

BUILDING BRIDGES: KUWAIT'S SUBTLE DIPLOMACY AND HUMANITARIAN SOFT POWER IN A FRACTURED REGION

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Abstract

Amidst the global transitions towards a multipolar order in the 21st century, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are emerging as a crucial regional bloc aiming for wider global relevance. Among these, Kuwait, despite being a 'small state,' has gained respect and stature through its diplomatic acumen, playing roles as a mediator and aid giver, while committing to multilateralism. This paper examines how Kuwait's foreign policy posture has evolved within the region's geopolitical structure, with a primary focus on its soft power projection through subtle diplomacy. Using a historical framework, this study highlights the emergence of Kuwait as a stabilizing actor amidst growing regional rivalries through a comparative analysis. The author concludes that despite internal structural constraints and geo-strategic external pressures, Kuwait's nuanced foreign policy approach is a good example of how small-state diplomacy can shape larger regional dynamics. Thereby, this article contributes to a broader understanding of how small states exercise global agency in regions where great power competition and intra-regional rivalries intersect.

Keywords: *Small-state diplomacy, geopolitics, GCC, soft power, hedging, balancing.*

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Introduction

Within a rapidly changing global order resulting from geopolitical rivalries, regional conflict, and erosion of multilateral institutions and norms, small states are challenged to seek stability and security through innovative foreign policy strategies. Kuwait, a small state located in a volatile region, has traditionally used strategic partnerships and security alliances to counterbalance its vulnerability against predatory regional rivals. Over the years, Kuwait's agile monarchy has also safeguarded its interests through subtle diplomacy, utilizing the art of mediation and aid-giving, as well as multilateral engagement. Kuwait thus exemplifies how small states can leverage both strategic partnerships and adopt more nuanced diplomatic approaches to navigate and secure themselves within a tumultuous landscape. Kuwait's subtle statecraft thus reflects not only an effort to maintain its sovereignty and national security but also projects a sophisticated understanding of the rapidly growing interdependence between small states and larger powers in a fractured world.

In the 21st century, small states face unique challenges as they strive to survive and exert influence within a complex international system, dominated by larger powers, although globalization, technological advancement, and multilateralism have provided them with increased agency. Deriving from the dual lens of small state security and dependency theory, this paper analyses how Kuwait has moved beyond alliance-building to develop subtle diplomacy and soft power as a buffer for its security challenges, thereby exerting effective normative influence in the world.

Small State Security and Dependency Theory: In international relations, although a universal definition of small states remains elusive,¹ they are largely defined by their limited population and geographical size,² restricted military³ and economic capacities,⁴ narrow political action space, and vulnerability to regional conflicts. While Westphalian approaches gave recognition to the sovereign rights of all states, big or small, the advent of globalization enabled them greater trade access and a voice in international forums,⁵ but also exposed them to asymmetric

¹ Matthias Maass, "The Elusive Definition of the Small State," *International Politics* 46 (2009): 65–83, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2008.37>.

² Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (London: Frank Cass, 1990), 13.

³ Jean-Marc Rickli and Khalid S. Almezaini, "Theories of Small States' Foreign and Security Policies," in *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, ed. Khalid S. Almezaini and Jean-Marc Rickli (London: Routledge, 2017), 9–10.

⁴ Harvey W. Armstrong and Robert Read, "The Determinants of Economic Growth in Small States," *The Round Table* 92, no. 368 (2003): 99–124, <https://doi.org/10.1080/750456745>.

⁵ Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, "Small States: Concepts and Theories," in *Handbook on the Politics of Small States* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020), 2–3.

threats and risks (immigration, terrorism, human trafficking, environmental, etc.). Although there are many small states in the world today, only a few singularly impact at the global level. However, collectively, their voice has gained considerable traction through multilateral institutions and global collaborations.⁶ Small states have traditionally experimented with many alliance roles, including neutrality, balancing, and bandwagoning.⁷ More recently, they have opted for strategic hedging as a survival strategy⁸ to secure themselves from becoming a pawn in a great power conflict.

Dependency theory exemplifies the overreliance of small states on alliances and partnerships to counter their innumerable geopolitical challenges arising from great power conflicts, regional disputes, and contested border issues. Often, they become susceptible to volatility in global markets and prices.⁹ Small states also seek infrastructural and technical support arising from limited indigenous expertise and training. The COVID-19 revealed their challenges in health care, access to medications, and vaccines, limiting their capacity to recover from such hazards.¹⁰ Further, the ecosystems of small states remain particularly vulnerable to land erosion and environmental degradation,¹¹ arising from climate change. As a result, small states face critical dependency,¹² arising from comprehensive security challenges.

Apart from strategic partnerships and bilateral arrangements, the main strategies used by small states to offset their multifarious challenges include multilateralism by leveraging international law and institutions, economic diversification through investment in special services - sports, tourism, banking, development of green energy and digital economies and diplomatic initiatives through climate advocacy, conflict mediation and humanitarian aid. By exerting soft power, through such subtle diplomatic overtures, small states can exert a non-coercive influence both on the

⁶ Iver B. Neumann and Sieglinde Gstöhl, “Introduction: Lilliputians in Gulliver’s World?” in *Small States in International Relations*, ed. Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, and Sieglinde Gstöhl (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), 3–36.

