

Local

# Kuwaitis and the confrontation of epidemic outbreaks

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**KUWAIT:** In the process of time, many countries all over the world, including Kuwait, were hit by pandemics in the 19th century and the mid of the 20th century. These epidemics killed millions of people, such as the plague which broke out in 1831. A Kuwaiti historian named Abdul Aziz Al-Rashid said, "Kuwait was hit by a nefarious plague that killed many of its people, which turned the country into a ghost town, except the Kuwaiti travellers who did not come back until the plague disappeared. They found out that their wives and children were perished by the plague, so they had to get married again from neighboring countries, such as Al-Zubair, Najid and the like. And by doing this, they saved Kuwait from extinction."

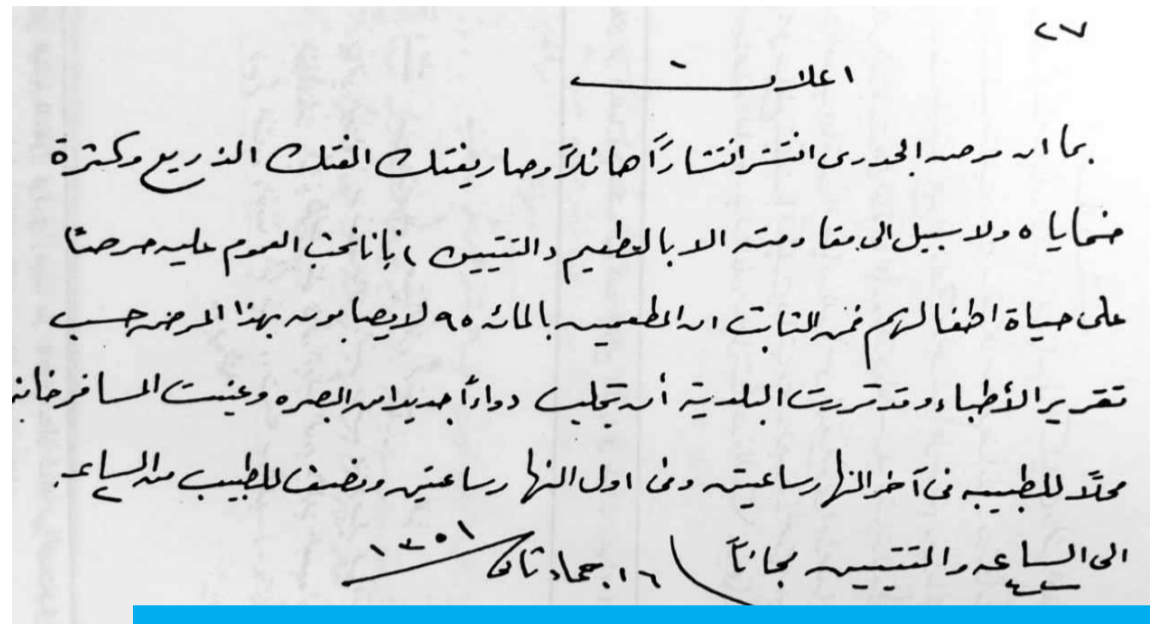
At that period until 1946, Kuwait did not have the sufficient financial resources to establish hospitals, provide the specialized nursing body as well as treatments.

Dr Eleanor Calverley, from the American Mission Hospital which started in 1910, reported about the epidemics which Kuwait witnessed in the first half of the 20th century, saying, "The diseases found in Kuwait were eye infections, children enteritis and trachoma that caused blindness. I could do simple operations that alleviated the diseases. Other diseases like tuberculosis and the smallpox were dangerously spreading and killed thousands of people especially children, whom had blindness, the thing that made Dr Mylrae a physician in the British Commission, who felt alarmed, to ask for doubling and exerting efforts to combat smallpox. So they asked for importing vaccines. People did not accept being vaccinated despite all trials." In 1918, Kuwait was hit by flu that overwhelmed the world because of poverty and lack of warmth in winter. Measles also was spread the same as in America and caused the death of many children. In addition, the whooping cough, chicken pox, rubella were known diseases as well as dengue that spread in Kuwait once, but people could survive it. In fact, those epidemics could kill a lot of people in Kuwait, especially the flu in 1918. This disease could kill 50 million to 100 million people all over the world, which means fifth percent of the population of the world.

