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A Briefing on Kuwait and Gulf Affairs with the U.S. Ambassador to Kuwait Amb Deborah Jones Middle East Institute Washington, D.C. August 27, 2009

The Middle East Institute hosted a lively discussion with **Ambassador Deborah Jones**, the current American ambassador in Kuwait. Ambassador Jones opened by countering common misconceptions about Kuwait in the West, praising it for “punching above its weight,” as a major strategic partner to the United States, as well as a thriving indigenous democracy. Kuwait enjoys stability and a sophisticated political culture, she said, and demonstrates mature male and female integration across its social spectrums.

The physical architecture of Kuwait offers insight into the country’s culture and life, reflected in *diwanias* which play host to integrated social gatherings, open criticism of the government and facilitate the freedom of expression. In particular, Jones alluded to the 17 operating newspapers in Kuwait, which is unique for the region.

In its political evolution, Kuwait is following the same path as 19th century Europe, with the social mobilization and “leavening” of society upward as the monarchy considers how to balance its rule and accommodate other social forces. We are witnessing change taking place in Kuwait, she noted, as discussion dominates the political scene about how to relieve the tension between the monarch and non-partisan candidates for elected office. Political parties are not explicitly mentioned in the Kuwaiti constitution, Jones said, and although they are not explicitly banned, their lack of mention has led to a non-party political system.

Kuwaiti women enjoy extraordinarily high quality education and influence in social life, although this influence lags in political life. Yet, this is not all that different that women’s efforts to break the glass ceiling at the higher echelons of American politics, she said.

On U.S.-Kuwait relations, Jones spoke of a “co-dependent” relationship, countering misconceptions that the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait should give it a subservient role to the U.S. Kuwait has proven indispensable to U.S. strategy in Iraq, providing considerable in-kind logistical support to American operations. As the withdrawal from Iraq approaches, Jones said it will not be surprising if Kuwaiti businesses that provide support translate their attention to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. The partnership with Kuwait goes beyond security and strategic objectives, she said, as a small trade relationship this thriving; Kuwaiti spending on General Motors outpaces military sales, she said.

The U.S. works with Kuwait to best facilitate the use of its two largest resources, hydrocarbons and the Kuwaiti people, encouraging Kuwait to use financial direct investment to invest in its long-term human capacities. Spending or investing the country’s national wealth is in part determined by its democratic parliament, and hence local politics, she said. Working on spending or other issues such as its relationship to Iraq, injects “intense” political dynamics into Kuwait—complicating U.S. relations with Kuwait. Sometimes working with autocrats is easier than with democrats, she joked.