

**The First Arab Gulf Country Establishing Full Diplomatic
Relationship with China**

**—Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the First
Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense of Kuwait**

Chao SUN

Kuwait is the first Arab gulf country to establish diplomatic ties with China and the friendship between the two countries goes back to ancient times. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1971, China-Kuwait relations have been developing steadily and healthily. Kuwait was one of the first countries to respond to China's Belt And Road Initiative and to sign relevant cooperation documents with China.

Of the thirty remaining monarchies around the world, six are from the Middle East, including Kuwait, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. What are the first words that spring to your mind when talking about royal family and princes, especially those from the Middle East? Mystical? Wealthy? Powerful? Or Inapproachable?

Recently I had an exclusive opportunity to have an in-depth dialogue with

the Minister of Al-Diwan Al-Amiri Affairs, the eldest son of the king of Kuwait, who is not only an influential figure in Kuwait, but the greatest collector of Islamic art in the world as well.



A Special Kind of Prince

He took us by surprise when he showed up dressed in a traditional pure white robe and said a cheerful hello to us, with a beaming smile on his face.

I invited him to his seat as I said: “Welcome, Your Excellency.” He fished out of the pocket on his robe a small note thickly dotted with Arabic words. I asked him what it was out of curiosity. He smiled and said, “That’s my cheat sheet.”

My professional photographer suggested that he take a few photos of the prince before we started the interview. He agreed and thoughtfully took off his glasses and asked smilingly, “Is it better to take off my glasses?”

“Affable” becomes the first word that comes to my mind when I think of him.

“Qian Long is My Friend”

Sun Chao: Your Excellency, I feel so honored to be here with you today. Welcome to Beijing. Welcome to China. Thank you so much for having us with your busy schedule in Beijing.

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: We need to talk about this trip, because it could be the most important trip, which is about His Excellency Xi’s vision, the Belt and Road Initiative.

Sun Chao: Yes, before we start, may I make a brief introduction? My name is Sun Chao and you can call me Chao. It’s a common name in China. I used to work and live in the United States. My point of mentioning my experience is that when I was in New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art was my favorite place. Thank you for your generous donation, which has made it possible for ordinary people like me to take a close look at so many spectacular Islamic art

works.

It's a great pleasure meeting you in person today. I launched "Belt and Road" Ambassador Interview on the communication platform of DRC to promote the international strategy of the initiative and make a humble contribution to China's think tank diplomacy. That's why we are here today.

Kuwait is a very important friend to us and the first Arab Gulf country to establish diplomatic ties with China. Kuwait is also playing an essential role among the countries along the Belt and Road route. As the minister, a top leader, you have met a lot of senior government officials including ambassadors from China. My first question is how do you feel about China?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: I feel great about China and this is actually my third trip here. All those trips were on official invitations. But I am looking for the time to come privately, so that I could cover all that great historical sites of China.

Sun Chao: Welcome to China again, Your Excellency. Could you share with us some stories during the 3 trips?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: One of the things I don't forget was the first time I came. I met His Highness Emir,

who was also a foreign minister at that time. He asked me if it was my first trip to China. I said yes. Then he said, “You have to see the Great Wall and the Forbidden City.” I said, “Obviously, but the Forbidden City is something very special to me.” He asked, “Why is it so special?” I said, “Because I have a friend staying there.” He kept talking and then he came back to me. He said, “Nobody lives there.” I said, “No, sir. My friend lives there.” We went to talk about the history of relation between Kuwait and China. And then he came back to me again and asked, “Could you tell me who is your friend living in the Forbidden City because even the tour guides don’t live there?” I said “Of course, it’s Qian Long.” “What do you mean by Qian Long? You mean the emperor?” I said, “Yes, Qian Long, the Emperor.” He said, “He died in 18th century. How could he be your friend?” I said “Oh, he never disappeared from my vision because he had a great collection of Mongolian art. It’s such a vast collection. He had a great passion for Mongolian art to the extent that in his workshop in the Forbidden City, there were two pieces unfinished. That’s why he is my friend.”

