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Global Britain in the Gulf: Brexit and relations with the GCC

Abstract

Britain's departure from the European Union will shape British foreign policy for years to come. Its relations with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with which the United Kingdom maintains deep-rooted military and economic ties, provide a useful illustration of what lies ahead. The UK's increased engagement in the Gulf had been well underway for some time. The years since 2012 have seen an uptick in strategic and commercial agreements alongside an increase in trade. But Brexit's economic cost, as well as the UK's reduced global influence outside the EU, have augmented the perceived importance of relations with Gulf States. A recent series of declarations and official visits demonstrate that Britain is poised to intensify its commitment to the region. The prospect of a free trade agreement with the GCC, a rise in defence

spending in the Gulf, and the reaffirming of bilateral ties with a number of GCC countries all underscore the UK's renewed devotion to its regional presence. Geopolitical instability and human rights violations perpetrated by Gulf monarchies will do little to dissuade British policymakers from further strengthening relations with allies in the Persian Gulf.

Résumé

La politique étrangère britannique au cours des années à venir va être façonnée par le départ du Royaume-Uni de l'Union européenne. Les liens militaires et économiques étroits qu'il entretient avec les pays du Conseil de coopération du Golfe donnent une bonne indication des orientations à venir. Cela fait quelques années maintenant que sa présence dans le Golfe s'intensifie. Depuis 2012, on

constate une augmentation du nombre d'accords stratégiques et commerciaux qui ont été conclus, ainsi qu'un renforcement des échanges commerciaux. Néanmoins, conscient du coût économique du Brexit ainsi que de sa perte d'influence sur la scène mondiale une fois sorti de l'UE, le Royaume-Uni perçoit ses relations avec les États comme étant d'autant plus importantes. Une série de déclarations et de visites officielles récentes attestent bien de la volonté du Royaume-Uni d'intensifier son implication dans la région. Les perspectives d'un traité de libre-échange avec le CCG, d'une augmentation des dépenses de défense dans le Golfe, et de consolidation des relations bilatérales avec plusieurs de pays du CCG soulignent l'intérêt renouvelé du Royaume-Uni à asseoir sa présence dans la région. Ce n'est ni l'instabilité géopolitique ni les violations des droits de l'Homme perpétrées par les monarchies du Golfe qui vont dissuader les décideurs britanniques de renforcer leurs liens avec ses alliés de cette région.



Introduction

Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty was triggered for the first time on March 29th 2017, beginning the process of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (EU). Months of bitter negotiating lie ahead as both sides struggle to hammer out a new settlement. In a speech announcing the UK's eventual departure from the EU, Prime Minister Theresa May defied naysayers by heralding the advent of an era of renewed global engagement. Hers is a vision that harks back to the mercantile clout of the days of empire, with the Britain, unshackled from its European fetters, able to fully live out its internationalist vocation. A flurry of diplomatic activity has followed, with the Conservative government desperate to prove that the scission will not spell the country's withdrawal from the world stage. But much remains murky about the rupture's exact terms. Less sanguine observers predict that, stripped of the EU's diplomatic and economic heft, Britain will gradually fade into irrelevance, hastening an already marked international decline. Much will depend on the events of the next several years.

To stave off such fears, the UK has redoubled its efforts to nurture relations with a number of countries beyond Europe. The Gulf States have received particular attention, with official

pronouncements, trade deals and deeper military cooperation underlining the region's importance in the eyes of British policy-makers. At a time when its global role is put into question like never before, that Britain should fall back on the monarchies of the Persian Gulf – with which it has established longstanding strategic and commercial ties – is only natural. Understanding this process requires analysing how the UK's ties with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states¹ have developed before and after Britain's vote on leaving the EU. The considerable effort Mrs May has devoted to reaffirming her government's commitment to the region can be interpreted as part of a process stretching back several years. However, a slew of post-Brexit visits and announcements, auguring marked increases in both regional defence spending and trade, have signalled a conspicuous change of pace.

