to Russian diplomatic reports from Bushehr, including those by M. Ovsienko, Muhsin Ferik Pasha consistently advocated for a diplomatic resolution to the Kuwaiti question. He believed that the threat of losing Kuwait to external influences, particularly British or local tribal forces, could be mitigated through peaceful negotiations. Muhsin Ferik Pasha emphasised the importance of curbing the ambitions of Abdul Aziz Al-Rashid, whose aggressive actions against Kuwait posed a significant threat to regional stability. A similar perspective was shared by Muhammad Fazil Pasha of Dagestan, the brigade commander entrusted with leading the Turkish punitive forces. Muhammad Fazil Pasha expressed concerns about the logistical challenges of deploying Ottoman troops in

the region and the potential for unintended consequences. His cautious approach reflected broader apprehensions within Ottoman military circles about the feasibility and risks of a direct confrontation with Mubarak Al-Sabah⁶.

Despite internal disagreements within the Ottoman administration, the central authorities ultimately resolved to proceed with a military campaign against Kuwait, a decision driven less by operational readiness than by the need to reassert imperial authority. In early 1901, Mushir Ahmed Feyzi Pasha was instructed to initiate preparations for offensive operations under his direct command, and by 6 April he had arrived in Basra to supervise the mobilisation process⁷.

The mobilisation of Ottoman forces quickly altered the strategic environment. Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah, aware of the growing threat, began consolidating his defensive capabilities, while British authorities closely monitored developments in light of their interests in Kuwait and the Persian Gulf. The arrival of the British cruiser «Lawrence» in the port of Basra on 7 April marked an early intervention in the crisis. Although officially framed as a precautionary measure, the sustained presence of the cruiser throughout the crisis functioned as a deterrent signal, underscoring Great Britain's readiness to protect its strategic position and further constraining Ottoman freedom of action⁸.

On 16 April, Mushir Ahmed Feyzi Pasha issued a formal written summons to sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah, demanding his presence in Basra within five days to address the escalating tensions. Mubarak Al-Sabah's response was characteristically defiant. He declared, «Let my enemies – Yusuf Ibrahim⁹, Abdul Aziz Al-Rashid, and Farik Kazim Pasha – appear in Basra first, and then I will appear. At present, I have no time for such matters, but I will gladly meet anyone who is willing to come to me»¹⁰. This refusal to comply with the Ottoman directive further escalated tensions and solidified Mubarak Al-Sabah's reputation as a leader unwilling to submit to external pressures. This response functioned not merely as an act of personal defiance but as a calculated political signal directed at both Ottoman officials and external observers, particularly Great Britain, indicating Mubarak Al-Sabah's confidence in alternative sources of protection and his readiness to test the limits of imperial coercion.

In response to sheikh's defiance, Ottoman generals accelerated their preparations for an invasion. Before launching hostilities, however, the Ottoman authorities conveyed a final ultimatum to Mubarak Al-Sabah. The terms of the ultimatum were uncompromising: sheikh

⁵Report of the titular councilor. 27 May 1901 // AIOS. 1901. Vol. 1, No. 26 (in Russ.).

⁶Ibid.

⁷Secret telegram of the Russian Imperial Consul General in Baghdad. 6 April 1901 // AIOS. 1901. Vol. 1, No. 13 (in Russ.).

⁸Report of Lieutenant General Sakharov. 11 April 1901 // Ibid. No. 16 (in Russ.).

⁹A major Al-Kuwaiti merchant who received support from the governor of Basra and the sultan's palace.

¹⁰Report of the titular adviser Ovsienko to the Russian Imperial Consulate General in Baghdad. 6 June 1901 // AIOS. 1901. Vol. 1, No. 19 (in Russ.) ; Secret telegram of court councilor Kruglov. Baghdad, 17 April 1901 // Ibid. No. 18 (in Russ.).

was required to renounce his authority as ruler of Kuwait, accept a ceremonial position as a member of the Ottoman State Advisory Council, and agree to live in honorary exile in a city of his choosing within the Ottoman Empire. Failure to comply would result in the immediate deployment of Ottoman forces to Kuwait [4, p. 21].

