

Spain and Kuwait to reawaken business and trade

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His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah
Former Minister of Information State of Kuwait
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WORLD FOCUS: Can you please introduce yourself and describe your professional career within the Kuwaiti government?

Former Minister: I graduated from the University of Kuwait back in 1976 and then joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I served in the Kuwait mission to the United Nations for 10 years during some very difficult times, such as the Iraq and Iran war, then the Iraq invasion of 1990. After this, I served as Ambassador of Kuwait to Saudi Arabia between 1995 and 1998; I was then National Security Advisor from 1998 until 2006. In 2006, I joined the government as Minister of Social Affairs and Labor and have been Minister of Information since November 2007.

WF: You've mentioned that some of your previous assignments were particularly challenging. What can you tell us about your current job as Minister of Information? What are your priorities and goals?

Former Minister: Media, communications and information are changing a lot. Everybody can now have access to the whole world via mobile or PC, TV or other media in just a few minutes. In Kuwait, as an open society, we have 17 daily newspapers, 13 private satellite channels and a lot of activity in media and telecommunications. We have therefore to follow this and facilitate all media work.

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WF: Please tell us about your personal visit to the Spanish Expo Zaragoza 2008. The key theme was water, an issue affecting the whole world but one that has been a very important topic in Kuwait for a long time. The Kuwaiti pavilion was ranked among the Expo's best. Please tell us about your experience in Zaragoza and your personal conclusion after this global event.

Former Minister: The Expo was a really important occasion for us. A few decades ago, we had no water in Kuwait and we had to bring it from southern Iraq. In the desert, we strongly depend on the rainy season. But after the development of the oil sector, we invested and developed technologies that could extract the water we needed from the sea. We therefore believe that, in this field, we are in a position where we can exchange our experiences with others. Water is important for everybody and it is very expensive too.



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We are using a part of our oil revenues for our needs. It is also an environmental matter. In Davos last year, we presented a paper on water to share our experience with the world. The Expo was therefore a very important opportunity for us to showcase our example and describe the past, present and future on how we are planning and managing this vital resource.

WF: There is no better place in the world to take the issue of water scarcity seriously than in the Arabian Peninsula, of course. During Minister Moratino's visit to Kuwait, he placed great emphasis on the excellent relations between the Kuwaiti and Spanish Royal Families. How important is this relationship, in your view, to boost relations between the two countries? Both Royal Houses are very well perceived in their respective countries. How can this facilitate the reawakening of trade and business between the two countries?

Former Minister: I was very lucky to be able to accompany His Majesty during his visits to Kuwait. Back in 2007, I was at the airport myself when His Majesty came overnight on his way to visiting the Spanish troops in Afghanistan. I was also at the airport on his way back and then accompanied King Juan Carlos to a visit to His Highness the Emir. I witnessed first-hand how deep the relationship between the two leaders is, and the interest in seeing the relationship between Kuwait and Spain increase in all spheres. Last May I was close to the delegation of Spain here in Kuwait, and discussed our participation in the Expo Zaragoza with His Majesty. King Juan Carlos. He was very interested in our pavilion and wanted to know all the details. There was also an important delegation of businesses and the private sector present to discuss



the mechanism of previous agreements. We are happy to see this happening, since officially, the governments are both doing their best, bilaterally and multilaterally between the GCC countries and the EU. Before the end of this year, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs will be in Madrid, for the inauguration of our new embassy, and to discuss important matters with the Spanish government. The Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) will be there too—a delegation will visit Spain to discuss the opportunities there, and the private sector will also be involved.

WF: I am delighted to hear this, since it shows that our work on Kuwait will be coming at a perfect time. The new official visit will probably bring new opportunities. As you know, Spain is already a good partner of Kuwait, and, at a broader level, with the EU and GCC countries. Only a few days ago, at the opening of a Parliament session, this Highness the Emir stressed how, in spite of the current economic and financial crisis and the drop in oil prices, this is the time to push ahead all the mega-projects in Kuwait that aim to diversify the economy of the country. How can both countries partner up in the development of these mega-projects? Spain surely has some very important companies in sectors like infrastructure and construction, energy, finance, tourism, telecommunications, renewable energies, high-speed transport etc.

Former Minister: We are looking at it from both sides. The KIA will visit Spain officially to discuss opportunities available there. The private sector will of course also discuss ways to cooperate in the big projects included in our five-year development plan. We have some really big projects coming up, and the Spanish have experience. While these are government projects, we are giving the private sector a very important role. Our approach is to encourage the private sector to take the lead in these mega-projects in all fields and cooperate with all our friends around the world.

WF: What can you tell us about the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between GCC countries and the EU? Where do both blocks stand, and how long will it take before we can actually see the FTA become a reality?

Former Minister: We have been talking about the FTA for 17 years now. When I was at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we

opened discussions on this matter. I then also followed up as Ambassador of Kuwait to Saudi Arabia. I can tell you that the GCC countries are willing to conclude negotiations before the end of this year. We are now discussing the final touches of the agreement and we don't want to spend any more time on it, as it has been on the table for such a long time. I can assure you that we have reached the end of this process, and in Kuwait we hope this can be signed before the end of this year.

WF: This is obviously at a multilateral level. What about your bilateral negotiations?

Former Minister: We have excellent relations with countries like Germany, the UK, and Italy and of course we are encouraging further relations with Spain. We encourage both bilateral and multilateral relations.

WF: To conclude, I would like to ask you two more questions. First, please tell us about your priorities for this year and 2009. Second, please tell us about your vision in regards to Kuwait and the relationship between Spain and Kuwait.

Former Minister: As Minister of Information, I am also in charge of culture. At a cultural level, there are many things Kuwait and Spain can do together to better understand each other. Spain has played a great role in the past and present regarding the two civilizations. Last year, for example, we organized a moment of dialogue and confrontation together with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We have our own culture and we want to concentrate on cultural programs and events, including GCC countries. Both countries have a very deep cultural heritage, so we want to use culture in the future to improve our mutual understanding. This is our priority and we want to increase our cultural presence at major events.

Another thing I would like to add is that with the global crisis we have been very busy, since this is affecting our oil prices and global investments. We are now preparing for the Arab Economic Council, which will be held in Kuwait next January 2009. Representatives from the whole Arab world will be here between 19th and 20th January. Of course we are also inviting the G8, China and India, as well as international organizations like the World Bank and the IMF. Given the current world situation, this event comes at a very important time.