Steering into troubled waters

The pressures shaping how Britain's global role will evolve following its departure from the EU vary considerably. On the more pessimistic end of the spectrum, Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, predicted the country's full-blown disintegration.² More equivocal, a Commons Select Committee on foreign affairs report cites evidence presented by Dr Tim Oliver of the London School of Economics and Almut Möller of the European Council on Foreign Relations, who stated that they had found little in the way of support "for the idea that a Brexit would enhance Britain's international standing".³ Central concerns revolve around relinquishing the ability to influence EU foreign policy and common defence policy, the renegotiation of more than 50 free trade agreements (FTAs) signed between various countries and the EU, and the potential loss in international prestige incurred by leaving the Union. Such areas have become all the more salient as the government's withdrawal from the EU is coming under intense scrutiny, with Labour – buoyed by the results of the general election held on June 8th 2017 – criticising the Conservative administration's management of the Brexit process.

1. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait.

2. "How Brexit Will Change the World", *Politico Magazine*, 25 June 2016.

3. "Implications of the referendum on EU membership for the UK's role in the world", *House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee*, 26 April 2016.

Much of the UK's recent international manoeuvring has been crafted to dispel such fears. Mrs May's policies vis-à-vis the Gulf are part and parcel of her interpretation of Brexit as the crucible for a new, "global Britain", poised to strike out alone while falling back on the UK's "profoundly internationalist" history and culture.⁴ The Deputy Director General of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Malcolm Chalmers, contends that Britain's influence outside the EU should emerge relatively unscathed, citing "its internationalist political culture, continuing high levels of resource commitment, and its permanent seat on the UNSC [the United Nations Security Council]".⁵ As if to lend credence to such views, state visits and the drafting of bilateral agreements have been conducted at a breakneck pace. In the Middle East alone, 2017 has seen the signing of a £100m defence deal with the Turkish air force,⁶ a £117m loan to Egypt⁷, and the inaugural meeting of a new UK-Israel Trade Working Group.⁸ Yet nowhere has this trend been clearer than in the Persian Gulf – Britain's annual trade with GCC countries is worth £28.73bn and the area provides the strategic means to project power into the Middle East.⁹ In June 2016, Chatham House's Jane Kinninmont predicted that, with Brexit looming, the UK would seek to "double down on its existing geographic areas of strength", with relations with Arab monarchies in the Gulf given pride of place among the country's foremost priorities.¹⁰ The region has correspondingly witnessed a sustained effort on behalf of the Conservative government to shore up and deepen economic and military ties.

Ebb and flow: Britain's regional engagement

Stretching from 1820 to 1971, the long period of British hegemony over the Persian Gulf left

4. "Theresa May's Brexit speech in full", *The Telegraph*, 17 January 2017.

5. Malcolm Chalmers, "UK Foreign and Security Policy after Brexit", *RUSI Briefing Paper*, January 2017, p. 7.

6. "Theresa May in Turkey: UK agrees £100m defence deal", *BBC*, 28 January 2017.

7. "British Ambassador signs joint declaration of intent", *GOV.UK*, 9 March 2017.

8. "UK and Israel set to hold first trade policy working group", *GOV.UK*, 28 March 2017.

9. Chris Doyle, "Neither consistent nor ethical: Britain's Middle East policy", *The New Arab*, 6 June 2017.

10. Jane Kinninmont, "A Post-Brexit Britain Would Double Down on Middle East Alliances", *Chatham House*, 13 June 2016.

its marks. James Onley describes how the empire's interests were safeguarded by an official (who came to be known as the Political Resident in the Persian Gulf) first stationed at Bushire (on the southwest Persian coast) before being headquartered in Bahrain in 1946. The political agents under his command oversaw shipping lanes and desert trade routes linking such cities as Bombay, Basra, Aleppo and Muscat.¹¹ Driven by the need to protect commercial interests, a *Pax Britannica* was established through a series of treaties banning maritime warfare, with the sheikhdoms that make up the present-day United Arab Emirates (UAE) becoming known as the "Trucial States" upon the signing of a "Perpetual Maritime Truce" with the rulers of present-day UAE and Oman in 1853 – those of Bahrain and Qatar acceded in 1861 and 1916 respectively.¹² Although the question of whether the colonial power's presence in the Persian Gulf was ultimately benevolent or oppressive has been the subject of vigorous debate among historians, the region became a site of considerable commercial and military cooperation between the imperial power and its local client states.¹³