⁷ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 17; Brittnee Carter, “Revisiting the Bandwagoning Hypothesis: A Statistical Analysis of the Alliance Dynamics of Small States,” *International Studies* 59, no. 1 (2022): 7–27.

⁸ Cheng-Chwee Kuik, “Getting Hedging Right: A Small-State Perspective,” *China International Strategy Review* 3, no. 2 (2021): 300–315, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-021-00089-5>.

⁹ Harvey W. Armstrong and Robert Read. “Trade and Growth in Small States: The Impact of Global Trade Liberalisation.” *World Economy* 21, no. 4 (1998): <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9701.00148>.

¹⁰ Hillary Briffa, “Small States and COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities for Multilateralism,” *Global Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (2023): 57708, <https://doi.org/10.1525/gp.2023.57708>.

¹¹ Matthew L. Bishop, “The Political Economy of Small States: Enduring Vulnerability?” *Review of International Political Economy* 19, no. 5 (2012): 942–960, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2011.635118>.

¹² Peter J. Katzenstein, “Small States and Small States Revisited,” *New Political Economy* 8, no. 1 (2003): 9–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356346032000078705>.

regional and the global stage.¹³ The more affluent small states have established soft power using financial aid for disaster relief, capacity building, poverty alleviation, post conflict reconstruction etc., to enhance their global agency such as, Singapore, Norway, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Qatar, Malta, Andorra, Liechtenstein, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait. The state of Kuwait's adoption of niche diplomacy to enhance its soft power and counterbalance its vulnerabilities remains the focus of this study.

Literature Review: There has been considerable academic writing on how small states navigate their foreign policy, despite limited security capabilities. It is argued that small states can utilize political economy, good governance, and diplomatic mediation as soft power to defy their territorial limitations, as seen in Singapore and Vatican City.¹⁴ Although small states lack coercive power, Sweden and Norway have repeatedly sponsored peace negotiations, as seen in the Oslo Accords.¹⁵ The successful mediatory role of small states in the Madrid Review Conference of 1983 suggests a more empirical approach to conflict resolution.¹⁶ Effectively increasing its foreign policy reach, Mongolia has emerged as a neutral peace broker in the Korean conflict since 2013, as seen in the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue initiatives.¹⁷

Despite having limited production possibilities to suit the consumption needs of an affluent society, Luxembourg has effectively used economic diplomacy through FDI and developmental assistance, far above other EU nations.¹⁸ Similarly, Estonia's status, despite its small size, was boosted by its aid impact on Georgia and Moldova.¹⁹ However, aid policies of small states can differ from those of larger

¹³ Joseph S. Nye, "Soft Power," *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153–171, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>; Binod K. Timilsana, "Soft Power and Small States: A Theoretical Discussion," *Journal of Political Science* (2024): 139–158, <https://doi.org/10.3126/jps.v24i1.62860>.

¹⁴ Alan Chong, "Small State Soft Power Strategies: Virtual Enlargement in the Cases of the Vatican City State and Singapore," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 23, no. 3 (2010): 383–405, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2010.484048>.

¹⁵ Fride Lia Stensland, "What Role Did Norway Really Play in the Oslo Process? A Case Study in Small-State Mediation," *Israel Studies Review* 38, no. 2 (2023): 30–47, <https://doi.org/10.3167/isr.2023.380204>.

¹⁶ William I. Zartman, "Mediation Roles for Large Small Countries," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 19, no. 1 (2013): 13–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600829208443013>.

¹⁷ Shinae Hong, "The Diplomatic Power of Small States: Mongolia's Mediation on the Korean Peninsula," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 76, no. 4 (2022): 415–431, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2022.2056577>.

¹⁸ Helen Kavvadia et al., *The Economic Diplomacy of Small States: A Case Study of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg* (SSRN, March 28, 2018), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3568999>.

¹⁹ Matthew Crandall and Ingrid Varov, "Developing Status as a Small State: Estonia's Foreign Aid Strategy," *East European Politics* 32, no. 4 (2016): 405–425, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2016.1221817>.

states, as seen in the examples of Sweden and the US, where small states give both higher quality aid and give it more generously than larger states.²⁰

The small GCC states, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman have each cultivated a unique identity through niche diplomatic efforts such as global aid, developmental assistance, peace mediation, environmental and climate advocacy, economic and financial services, multilateralism, media diplomacy, global branding through sports, financial services, educational partnerships, and security cooperation, as cornerstones of their foreign policy. Focusing on the increasing centralization of humanitarian governance, funding, and capacities in logistics and operations among Gulf donors, scholars have analyzed the dynamics of politicization and securitization that have made these states play diverse roles in regional and international systems through humanitarian aid and mediation.²¹ By analyzing the factors that motivate financial aid in the UAE and Kuwait using the Heckit model, it is evident that cultural and geographic proximity, along with human development, are key drivers.²² Similarly, aid is largely disbursed based on strategic geopolitical and security interests, although social aims still factor in the distribution of aid from the UAE and Kuwait.²³

It is also seen that foreign aid of some Gulf states has transformed after 9/11 and the 2011 Arab uprisings, shifting from a solidarity-based aid model to one strategically aligned with political and military geopolitical interests, particularly in regions like Yemen, Libya, and Syria.²⁴ Comparing the mediation efforts of Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar in the Yemen conflict, it is observed that when the level of independence in a small state's foreign policy is high, it is more likely to engage with proscribed actors, as seen in the case of Kuwait and Oman. However, the choices of Qatar were influenced by a certain level of dependence on Saudi Arabia.²⁵ However, although these states are rebranding themselves in terms of dis-

²⁰ Stephen J. Hoadley, "Small States as Aid Donors," *International Organization* 34, no. 1 (1980): 121–137, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300003994>.