The subsequent developments following the initial tensions between sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's and the Ottoman Empire significantly altered the trajectory of events, ultimately favouring Mubarak Al-Sabah's position. Despite the initial mobilisation of Ottoman forces and plans for a punitive expedition against Kuwait, logistical, strategic, and geopolitical obstacles prevented the operation from materialising.

The Ottoman military strategy originally envisioned a two-pronged assault on Kuwait, combining land and naval forces. However, this plan encountered significant challenges. The deployment of cavalry overland was deemed highly risky due to the presence of hostile Arab tribes in the desert regions surrounding Kuwait. These tribes, often in conflict with Ottoman authorities, posed a substantial threat to the safe passage of Ottoman troops. Additionally, logistical issues related to the movement of infantry and artillery further complicated the feasibility of the campaign¹¹. The most critical impediment to the Ottoman campaign, however, was the presence of two British warships stationed off the coast of Kuwait. These vessels arrived shortly after Ottoman forces gathered in Basra, signaling Great Britain's keen interest in safeguarding its strategic influence in the Persian Gulf. The prospect of British intervention in support of Mubarak Al-Sabah presented a grave dilemma for the Ottoman leadership. Any military confrontation with British-backed forces risked not only a catastrophic defeat but also the potential for Great Britain to formalise its protectorate over Kuwait, thereby severing the territory from the Ottoman Empire entirely.

It is necessary to note that Ottoman efforts to reassert authority over Kuwait following Mubarak Al-Sabah's defeat reveal not a lack of imperial will, but the structural constraints limiting Ottoman coercion. Internal disagreements among Ottoman officials, logistical challenges of desert warfare, reliance on the Rashids as local proxies, and, above all, the risk of British military intervention severely narrowed Istanbul's options.

Faced with these unfavourable circumstances, the Ottoman authorities reassessed their approach, signaling a shift from coercive measures toward diplomatic engagement. Muhsin Ferik Pasha emerged as a key intermediary in this process. His decision to travel to Kuwait reflected an acknowledgment of the practical limits of military intervention under conditions of heightened imperial rivalry. During the negotiations, Muhsin Ferik Pasha engaged not only with Mubarak Al-Sabah but also with the commanders of the British warships anchored

in Kuwaiti waters, underscoring the triangular nature of the crisis¹² [4, p. 133–134; 6, p. 123].

Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah deliberately emphasised the protective role of the British naval presence, framing it as a deterrent rather than an explicit alliance. This rhetorical strategy increased the perceived costs of Ottoman escalation and reinforced Istanbul's suspicions that any use of force against Kuwait risked provoking direct British involvement. As a result, diplomatic accommodation emerged as the least risky option for the Ottoman authorities, further entrenching Kuwait's position as a semi-autonomous political actor within a contested imperial environment.

Despite this temporary reconciliation, the broader implications of these events marked a turning point in Kuwait's trajectory. The crisis underscored Mubarak Al-Sabah's growing reliance on British support, which, while providing him with immediate security, gradually drew Kuwait into a semi-dependent relationship with Great Britain. Over the following years, Kuwait increasingly aligned itself with British interests, accepting new obligations that further entrenched Great Britain's influence in the region.

For the Ottoman Empire, the resolution of the crisis was far from satisfactory. While the immediate threat of British intervention was averted, the status of Kuwait represented a significant challenge to Ottoman sovereignty. The empire continued to view Kuwait's alignment with Great Britain as a strategic vulnerability and sought, unsuccessfully, to reassert direct control over the territory in the years leading up to its eventual collapse.

The aborted punitive expedition of 1901 demonstrated that while the Ottoman Empire retained symbolic authority, it lacked the material and geopolitical conditions necessary to enforce it. The resulting compromise (Mubarak Al-Sabah renewed oath of loyalty to the sultan) represented a diplomatic stalemate rather than imperial restoration. Kuwait remained formally within the Ottoman political order while operating in practice as a semi-autonomous entity.