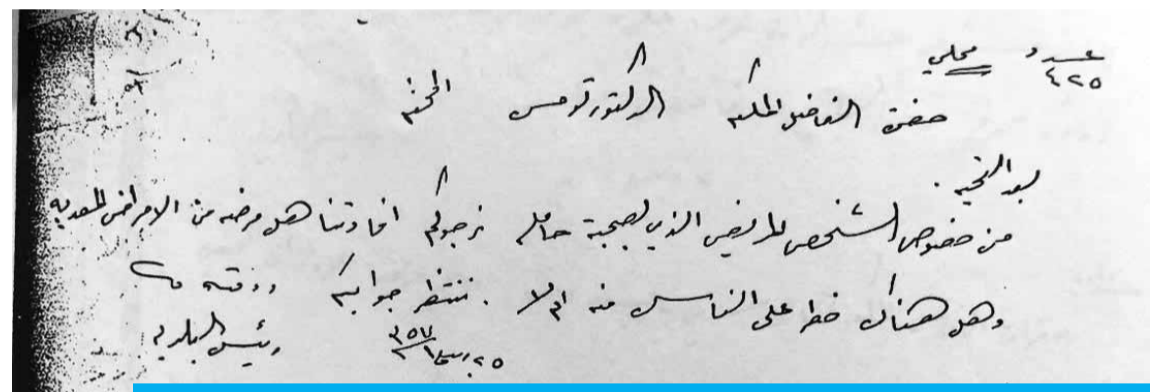
When it came to health services, Kuwait depended only on the dispensary of the British Accreditation Foundation (BAF) in 1904, set up by S G Knox, the British Accreditor. Physicians were British and Indians who treated only BAF employees, then later on allowed treating Kuwaitis provided that they do not exceed seventy. Kuwaitis could, despite the lack of their resources and exporting oil in 1946, treat and nurse their patients. They volunteered for their country. Some treated burns, wounds, fractures, poisons, eye infections and smallpox. Most medicines were herbal provided by herbalists. Some of them were Sheikh Musaid Abdullah Al-Azmi, who graduated from Al-Azhar University in 1881. While studying in Egypt, he learned how to vaccinate people against smallpox. After graduation, he went to India to buy the necessary materials for vaccines. He came back to Kuwait in 1315 H through Yemen, Muscat, Ras Al-Khaimah, Dubai and Ehsa. He made his house his clinic for treating people, taking a 'Qran' which equaled twenty fils for each vaccine. Other Kuwaiti curer was Sailor Ahmed Muhammed Al-Ghanem who was famous for treating bone fractures.

There are many Kuwaiti reformers who, through their charities, could provide health services in 1913. Farhan Al-Khudhair, founder of the Arabic Charity, provided health services. He received full support. In the document of establishment dated Oct 13, 1913, the aims of the charity were mentioned as follows: "And that Ahmed, Farhan and Ali, sons of Fahd Al-Khudhair, have dedicated Waqf as a building to establish the Arabic Charity Society, located in Saud Headquarter as a hospital for patients, clinic and a meeting place." It was a two-storey building. The first floor was for mentoring, students and the library. The second one was for the physicians and the drug store.

In addition to the personal efforts of Khudhair, many volunteers helped physician in the hospital such as wound's dressing. They were Musaid Al-Kulaib, Abdul Hamid Al Sania and Sultan Al-Kulaib who urged young men to kill their free time by helping physicians nursing patients. Many benevolent people donated to the charity including the late Amir Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah who donated 5,000 rupees and medications as well. Despite the short peri-



A Kuwait Municipality announcement dating back to 1932 urging the public to vaccinate against smallpox.



A letter sent from Kuwait Municipality to the American Mission Hospital in 1938, inquiring about a patient and how to prevent infection.

od of the charity hospital's work, it played a vital role in helping people. In the 1930s, Kuwait suffered many spreading diseases. Dr Mary Bruins Allison reported: "I have witnessed the death of many women due to viral infections." In 1932, the smallpox killed thousands of children, so Dr Mylrae advised to use vaccines.

The Kuwaiti Town Council took a decision to bring the protective antidote, increase the social awareness to have vaccines through making posters and appointing physicians to give free vaccination. In the mid-1930s, Kuwait was exposed to many diseases. One of the main problems was the inflammation of eyes because of trachoma. Others were the liver diseases, pains of dengue, toothaches, dermal infections, cough, tuberculosis and unknown fevers. In addition, there were problems of malnutrition, pregnancy, infertility and heart diseases.

In 1939, The Kuwait Department of Health set up the first small government clinic, located in the internal Souk (Market) in Al-Ameer Street, the pharmacy of Wanais, that belonged to Muhammed Boudai then belonged to Hamad Al-Humaidi. Two months later, the government bought it. At that time, it took its official structural system when Mohammed Boudai was its director, Khalid Abdul Latif Al-Duhaim was the clerk and Mohammed Al-Otaibi was the supervisor.

In August of the same year, Dr Omar Salama, and the pharmacist Mohammed Salama were appointed in the clinic. And because the place was not big enough, the government hired the Diwaniya of Haj Ismail Maarifi in Sharq to be the Health Department and Al-Ameri Clinic. Dr Yehya Al-Hadidi, a Syrian physician, mentioned that in the beginning of his work in 1940, he asked for more volunteers to help work in the Health Department, from whom were Al-Duhaim, Ali Amman and Aisha Jamma. He also mentioned that work started at sunrise and ended at sunset. They divided the diwaniya into many divisions to facilitate treatment because of many patients. They also did not have electricity at the time.