²¹ Ghassan Elkahlout and Sansom Milton, "The Evolution of the Gulf States as Humanitarian Donors," *Third World Quarterly* 45, nos. 15–16 (2023): 2246–2265, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2229742>.

²² Beata Udvári, Katalin Kis, and Péter Halmosi, "Generosity or Economic Reasons? Motivations of Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates for Aid Allocations," *International Journal of Diplomacy and Economy* 4, no. 2 (2018): 81–106, <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJDIPE.2018.094088>.

²³ Jaromír Harmáček, Zdeněk Opršal, and Pavla Vitová, "Aid, Trade or Faith? Questioning Narratives and Territorial Pattern of Gulf Foreign Aid," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 24, no. 5 (2022): 772–794, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2022.2037958>.

²⁴ Mohammad Yaghi, Hanaa Almoaibed, and Silvia Colombo, "Foreign Aid of Gulf States: Continuity and Change," *Third World Quarterly* 45, nos. 15–16 (2024): 2145–2154, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2431294>.

²⁵ Freke Leene, "Small States, Big Fish: Comparing Kuwaiti, Omani, and Qatari Foreign Policy and Engagement with Proscribed Armed Groups During Mediation in Yemen" (master's thesis, 2023), <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1762844/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

tancing from terrorist sponsorship, transparency in allocation patterns, sources of aid provision, and coordination with multilateral organizations, these factors are merely based on self-reporting and therefore can be contentious.²⁶

In Kuwait, foreign policy is guided by conceptions of both 'national' and 'regime' security interests rather than 'any ideational attachment to mediation', thereby creating space for soft balancing in regional and global stages.²⁷ Kuwait's allocation of aid was initially influenced by internal and external factors such as the threat of annexation by Iraq, the prevention of the spread of Iran's Islamic revolution, and the support for pan-Arab causes. However, since the Gulf War, it has been used to reward nations that supported it, and after 9/11, Kuwait has leveraged its foreign aid to advance its interests during the war in Lebanon, the 2011 Arab uprisings, and the 2018 summit for the reconstruction of Iraq.²⁸ Kuwait's foreign policy tools, development assistance, and mediation in the Middle East from 2003 to 2014 are closely related to interdependence, soft power, and national interests.²⁹ In the Qatar Gulf crisis (2017), where the US and Kuwait presented third-party intervention, it was seen that small-state mediation was more effective in crisis de-escalation, while superpower mediation could exacerbate it.³⁰ Kuwait's success was in mediating through strategies parallel to the balance of power and soft power concepts, while not using any directive strategies in the mediation.³¹ Kuwait's role as mediator in some conflicts while remaining neutral in others and its consummate multilateralism within the region and at the global level are factors that make Kuwait significant on the global stage.³² Kuwait's humanitarian aid policy involves much coordination at multiple levels of state policy, civil society organizations,

²⁶ Mohammad Yaghi, "9/11 and Branding the Gulf States' Foreign Aid," *Third World Quarterly* 45, nos. 15–16 (2024): 2155–2174, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2304219>.

²⁷ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "Kuwait as a Mediator in Regional Affairs: The Gulf Crises of 2014 and 2017," *The International Spectator* 56, no. 4 (2021): 119–133, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1982293>.

²⁸ Mohammad Yaghi, "Kuwait's Foreign Aid: Motivations and Allocations," in *The Making of Contemporary Kuwait: Identity, Politics, and Its Survival Strategy*, ed. Mahjoob Zweiri and Sinem Cengiz (London: Routledge, 2024), 69–87.

²⁹ Mohamed Naser, "Kuwait's Foreign Policy towards Regional Issues in the Middle East from 2003 to 2014," *Asian Social Science* 13, no. 11 (2017): 95–108, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v13n11p95>.

³⁰ Ibrahim Fraihat, "Superpower and Small-State Mediation in the Qatar Gulf Crisis," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 2 (2020): 79–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2020.1741268>.

³¹ Huzeyfe Altıok, "Kuwait's Mediation in the Gulf Crisis: Dynamics of Kuwait's Foreign Policy Approaches," in *Social Change in the Gulf Region: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023), 597–618.