The World’s Biggest Collector of Islamic Art

Sun Chao: Interesting and touching. That’s such a lovely a story during the trip and about art. I see that art has brought you and the Chinese emperor together, transcending time and space. Your Excellency, it is internationally recognized that your collection is by far the most comprehensive Islamic art collection in the world. In other words, you are the world’s greatest collector of Islamic art.

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: The al-Sabah collection began to take form in 1975 when I purchased the collection's first object. It was a mid-14th century enameled glass bottle I found in a London art gallery. At that time, the collection started out as a hobby. But it soon grew to a full-fledged collection worthy of a place in a museum. In 1983, as the collection was growing, it made its way from my private residence to its new location at the Kuwait National Museum.

I want to introduce you Dar al Athar al Islamiyyah. It is a cultural organization based around my private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organization created to manage the loan of my collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognized cultural organization. The size of collection has now grown to more than 30,000 objects representing different chronological and geographical points from the Islamic world.

Over decades, the number and categories have continued to grow including arms and armor, calligraphy, carpets and textiles, coins, glass, hard stones, ivory, jewelry, manuscripts and miniatures, metalwork, stone and stucco, and woodwork.

The collection has long had an active program of the publication of volumes focused on its holdings, which is ongoing. It also has an impressive history in the generation of distinguished special exhibitions, in addition to the loaning of objects to exhibitions organized elsewhere in the world.

I'm grateful to Metropolitan Museum because they wanted me to be there as one of the trustee members on their board. But unfortunately, I was so busy. Now my wife has replaced me. She is active. They are doing wonderful jobs.

Art is a big scope. So if you are interested in any of those subjects, I'd be happy to talk about it.

Sun Chao: Your Excellency, I learned that the distinguished collection has been ambitiously assembled over the past few decades including the collections survived the vicissitudes of the 1990 Gulf War, when much of it was removed from Kuwait and transported in metal trunks to the Iraq Museum in Baghdad by a group of Iraqi archaeologists by the order of the government. Could you please shed some lights on the Islamic art, as just now you asked me if I have a particular area of interest?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: My collection and my passion spans as much as the art of the world, whether it is historic relics from the Bronze Age or the modern art.

For most of the Middle Ages, Islamic glass was the most sophisticated in Eurasia, which was exported in large volumes to both Europe and China. Islam borrowed a great deal of techniques that were employed in glass-producing in **Sassanian** and Ancient Rome. And since figurative decoration played a small part in pre-Islamic glass, the change in style is

not abrupt, except that the whole area initially formed a political whole. And Persian innovations were almost immediately taken up in Egypt. For this reason it is often impossible to distinguish between the various centers of production, of which Egypt, Syria and Persia were the most important, except by scientific analysis of the material, which itself has difficulties. From various documentary references, glass-making and glass trading seem to have been a specialty of the Jewish minority in several centers.

Some of my Islamic art collection spans from the 7th to the 19th century, with Mughal jeweled arts representing one aspect of its holdings. These collections survived the vicissitudes of the 1990 Gulf War, when much of it was removed from Kuwait and transported in metal trunks to the Iraq Museum in Baghdad by a group of Iraqi archaeologists. Fortunately, most of these items were recovered through the agency of the UN. The most notable exceptions are three highly important carved Indian emeralds, which are still missing. The building—along with a magnificent pair of fourteenth-century Moroccan doors that had been installed there—was burned.

Sun Chao: Your Excellency, speaking of museums, what are your favorite museums in the world? Do you have an interest in Chinese art works?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: That's a difficult question to answer. Sometimes a recently discovered historic site is better than the museums. So it's very difficult to choose.

There are very great museums like Metropolitan Museum of Art, Musée du Louvre, the British Museum, V&A, and Berlin Museum. They are the great museums in the world, but I cannot identify one in particular because each museum has its own strength. For example, some collections in a certain museum may be better than others.