This period sowed the seeds of current tensions with Iran, with Britain handing three previously Iranian islands to what would become the UAE.¹⁴ The government's current affirmation of a hard stance vis-à-vis Iran also has historic roots: George Brown, who served as Foreign Secretary under Harold Wilson between 1966 and 1968, was advised by then-Resident Sir Steward Crawford that Britain should reassure Gulf States by eschewing "any appearance of endorsing Iran's ambitions".¹⁵ The difficult task of striking the balance between unproductive antagonism towards Iran, which could have significant geopolitical repercussions, and convincing Arab countries of the UK's potential to contain Persian ambitions has long been at the heart of Britain's foreign policy in the region. This dynamic remains relevant against the backdrop of Britain's recent criticism of Iran's actions abroad, detailed later on.

11. James Onley, "Britain and the Gulf Shaikhdoms, 1820-1971: The Politics of Protection", *Center for International and Regional Studies*, 2009. p. 4.

12. James Onley, "The Politics of Protection in the Gulf: The Arab Rulers and the British Resident in the Nineteenth Century", *op. cit.*, pp. 31-32.

13. *Ibid.* pp. 32-33.

14. Paul Iddon, "Britain's New Persian Gulf Venture", *The National Interest*, 21 December 2016.

15. *Ibid.*

In January 1968, the Harold Wilson government's declaration that the UK would withdraw its troops from the Gulf, signalling the end of its military presence "east of Suez" by the end of 1971, allowed for the emergence of the now-independent UAE, Qatar and Bahrain.¹⁶ Although this move put an end to Britain's role as "arbiter and guardian of the Gulf" as described by a 1908 Foreign Office memorandum,¹⁷ this by no means meant the end of the UK's influence in the region. The Royal Navy has maintained a presence in the Persian Gulf since the 1980s, from the Armilla Patrol – launched to protect shipping lanes following the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 – through to the escorts and minehunters currently deployed as part of Operation Kipion.¹⁸ In addition, trade with Saudi Arabia shot up after the first al-Yamamah deals were signed in the late 1980s, worth £50bn and remembered as "the biggest [UK] sale ever of anything to anyone".¹⁹ Given the UK's continued regional military presence, along with close diplomatic and economic cooperation with GCC countries, Britain cannot truly be said to have withdrawn from the Persian Gulf. Yet while RUSI's Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly echo this view, they highlight the intensification of Britain's engagement in the Gulf following the signing of a defence cooperation agreement with Bahrain in October 2012.²⁰ Since, the UK's regional military, economic and diplomatic activities have continued to expand.

Britain's "return" to the Persian Gulf

Defence cooperation has been at the heart of Britain's desire to reaffirm its position in the Gulf. Talk of the UK restating its commitment to the region can be traced back to a Defence Cooperation Accord (DCA) signed between the UK and the UAE in 1996, one of Britain's lar-

16. Shohei Sato, "Britain's Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf, 1964–68: A Pattern and a Puzzle", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 37 (1): 99–117, March 2009. p. 100.

17. James Onley, "The Politics of Protection in the Gulf: The Arab Rulers and the British Resident in the Nineteenth Century", *New Arabian Studies* 6: 30–92, 2004. p. 75.

18. Peter Harris, "Back in Bahrain? Britain Never Left Persian Gulf", *The National Interest*, 16 December 2014. "Operation Kipion", *royalnavy.mod.uk*.

19. Chrissie Hirst, "The Arabian Connection: The UK Arms Trade to Saudi Arabia", *Campaign Against Arms Trade*, 2000.

20. Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly, "A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf", *RUSI*, April 2013, p. 8.

gest defence commitments outside of NATO. Stansfield and Kelly note that, while the DCA was neglected following Tony Blair's election in 1997, the UK's renewed involvement in the region increases the potential of the agreement as a tool for increasing military cooperation.²¹ Moreover, although then-incoming Prime Minister David Cameron's launching of a "Gulf Initiative" in 2010 in a bid to consolidate relations with the region was temporarily shelved following the unrest of the Arab Spring, signs of genuine diplomatic reengagement were not long coming.²² Yet the degree to which Brexit has sped up this process remains unclear. A comparison of related activity in the period preceding and following the referendum held on June 25th 2016 is thus required to better understand the nature of the current government's regional foreign policy.