³² Joshua Kirkhope-Arkley, "Balancing the Scales: Kuwait's Neutrality Amidst Geopolitical Rivalries in a F(r)actus Middle East," *The Columbia Journal of Asia* 1, no. 1 (2022): 159–174, <https://doi.org/10.52214/cja.v1i1.9356>.

and individual donors who volunteer and fund international Islamic charities.³³ Kuwait's charitable and developmental aid policy also extends towards Africa, which has enabled its political clout, seen in its support for Kuwait's election as a non-permanent member to the UN Security Council in 2017.³⁴

The above literature review depicts significant gaps, such as limited theoretical engagement with small state behavior relating to niche diplomacy, pros and cons of Kuwait's mediation efforts and humanitarian aid, domestic drivers of Kuwait's subtle diplomacy, and limited literature comparing such policy between Kuwait and similar small states of the GCC. Deriving from these gaps, this paper analyses how Kuwait navigates specific strategies of niche diplomacy, to gain regional and global impact, using the following research questions:

1. How has Kuwait constructed and leveraged its foreign policy through niche diplomacy?
2. What are the domestic drivers of Kuwait's foreign policy relating to niche diplomacy?
3. What are the advantages and constraints for Kuwait while using niche diplomacy?
4. How does Kuwait compare with other small GCC states in balancing soft power?
5. How can niche diplomacy serve as a sustainable soft power tool for small states?

Kuwait: Small State in a Turbulent Neighborhood

Historically, in international relations, small states have largely remained passive actors with limited agency and influence, often subjected to the rule playbook of big powers. However, in the aftermath of decolonization and the fall of the erstwhile USSR, more small states have come into existence. These small states seek to adopt a foreign policy that is more proactive in the international arena, using their geostrategic assets to play an impactful role, far greater than their size and population. Kuwait is one such state with vast fossil fuel resources, located at the critical junction connecting the East and the West in the Arabian Gulf, surrounded by large powers - Iraq and Iran. Kuwait's diplomatic culture emanates from its Arab tribal antecedents. In the Arab world, tribal relations have endured through in-

³³ Mara A. Leichtman, "Humanitarian Sovereignty, Exceptional Muslims, and the Transnational Making of Kuwaiti Citizens," *Ethnography* 24, no. 3 (2023): 407–431, <http://dx.doi.org/10.52214/cja.v1i1.9356>.

³⁴ Mara A. Leichtman, "Kuwait's Foreign Relations with East Africa," in *The Gulf States and the Horn of Africa: Interests, Influences and Instability*, ed. Robert Mason and Simon Mabon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 199–226, <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526162175.00015>.

numerable conflicting and contentious relationships, scarce resources, and a deep sense of tribal honor. Often, when conflicts arose between tribes, a third party (a respected *Shaikh* or leader of a neutral tribe) would be asked to assume the role of a mediator, to ensure that all tribes could live in peace, sharing the limited resources. The two main Arabic terms associated with such diplomacy are ‘*Sulh*’ and ‘*musalahā*,’ signifying techniques of conflict resolution emphasizing mediation, reconciliation, and fostering of enduring relationships.³⁵ Deriving from such a culture of neutral third-party mediation, Kuwait’s leaders earned respect for their neutrality, wisdom, and statesmanship in conflict mediation, especially among the six Gulf states that originated from similar tribal traditions.

In 1961, Kuwait severed its status as a British protectorate, gained statehood, established semi-democratic institutions, and soon began its journey as a leading oil exporter and key player in world oil trade. However, Kuwait’s immense wealth only rendered it more vulnerable due to encroachment by its aggressive neighbors. The attack on Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990 revealed the strategic vulnerability of Kuwait despite guarantees of support from regional institutions such as the GCC and the Arab League. Therein, Kuwait’s security dependency through security and military partnerships with the US, UK, and France was necessary to secure its borders. This included allowing foreign military bases and forward deployment and posturing. However, with the waning of US engagement in the Arabian Gulf region, even as the world is transcending to a multipolar order, and the rise of regional rivalries within the GCC, Kuwait seeks to avoid becoming a pawn in global and regional great power rivalries. Kuwait has adopted a policy of strategic hedging³⁶ to safeguard its economic and security interests, forming multilateral partnerships with China, Turkey, India, and Russia, even as it continues its older partnerships with the US, France, and the UK. Such balancing is viewed as mandatory for Kuwait’s security as well as economic growth.³⁷

Kuwait’s Niche Diplomacy

Kuwait has also been driven to adopt comprehensive security strategies through neutrality, mediation, conflict resolution, and financial aid as an intrinsic part of its

³⁵ George E. Irani, “Apologies and Reconciliation: Middle Eastern Rituals,” in *Taking Wrongs Seriously: Apologies and Reconciliation*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Alexander Karn (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2006), 132–150, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804767804-009>.

³⁶ Ismail N. Telci and Mehmet Rakipoğlu, “Hedging as a Survival Strategy for Small States: The Case of Kuwait,” *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 10, no. 2 (2021): 213–229, <https://doi.org/10.20991/allazimuth.960945>.

³⁷ Abdullah K. Alshayji, “Kuwait’s Security Dilemma: The Balancing Acts of a Small Nation-State,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 3 (2010): 59–81, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jsa.2010.0006>.

foreign policy initiatives.³⁸ It has juggled neutrality in regional conflicts, soft power balancing through humanitarian and development aid, often referred to as Dinar Diplomacy,³⁹ and mediation to gain credibility and significant influence in the UN, Arab League, GCC, and many other multilateral institutions.