The failure of the Ottoman punitive expedition in 1901 not only shaped Kuwait's immediate political status but also influenced how external powers evaluated the region's strategic potential. Beyond Great Britain, which emerged as Kuwait's primary protector, Russian Empire also reassessed its interests in the Persian Gulf in light of the demonstrated limits of Ottoman authority. While Russian Empire had demonstrated interest in counterbalancing British influence, its activities in Kuwait and the surrounding areas remained secondary to its broader geopolitical and economic strategies. Reports from Russian diplomatic representatives, such as M. Ovsienko, indicated a limited capacity for Russian Empire to project influence in the gulf.

¹¹Report of the titular councilor. 27 May 1901 // AOIS. 1901. Vol. 1, No. 26 (in Russ.).

¹²Ibid.

By mid-1901, the Russian Empire had reached a definitive conclusion regarding its policy toward Kuwait. Saint Petersburg formally declined Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah earlier overtures for closer Russian involvement. This decision was driven by several factors, including a recognition of the region's unpredictability and a strategic calculation to avoid exacerbating tensions with Great Britain. Russian Empire's awareness of the secret Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty, which effectively placed Kuwait under British protection, further reinforced this cautious approach [9, p. 260]. Russian policymakers clearly understood that any active involvement in Kuwait would almost certainly provoke a strong British response, thereby jeopardising broader Russian-British relations.

Thus, while Russian Empire maintained a nominal presence in the gulf, its role was largely symbolic, aimed at preserving a semblance of influence and countering British dominance without direct confrontation. This cautious stance reflected the broader realities of imperial geopolitics, wherein regional ambitions were often tempered by the need to manage relations with rival powers.

The cautious Russian approach toward Kuwait was later formalised through analytical assessments conducted in the early 20th century. A comprehensive study completed in 1908 examined the military-political and

socio-economic interests of the Russian Empire in its peripheral regions, including the Persian Gulf, and evaluated the feasibility of potential policy initiatives [8]. The researchers concluded that establishing a military port in the Persian Gulf was both impractical and misaligned with Russian Empire's strategic interests. They deemed the execution of such a programme unviable and devoid of meaningful benefit. Similarly, the development of a naval fleet to safeguard Russian commercial interests in the region was deemed unnecessary, given the limited number of merchant vessels operating in the Persian Gulf and the lack of significant threats to their security [8].

The study also underscored the geopolitical risks associated with any Russian initiatives in the Persian Gulf. It emphasised that such actions could provoke reactions from European powers, particularly Great Britain, which maintained a dominant position in the region.

These conclusions underscored the geopolitical risks associated with any expansion of Russian activity in the Persian Gulf, particularly the likelihood of provoking reactions from dominant European powers, foremost Great Britain. As a result, Russian engagement with Kuwait remained confined to diplomacy and information-gathering, a pattern that persisted until the eve of the World War I.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that Kuwait's political trajectory at the turn of the 20th century was shaped by the interaction of local agency and imperial rivalry. Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah emerged as a central political actor who, operating under conditions of limited military and economic resources, successfully employed diplomacy and strategic maneuvering to preserve Kuwait's autonomy amid Ottoman decline and intensifying European competition.

The findings highlight the importance of external alignments in securing Kuwait's position. The Anglo-Kuwaiti treaty provided critical security guarantees, while Mubarak Al-Sabah's contacts with Russian Empire illustrate his efforts to explore alternative diplomatic options and to exploit imperial rivalries. At the

same time, restrained engagement of Russian Empire (shaped by geopolitical caution and the desire to avoid confrontation with Great Britain) demonstrates the structural limits faced by smaller powers seeking support beyond the dominant imperial actor in the region.

Kuwait's experience underscores that small political entities were not merely passive objects of imperial competition but active participants in shaping regional power dynamics. Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah's diplomacy exemplifies how local rulers could leverage imperial rivalries and balance-of-power politics to maintain de facto autonomy within a formally imperial framework. This case thus contributes to gulf historiography by illustrating the mechanisms through which local agency operated within (and sometimes constrained) imperial systems.

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