Progress in the area of military cooperation was proceeding apace long before the vote on EU membership. Such developments are in line with the 2010 National Security Strategy published by the Cabinet Office, which, according to David Roberts, "emphasizes the importance of security, trade, and promoting and expanding British values and influence as perennial British *raison d'état*".²³ The UK runs such initiatives as the Saudi Arabia National Guard Communications Project, which helps train the House of Saud's praetorian guard-cum-auxiliary force.²⁴ From the pre-1971 period to the present day, the enrolment of Gulf officers in British training centres has proven a useful vector of British influence. A parliamentary Select Committee on "Soft Power and the UK's Influence" noted that such officer training centres as Sandhurst help promote the "development of an understanding of British culture amongst future foreign military leaders, and the establishment of informal networks between influential individuals".²⁵ Over 198 officers from the UAE alone have graduated from Sandhurst.²⁶

21. *Ibid*, p. 4.

22. Helene von Bismarck, "Britain's 'Return East of Suez': A Historical Perspective", *Imperial and Global Forum*, May 2016.

23. David B Roberts, "British national interest in the Gulf: rediscovering a role?", *International Affairs* 90 (3): 663–677, May 2014. p. 663.

24. "Armed Forces: Saudi Arabia: Written question – 46071", *parliament.uk*, 12 September 2016.

25. "Persuasion and Power in the Modern World - Select Committee on Soft Power and the UK's Influence", *parliament.uk*, May 2014, section 110.

26. "Bilateral Relations", *Embassy of the United Arab Emirates in London*.

Hiccups in joint training schemes have included the expulsion of 80 British military officers from the UAE in 2014, a move thought to have been in reaction to the UK's purported support for pro-democracy activists and regional Islamist movements.²⁷ Such episodes formed part of a broader dip in bilateral relations: tensions with the UAE had already led to the collapse of a £6bn sale of 60 Eurofighter Typhoons and a British submarine being refused entry into Dubai's waters.²⁸ But recent years have seen a marked improvement in the UK's rapport with the UAE, as shown by a series of gushing articles published by Dubai-based newspapers, heaping praise on the two countries' relationship.²⁹ Moreover, the number of officers passing through such programmes is on the up. In the Ministry of Defence's "Single departmental plan: 2015 to 2020" report, the British government announced the creation of 400 places of training courses in the UK as well as 30 multi and bilateral exercises to promote "regional and UK interoperability".³⁰

Britain has also invested in re-establishing a strong military presence in the Gulf. Setting up or investing in pre-existing military bases throughout the region has been announced as part of the government's strategy to "tackle extremism".³¹ Memoranda of understanding have emerged as an avenue through which such interests can be pursued, such as that signed in 2009, which opened up military installations in the UAE for use by British forces. The Al-Minhad airbase, located south of Dubai, has since been upgraded to facilitate the withdrawal of British troops from Afghanistan. It serves as one of the UK's main regional staging posts, hosting RAF Panavia Tornado and Eurofighter Typhoon squadrons.³² Further deals have been reached

27. Simeon Kerr, "UAE stops using former British officers as military trainers", *The Financial Times*, 22 May 2014.

28. Alistair Osborne and Alan Tovey, "Blow for Britain and BAE Systems as UAE rules out Eurofighter deal", *The Telegraph*, 20 December 2013.

David B Roberts, "What does the increasing assertiveness of Persian Gulf states mean for regional security?", *The Telegraph*, 15 April 2015.

29. "Nahyan commends relations binding UAE with UK", *Gulf News*, 5 April 2016.

"UAE-UK ties are only increasing", *The National*, 7 November 2016.

30. "Single departmental plan: 2015 to 2020", *GOV.UK*, 20 March 2017.