Kuwait's mediation role was evidenced after its independence between Bahrain and Iran in 1968, between Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which led to the formation of the UAE in 1971, and between Qatar and Saudi Arabia in 2003. Kuwait was also the major force behind the inception of the GCC in 1981, validating the need for regional multilateral diplomacy. Abdullah Bishara, a Kuwaiti diplomat, became the GCC's first Secretary General. The role of Kuwait's Late Emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, who was a key statesman and foreign minister of Kuwait for four decades, is also noteworthy as the architect of Kuwait's niche diplomacy. Known as a doyen of diplomacy in the region, he earned respect through his wide experience, astute leadership, and able and subtle networking abilities within the Arab world. After his passing in 2020, the region is witnessing a shift towards more aggressive use of niche diplomacy by new age leaders such as Prince Mohammad Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Shaikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the UAE, thereby over shadowing Kuwait's more restrained approach. Maintaining Kuwait's stature and reputation as a subtle and effective mediator requires more engaged and consistent efforts, even as Kuwait transitions into the hands of a new generation of leaders. Some of Kuwait's efforts at mediation in the last four decades are detailed in Table 2.

Table 1: Kuwait's mediation efforts in some regional conflicts

| Case | Role | Methods Used | Outcomes |
|---|--|--|---|
| PLO-Jordan conflict (1970s) ⁴⁰ | Encouraged reconciliation via the Arab League | Non-confrontational diplomacy using ties with the Palestinian leadership | Limited success, supported Arab unity in major forums |
| Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) | Mediation through the Arab League, and financial support | Early outreach and mediation efforts | Groundwork for the Taif agreement of 1988 |
| Yemen North-South Conflict (1972) | Brokered Kuwait Agreement | Hosted talks in Kuwait City | Formal agreement on unification signed |

³⁸ Radhika Lakshminarayanan, *Small State Security Dilemma: Kuwait after 1991* (Chennai: Notion Press, 2019), 101–103.

³⁹ Abdul-Reda Assiri, *Kuwait's Foreign Policy: City-State in World Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 26–27.

⁴⁰ Abdul-Reda Assiri, "Kuwait's dinar diplomacy: the role of donor-mediator." *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 3 (1991). ProQuest.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) | Key participant in GCC and UN-led advocacy efforts | Quiet diplomacy, Logistical and humanitarian support | Helped support ceasefire diplomacy (UNSCR 598) |
| Iraq Post-2003 Reconciliation Diplomacy | Support to normalize GCC and Arab ties with post-Saddam Iraq | Engagement through the Arab League, bilateral visits | Improved Kuwait-Iraq ties supported the reintegration of Iraq regionally |
| Sudan and Darfur Conflict (2007 onward) | Support to Arab/African peace efforts, humanitarian diplomacy | Donor conferences, mediation support | The political mediation role is secondary |
| Lebanese Political Crisis (2008) | Mediator through the Arab League and bilateral diplomacy | Quiet diplomacy, support for unity governments | Helped de-escalate tensions, reinforced Kuwait's neutrality |
| Post Arab Spring crisis between Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE, and Qatar (2013–14) ⁴¹ | Key Mediator between GCC members | Back-channel talks emphasizing Arab unity | The Riyadh Supplementary Agreement (November 16, 2014) |
| Yemen Peace Talks (2016) ⁴² | Hosted the UN-sponsored peace talks in Kuwait City | Providing a neutral venue, support to the UN process | Talks were unsuccessful, though Kuwait's efforts were commendable |
| 2017–2021 Gulf Crisis (Qatar Blockade) ⁴³ | Key mediator between Qatar and the blockading states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain) | Shuttle diplomacy, back-channel talks, Public calls for dialogue | Helped maintain dialogue, reduced escalation, and Laid groundwork for Al-Ula Declaration (2021) |
| General Arab Conflicts (e.g., Syria, Libya) | Advocacy for dialogue within the Arab League, NAM, OIC, and GCC. | Multilateral diplomacy, hosting summits, a bridge-builder: radical and conservative Arab states | Recognition of Kuwait's role as a neutral peace broker for Arab unity |

⁴¹ Marwan Kabalan, “Kuwait’s GCC Mediation: Incentives and Reasons for Failure,” in *The GCC Crisis at One Year: Stalemate Becomes New Reality* (Washington, DC: Arab Center, 2018), 23–30, <https://arabcenterdc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Stalemate-becomes-reality.pdf#page=23>.

⁴² Robert Forster, “Toward a Comprehensive Solution? Yemen’s Two-Year Peace Process,” *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 3 (2017): 479–488, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/90016474>.

⁴³ Abdulhadi Alajmi, “The Gulf Crisis: An Insight into Kuwait’s Mediation Efforts,” *International Relations and Diplomacy* 6, no. 10 (2018): 2328–2134, <https://doi.org/10.17265/2328-2134/2018.10.002>.

Table 1 indicates that Kuwait establishes credibility as a mediator capable of driving conflict resolution, by providing a neutral platform for negotiations as a host in regional peace-making conferences, relying on ‘behind the scenes’ efforts using back channels with Iran and Iraq, leveraging its relations with the GCC monarchies, and using multilateral institutions. Comparing Kuwait’s efforts at niche diplomacy with other small GCC states (Table 2), we see that Kuwait focuses on quiet diplomacy and a more balanced foreign policy, although it lacks the high-profile visibility and aggressive soft power branding in comparison to the UAE and Qatar.