I can assure you that you have beautiful museums in China. I am trying to pay a private visit to these museums. Your government is extremely kind to us and has helped us solve a great many difficulties.

Sun Chao: Maybe one day your collection can come to China and share with more Chinese people?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: Of course. Actually, I am very grateful to the Chinese government. Once we were selecting jade from China and central Asia. Both kinds of jade reflect buddhist culture, but have their own characteristics and interests. The Chinese government sent a very excellent scholar to help us learn more about Chinese and central Asian jade.



Kuwait's 2035 Vision

Sun Chao: If the rest of the world, especially Chinese talks about your country, what would you like them to know?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: His Highness's "Vision 2035" very much coincides with Chinese President's Belt and Road Initiative. We have a lot of good things and we have a lot of not-so-good things such as dependency on oil. We are trying to strengthen the great relations and the strategic partnership with China. We may take further steps in order to get over our weakness. His Highness is trying to get the country back to every single citizen. Kuwait is producing for himself and for his future. So that's what we want to do.

Sun Chao: We know that Kuwait is the first Arab gulf country establishing full diplomatic relationship with China. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties, the two countries have maintained friendly exchanges at different levels. Kuwait is also the first Arab country to invest in China. We also signed an agreement to consolidate bilateral economic relations. So based on your rich experience, what would you suggest to promote our future ties?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: We are doing very well. Our presence here is to discuss further development projects with our Chinese partners, which will provide new hope to our future cooperation.

We pin high hopes on the Belt and Road Initiative and are willing to discuss it with China. It is hoped that the relations between the two countries will be more stable and closer, and that everything will move in the right and appropriate direction.

Sun Chao: Your Excellency, you have mentioned Kuwait's 2035 new vision. As one of the most resourceful countries in the world, Kuwait keeps reforming its economic system toward market-oriented economy and has achieved great success. But on the other hand, Kuwait depends heavily on oil and gas. So, would you like to share with us the measures and achievements your country has made and the challenges your country is facing now?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: At the moment, the challenge we are facing is that we still depend heavily on our resources. Luckily our people understand and are aware of this. It's clear that they really want their country not to depend on the resource of oil. That's why you will hear more discussions among Kuwaiti people about the best path for the country in the future. And the Kuwaitis have taken many effective measures to diversify our economy, such as making Kuwait an important international port.

There's a lot of work going on. The most major work is to explore more possibilities of future with our Chinese friends.

As the initiator of silk city, I have been paying close attention to China's Belt And Road initiative, and actively discussed with the Chinese side to build a new town -- silk city in the Sofia region on the north coast of Kuwait. When completed in 2035, the city will become an important strategic hub on the new silk road linking China and Europe. We will build Kuwait into a financial and leisure port linking Asia and Europe.

“Learning from History”

Sun Chao: Your Excellency, what are your points of view on the Belt and Road Initiative?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: It's a wonderful

thing. We should explore and learn from history. In history, people meet people. They shake hands. They see faces. They talk with each other in their own accents. They are Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, Christians and Hindus. So, intercultural exchanges were realized physically.

We need to get more human involved rather than just using banks, cars or social media. We want people to share the most challenging things happening in the future, for example, shortage of food and worsening environment. So that's the thing that I think we should take into great consideration.

Sun Chao: Thank you so much for sharing your understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative. When it comes to the Belt and Road Initiative, we often think about infrastructure and economic cooperation. But aside from that, cultural exchanges should also be included. Could you tell me, based on your rich experience in art, what cultural exchanges China and Kuwait can organize to deepen our partnership on the initiative?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: I have visited most of the museums in Beijing. We are also working hard, trying to get Chinese arts and collections exhibited in Kuwait to share China's art treasures with friends in Kuwait, gulf countries and other parts of the world who are interested in Chinese art.