The first health group was formed because

only the hospital of the missionary and the British Clinic provided health services. Although they were medically inexperienced, yet they could help physicians Salama and Hadidi. They include Khalid Abdul Latif who worked with his father the founder of the first pharmacy in Kuwait in 1927, Mohammed Boudai who had a pharmacy, Ali Amman who graduated from Egypt as a pharmacist, Hamid Al-Naserallah and Hmoud Burusli as first wounds dressers.

In the 1940s, the clinic expanded and Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salam asked the members of Information Department who were Ahmed Al-Mishari, Nisf Al-Yousif, Abdul Hamid Al-Sania and Abdullah Zaid Al-Khalid, to supervise the clinic. Mohammed Jassim Al-Nisf was appointed the first director. Other personalities like Yousif Al-Haji and Abdul Mhsain Al-Mukhaizim the administrative official joined the Health Department. Abdul Mhsain Al-Zain and Rudan Al-Rudan helped in the accounting work. On July 30, 1940, the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Ahmed Al-Jaber issued the first health law. Its articles included the organizational matters of the Health Department related to the health council as well as the authorities of both the technical and administrative directors, the thing that led to expanding services and legislations of health affairs. "It was hard work," Yousif Al-Haji said. "The director Muhammed Al-Mudhif did not have a car in 1944, so he had to come on foot. Others came on bicycles. We worked in morning and evening shifts. Due to the great number of patients, we had to work till late hours and exert much efforts."

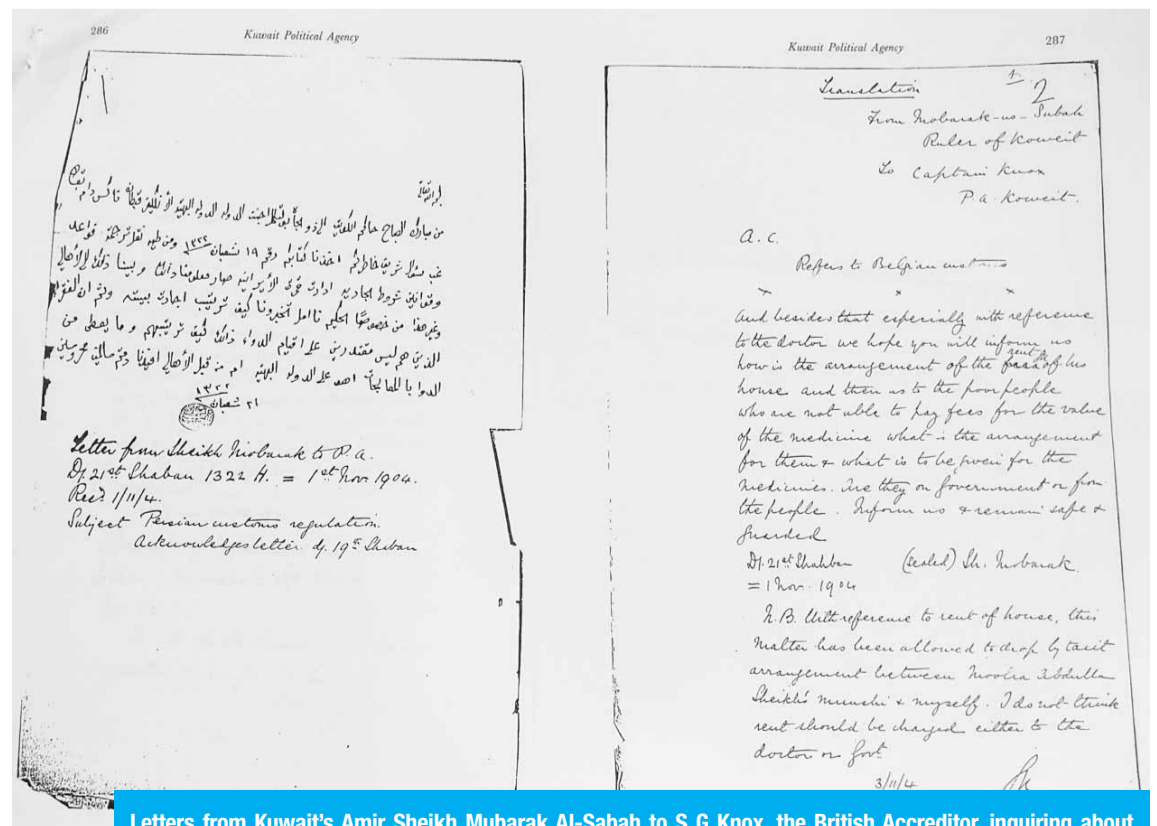
All efforts exerted by the people of Kuwait before oil showed the great sacrifices they presented at that time. The voluntary work in Kuwait is really extinguished and different from other countries. It has recently been seen during the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), so no wonder to see it in Kuwait. This made the regional director of WHO in the Middle East, Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, to praise and laud the efforts of Kuwait in combating and containing the virus in collaboration with non-Kuwaitis and expatriates.

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Letters from Kuwait's Amir Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah to S G Knox, the British Accreditor, inquiring about treating Kuwaitis at the British Accreditation Foundation clinic.