Table 2: Comparison of soft power in GCC: Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain

| Policy elements | Kuwait | UAE | Qatar | Oman | Bahrain |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|--|--|--|
| Posturing and Branding | Limited branding, Subtle diplomacy, Neutrality, Active Mediation | High Branding, Aggressive global player, Rapid modernization | High Branding-Assertive and influential diplomacy | Soft branding, Quiet Diplomacy, Neutral mediation | Soft Branding, Open economy |
| Soft Power tools | Humanitarian and Development aid, UN alignment | Tourism, Business hub, Conferences, Expo, moderate humanitarian aid | Hub for Sports (World Cup 2022, Formula 1 Grand Prix), Education city, Finance, Media (Al Jazeera), humanitarian and development aid | ‘Ibadism’ (Tolerance and dialogue, Sultan Qaboos Chairs and Cultural Centers, Tourism, logistics | Sports (Formula 1 Grand Prix), cultural events, finance, tourism, and information technology |
| Diversification | Slow cautious approach | Rapid and well diversified | Rapid Progress | Steady progress | Steady Progress |
| Sovereign Wealth Fund and investment | Kuwait Investment Authority | Abu Dhabi Investment Authority | Qatar Investment Authority | Oman Investment Authority | <i>Mumtalaka t Holding Company</i> |
| Strategic Engagement | Defensive military alliances, multilateral | Proactive military alliances-US, | Al Udeid US air base, Turkish base- | US Joint Logistics Support Base at | Strong US alignment, HQ of U.S. Navy's |

| | | | | | |
|---------------------|---|---|--|--|---|
| | security, Neutrality, Logistic support through US bases in Afghanistan | France, Overt and covert engagement in Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, the Abraham Accords | Doha, logistic support in the Afghanistan conflict | Duqm, Bilateral partnerships, neutrality, Logistics support to the US in Afghanistan | Fifth Fleet, Limited Engagement - Afghanistan military operations - Houthis |
| Geopolitical Thrust | Neutrality, strategic balancing (Iran, Iraq, GCC), and multipolar hedging | US alignment, hedging with China, India | US bases, Hedging with Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia | US bases, Strategic hedging, and multi-engagement | Balancing strategies, Alignment with the US and Saudi Arabia |

Kuwait also provides developmental and humanitarian aid through national institutions, NGOs, and multilateral organizations. As early as 1962, the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) was established to disburse loans for development assistance, infrastructure, health, education, and economic growth in developing countries. Aid is also disbursed through the Kuwait Red Crescent Society (KRCS), which provides emergency humanitarian relief in disaster zones and conflict-ridden areas. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), through the Department of Development and International Cooperation, coordinates Kuwait's contributions towards UN programs, humanitarian summits, regional crises, and works in cooperation with other state charitable organizations and NGO's that provide aid to Islamic charities for education, orphan relief, and healthcare. Kuwait also partners with UN agencies such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), UNICEF, World Food Program (WFP), and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Kuwait was also recognized as an 'international humanitarian center' by the UN, and its Amir, Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, was awarded for Humanitarian leadership in 2014. As a center for humanitarian excellence, Kuwait facilitates partnerships with international agencies and NGOs, as well as enables capacity-building through training programs, workshops, and knowledge-sharing initiatives. Since its independence in 1961, Kuwait has played a key role as an aid giver (Table 3):

Table 3: Brief profile of Kuwait as an aid giver (1961- 2025)⁴⁴

| Region | Recipient Country | Type of Aid | Institutional mechanism |
|----------------|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| Arab Region | Palestine (West Bank/Gaza) | Refugee aid, education, health care, reconstruction | UNHRA, NGO's, Direct aid |
| | Yemen | Disaster relief, Infrastructure development, healthcare, humanitarian aid | KFAED, MOFA, |
| | Lebanon | Emergency relief, Infrastructure development | Arab League, MOFA, |
| | Egypt | Infrastructure, Economic Development | KFAED |
| | Sudan | Power Generation, Water Projects | KFAED |
| | Jordan | Post-war reconstruction | KFAED, MOFA |
| African Region | To Syrian refugees (in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey) | Refugee aid, Pledging conferences | MOFA, UNHCR, NGO's |
| | Morocco, Senegal, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Uganda, Benin, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Chad, Gabon | Agriculture, Energy, hospitals, airports, water, and sanitation works | KFAED |
| | Somalia, Ethiopia | Food, water, Healthcare, Emergency relief | KFAED, KRCS |
| | Tanzania | Textile Industry, Port Improvement | KFAED |
| | Kenya | Infrastructure, Health, Education | KFAED, NGO's |
| Middle East | Iran | Earthquake relief | MOFA |
| | Afghanistan | Refugee relief, Humanitarian aid, support for Islamic charities, education | NGO's, MOFA, KFAED, UNHCR, WFP, KRCS |
| | Iraq | Post-war Reconstruction and humanitarian aid | KFAED, Direct donations, UN forums |
| Asia | Indonesia | Tsunami/earthquake/flood relief | UNDP, UNICEF, KRCS |
| | Pakistan | Earthquake/Flood relief | UNICEF, KRCS, WFP, KFAED |
| | Philippines | Typhoon relief, healthcare | UNICEF, KRCS, IFRC |
| | India | COVID-19 aid/disaster relief | WHO, KRCS, |

⁴⁴ **Source:** Data corroborated from KFAED Annual Reports.