The problem we had before was that we did not have enough exhibition

space after the invasion of Saddam and Gulf War. Now we do have, and we are working hard to introduce them to the Kuwaitis. And I am also ready to send some of our collection to China because we've seen a lot of interests from the Chinese towards our collection.

Among all the museums that I have visited here, many of them have Kuwaiti collections from both public and private owners. They showed great interest in Kuwaiti arts. So I think that the exchange of museum collections is feasible to enhance cultural exchanges between the two countries.

Sun Chao: Your Excellency, just now you mentioned, your country is now building Silk City and world's longest causeway and establishing a major free trade zone linking the Gulf to Central Asia and Europe. Your country also puts forward "New Kuwait 2035", aiming to transform the country's economy by 2035. So how do you see the potential cooperation with China?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: I think our Chinese friends are always interested in His Highness's "Vision 2035". North Kuwait is the most sensitive area because it is located between two greatest civilizations of the world. From the west, it's the Mediterranean and on the east, it is the civilization of Iraq and Iran. This provided opportunities for knowing great civilizations. The areas selected for implementing the vision are five islands extending 1000 square kilometers and a coastal land stretching 1000 square kilometers.

Many projects of the Belt and Road Initiative will not get to Kuwait before going through others. And if this Initiative does well for the others, it will certainly be welcomed by Kuwait. And as you know, Chinese railway has reached London, and your trains reach Baghdad of the Gulf Region. China is supposed to have four routes starting from western China. These routes need to be further extended to reach more regions and countries. By doing so, the Belt and Road Initiative would be welcomed by people from the world.

Sun Chao: Your Excellency, I have a question related to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) because your country is a very important member of the GCC and playing an important role in strengthening China's ties with countries in the region. I would like to know, from your point of view, what is Kuwait's role in the GCC and how to promote China and the GCC's relationship in the future?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: GCC is fully aware of His Highness's "Vision 2035" because it is linked with the decision that has been taken by the rulers to connect those GCC countries by railways, and to connect Kuwait all the way up to the north, Iran, Mediterranean, the Red Sea, to East Europe, and Northwest Europe.

Kuwait is also looking to make some breakthrough. We have joined the vision plan to better protect the gulf environment. For example, we are trying to get fewer oil tanks to the gulf to prevent the pollution. We are

also sharing with other GCC countries power and electricity. So there are a lot of things that we can work on together. This Belt and Road Initiative is adding to it.

“Yella”

Sun Chao: Your Excellency, what is your favorite sentence from your country that you want to share with us?

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: I think of a slang word. It's called “yella”. It means we should move because time is limited and actions should be taken.

For example, we need to urgently build up social media, which is vital to the modern society. A society will lag behind if it fails to catch up. Someone will catch it earlier but someone will be far behind.

The modern world knows no boundaries. The advent of social media and Google has facilitated communication among people. That is why I believe we should develop social media and in the meantime send more students across the border for intercultural communication and exchanges, for the benefit of our two countries and the whole of the world.

Sun Chao: Your Excellency, there is a Chinese saying: “Actions speak louder than words”, underlining the importance of taking actions.

The sentence is also my motto. That's why I strongly agree with you. Actually a component for my name "Chao" is the Chinese character for "go" faster, similar to action. It's an interesting coincidence.

Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahamed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah: The best thing I can say is that you Chinese people are very lucky. You have very wise people in your own country. And they really think far and they are really working hard to get China to the best position in the world.

Both our countries have a vision, and it is our duty to deliver it.

I wish the Belt and Road Initiative a complete success. I hope we can be your associate by helping you succeed with your initiative and that our peoples will work together towards a better future.



(Chao SUN is the Author of Global Leaders on the Belt and Road

Initiative and founder of the New Silk Road Network;

She holds senior title at the Development Research Center of the State Council of China; she is the adjunct professor at Shenzhen University, Renmin University Business School and Beijing Jiaotong University.)