Table 3 shows that Kuwait's aid contributions have extended beyond Arab and Islamic states to include multiple countries from different regions of the world.

| | | | KFAED |
|------------------------|-----------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| | Sri Lanka | Tsunami relief, Poverty alleviation, infrastructure | UNDP, UNICEF, KRCS, KFAED |
| | Maldives | Environmental conservation | UNDP, UNICEF, KFAED |
| | Thailand | Flood relief, Healthcare | UNICEF, KRCS, WFP |
| | Nepal | Earthquake relief, Education, Health care | UNDP, UNICEF, KRCS |
| | Myanmar | Rohingya refugee aid, Medical supplies, Food relief | UNHCR, WFP, KRCS |
| | Bangladesh | Rohingya refugee relief, shelter, and healthcare | KRCS, UNHCR, KFAED, WFP |
| Latin America | Argentina, Cuba | Sustainable development, Infrastructure | KRCS, UN agencies, and Direct support |
| The Caribbean | Haiti | Earthquake relief, pandemic support, and food aid | KFAED |
| Europe | Italy- 1980 | Earthquake relief | MOFA |
| | Poland-2022 | Ukrainian refugee aid, Medical aid, humanitarian relief | KRCS, UN Agencies |
| Global Aid (2020-2021) | 50 nations | COVID-19 pandemic | Kuwait Pandemic Response Fund |

Domestic Constraints Driving Kuwait's Foreign Policy

Kuwait faces considerable domestic challenges emanating from its single resource dependence on fossil fuels, which account for 90% of government revenue, rendering Kuwait vulnerable to high fluctuations in global oil prices. Kuwait also faces demographic challenges from a low indigenous population and overdependence on expatriate labor that forms 70% of Kuwait's population, particularly in critical fields like infrastructure, construction, healthcare, essential services, and domestic labor. Although Kuwait created the world's first Sovereign Wealth Fund (SWF) as a financial buffer for a post-oil future, and it is still among the largest globally, its long-term sustainability depends on reform, growth, and successful diversification measures. Kuwait is also restrained by its relatively open political system with a quasi-democratic parliament, which leads to constitutional deadlocks, public debates, and opposition-led executive-legislative conflicts, which only hinder the nation's growth. Kuwait has a large youth population, and although this is seen as a demographic dividend, its high expectations for public sector employment and hesitation to enter the private sector put considerable pressure on Kuwait's government, resulting from the cradle-to-grave welfare model that is entrenched in Ku-

wait's constitution.⁴⁵ To address these challenges, Kuwait has launched considerable initiatives through its 'Vision 2035'; however, its progress is slow and limited due to corruption, bureaucratic inertia, political gridlock, and administrative self-interest. Kuwait is also among the most water-scarce nations in the world, depending almost exclusively on desalination plants along the Arabian Gulf waters. Coupled with extreme climate change and rising summer temperatures, Kuwait relies on high energy consumption, which may not be sustainable in the long run.

These domestic pressures and Kuwait's external strategic vulnerability have contributed to Kuwait's emphasis on consensus and caution, which have slowed diversification efforts, limited visibility, and global branding. Unlike its small state neighbors, Kuwait has not yet developed its soft power using assertive branding through tourism, international sports, cultural events, and a business-friendly environment, although such efforts are in the pipeline. Therein, intentionally using quiet diplomacy, avoiding regional military engagement, focusing on humanitarian aid, mediation, and multilateralism has proven a more sustainable foreign policy approach for Kuwait.

Discussion

Small states often use soft power as a key component of their foreign policy to enhance their strategic interests. Despite limited capabilities, small states can seek leverage through diplomatic overtures like aid and mediation. Such strategies enhance their global reputation and image, build a network of responsive partners, and foster goodwill without being seen as a selfish aggressor or bully. This enables them to gain influence within international organizations, like the UN, where aid contributions can help them gain recognition within larger coalitions or secure favorable votes towards key resolutions. The positioning of small states in supporting humanitarian causes provides them a moral stance as champions of peace and human dignity in a norm-based society. Further, small states also gain critical strategic access within aid recipient nations, which can boost their security interests and provide trade and investment opportunities. Therefore, for small states, such soft power strategies help to compensate for their logistical inadequacies and enable considerable influence to survive in the present interconnected and interdependent world.

The main objective of this paper was to analyze how Kuwait uses niche diplomacy to make an impact within a multipolar world. Responding to our first re-

⁴⁵ Radhika Lakshminarayanan, "Youth Development in Kuwait: Dimensions of Civic Participation and Community Engagement towards Nation Building," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 2 (2020): 230–250, <https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12221>.

search question on the construction and leveraging of Kuwait's niche diplomacy we see that although Kuwait may be seen as a muted player in the regional and global scene, in comparison with its more prominent neighbors, a close study of Kuwait's posture indicates that it is playing a different game by its own rules and standards. Kuwait seeks to project economic stability, diplomatic reliability, and financial credibility through humanitarian leadership and peace mediation. Kuwait's subtle diplomacy is deliberately and carefully calibrated, deeply rooted in its history, society, and culture. Given its turbulent past, Kuwait seeks to avoid a similar debacle by refraining from polarizing, provoking, and taking sides.

Our second research question is on the domestic drivers of Kuwait's policy of niche diplomacy. Kuwait's dependence on a single resource represents an inherent need for economic diversification, experience with war and destruction, and the state's accountability to public debate due to its quasi-democratic political system drives Kuwait's stance of cautious neutrality and mediation in foreign policy. Additionally, through humanitarian aid, Kuwait seeks to project itself as using its affluence to champion global development and support humanitarian causes across the world.

Regarding our third research question, on the advantages and constraints of this policy, we note that Kuwait has deliberately adopted a quiet and benevolent foreign policy aimed at protection and survival. As a mediator, Kuwait has won some degree of credibility as a sincere and non-partisan peace broker, e.g., the 2017 Gulf crisis, the Yemen conflict, and even moderating dialogue with Iran. Unlike other Gulf monarchies, Kuwait's executive is more accountable to public discourse and a free media; therefore, more aggressive leanings in the Israel-Palestine conflict or Sunni-Shia rivalries remain sensitive. A low profile and neutral foreign policy stance thus enable Kuwait to maintain an 'open door' and flexible approach that protects its national interests and safeguards its sovereignty at all costs.

To answer our fourth question comparing Kuwait with small states in the GCC, we note that Kuwait's niche diplomacy is quite distinct from other GCC states. A purview of Table 2, elucidates that while the UAE has largely diversified its economy to be recognized as a vibrant business hub in the region, Qatar has diversified through sports, conferences and educational infrastructure, and Oman through tourism and culture focus, Kuwait has only now begun similar efforts through its Kuwait Vision 2035. However, while the UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain have been overtly or covertly taking sides in regional conflicts, Kuwait has strictly maintained neutrality and shown immense capability to mediate within the GCC.

Our final research question was to analyze whether such niche diplomacy can serve as a sustainable soft power tool for small states. Kuwait is deeply shaped by

its external security challenges and domestic constraints; however, its quiet and niche diplomacy, economic buffers, and political institutions have provided it with significant tools to navigate an increasingly complex and fractured international order. By emphasizing niche diplomacy, Kuwait has acquired a reputation as a peace builder without seeming to meddle in regional politics. This is a more tenable posture given Kuwait's exposure to violent and destructive conflicts, its more revisionist neighbors, Iraq and Iran, and the need to balance among the Sunni, Shia, as well as tribal elements within its borders. Similar image branding as a humanitarian state and bridge builder can garner considerable voice for small states in international and regional organizations. However, while humanitarian aid can be a powerful tool for soft power, it also has significant risks and limitations.

Financial aid is often perceived as non-altruistic and politically motivated, which undermines the credibility of the donor state and reduces its effectiveness. Such efforts have been criticized as 'Aid washing' for image building, often to distract or overshadow human rights violations or military aggression. Financial aid can also create a kind of dependency among the aid recipients that can delay growth, and retard self-sufficiency. Mismanagement of aid by corrupt government agencies or NGO's can enable wrongful access and use for nefarious activities like militarization, terrorism, smuggling, etc. Aid may also be used by donors as a means to influence political processes and policies that align with the donor's geopolitical interests, thereby undermining the operational legitimacy of local governance of the recipient nation. Aid allocation may also favor states with similar religion, culture, or ideology, thereby excluding other needy nations. When small states prioritize funds for aid to enhance their national image, sometimes sidelining domestic issues like poverty, unemployment, or health care, it can cause discontent among the indigenous population of the donor nations. It is therefore essential for small states to carefully design and implement humanitarian aid programs that prioritize the needs of the recipients, align with broader domestic and humanitarian principles, and ensure that the aid provided is effective, transparent, and ethically sound.

Conclusion

Kuwait, located in a particularly volatile and complex region in the world, exudes typical elements of small state dependency and vulnerability. Therefore, investing in niche diplomacy forms an effective foreign policy strategy to protect its national security interests. Using a historical framework and comparative analysis, this paper examined Kuwait's soft power projection towards its national branding as a stabilizing actor in the region.

Kuwait largely relies on ‘quiet and subtle diplomacy’ using more of covert mediation through back channels, to achieve results. While its efforts are credible, back-channel encounters are neither officially documented nor published, and, therefore, any study is limited in reliance on secondary sources such as media reports and published accounts from think tanks and international bodies, which often lack nation-specific contexts. Another limitation is that local statistical databases of the government do not have consistent and uniform longitudinal data on Kuwait’s financial aid and mediation efforts across decades; hence, much information cannot be corroborated. While this study focused on Kuwait’s niche diplomacy, it did not analyze how Kuwait’s foreign aid and mediation efforts are institutionalized, through specific channels like the KFAED or MOFA; their structures, funding models and operational norms, as well as by non-state actors like the Zakat house and KRCS, which future research can work on. Further quantitative studies could also be done on the effectiveness of Kuwait’s aid vis-à-vis specific sectors like education, healthcare, food security, infrastructure development, etc. Thereby providing scope for studying the more tangible impact of financial aid on recipient countries.

Kuwait is among the few GCC states that seek to play a key role in back-channeling dialogue not only within the GCC but also between the GCC states and Iran. Within the emerging geopolitical tensions and the elusive nuclear deal with Iraq, navigating mediation through neutrality and statesmanship can be a game-changer for this small state. As the internal dynamics of the GCC become more complex and competitive, with conflicting interests for regional domination and economic diversification, Kuwait can be a major player in building bridges between these states, each attempting to outdo the other in terms of international branding and soft power.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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