31. Keith Perry, "UK forces plan three new bases in Middle East to fight Isis", *The Telegraph*, 9 September 2014.

32. Frank Gardner, "'East of Suez': Are UK forces returning?", *BBC*, 29 April 2013.

following the aforementioned 2012 defence cooperation agreement with Bahrain: in March 2016, the UK and Oman agreed as to the deployment of 45 British training teams in Oman in 2016.³³ After 2019, troops are to follow as Britain redeploys its service personnel currently stationed in Germany.³⁴

Alongside the establishment of a new British Defence Staff in Dubai, the 2015 edition of the annual National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review called for investment in key infrastructure.³⁵ Alongside Al-Minhad, targets for such investment include Duqm port in Oman, with UK Defence Secretary announcing a multi-million pound joint venture to further develop the naval facility to "support future carrier capability and wider British maritime needs in the area" in the months preceding the Brexit vote.³⁶ November 2016 saw the opening of the UK's first new overseas establishment in 45 years in the form of HMS Juffair, a naval support facility at the Mina Salman port in Bahrain, home to several mine-hunter warships.³⁷ The investment in the new facilities was made following a defence agreement signed two years prior, with Bahrain shouldering most of the £15m required to build the facility and the UK covering operating costs – the head of the Royal Navy declared that it would "quite literally cement the Royal Navy's commitment to the Gulf".³⁸ Such bases are all the more important given that, with no aircraft carriers of its own (until the Queen Elizabeth class enters into service after 2020, that is), Britain relies heavily on such regional footholds in order to project force throughout the Middle East.

Although the UK and the Gulf countries have maintained strong commercial links since the end of the British Empire, recent years have

33. "UK to increase training to Oman", *GOV.UK*, 17 May 2016.

34. "With silver and lead, Britain woos new allies in the Gulf", *The Economist*, 18 February 2017.

35. "National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015", *HM Government*, November 2015, sections 5.57, 5.58.

36. "Multi-million pound joint venture announced between Britain and Oman", *GOV.UK*, 30 March 2016.

37. "Royal Navy opens new base in Bahrain", *Naval Today*, 14 November 2016.

38. "UK-Bahrain sign landmark defence agreement", *GOV.UK*, 5 December 2014.

George Allison, "Five ships to be permanently based in Bahrain", *UK Defence Journal*, 22 January 2017.

"The Post-Brexit Reality in the MENA", *Fanack Chronicle*, 30 May 2017.

seen Britain easing visa procedures for Emirati, Qatari and Omani nationals as well as a general uptick in economic flows.³⁹ In 2012, trade with the UAE alone reached £14bn, with the Emirates investing £8bn in UK-based projects.⁴⁰ Three years later, the UAE and Britain pledged to double their bilateral trade to £2bn.⁴¹ A marked eagerness to expand commercial ties preceded the referendum on the EU: in early 2016, Britain's Department for International Trade highlighted Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE as markets that have either intensified their commercial ties with the UK or that are ripe for further investment.⁴² Sovereign wealth funds and private investors in the Gulf have invested heavily in the London property market, leading the erstwhile mayor of the capital, Boris Johnson, to describe Britain's capital as "the eighth emirate".⁴³ Qatari consortia have invested in such construction projects as the Shard, completed to the tune of £1.5bn,⁴⁴ and Harrods – a luxury department store – sold to Qatar Holdings for the same sum.⁴⁵ To date, Qatar is thought to have invested as much as £40bn in the UK, rendering Britain its single largest investment destination.⁴⁶ Yet despite the importance of trade and investment flows with smaller Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia remains the UK's foremost trade partner in the Middle East. With exports of visible goods to the Kingdom increasing from £3.3bn in 2012 to £4.12bn in 2014, the UK was identified as Saudi Arabia's second largest

cumulative investor in 2015.⁴⁷ Saudi-piloted Typhoon fighter-bombers, sold by Britain, have played a key role in the Kingdom's intervention in Yemen.

Brexit and beyond

As described above, Britain has undertaken its military reinsertion in the Gulf through both military cooperation and investment in key infrastructure. Having deployed more than 1,500 military personnel and seven warships in the Gulf, the UK's regional presence is second only to that of the US.⁴⁸ British forces have made good use of their access to Gulf bases. According to the British Ministry of Defence, the RAF has dropped "11 times more bombs than at the height of the Afghanistan conflict" targeting Islamic State positions in Syria and Iraq.⁴⁹ More is to come. Mrs May's government has assured its regional allies that the UK will continue to expand its armed capabilities in the Persian Gulf, promising £3bn in regional defence spending over the next decade.⁵⁰

British officials have long demonstrated their devotion to relations with Gulf States through overseas visits. Recent examples include that made by the British Defence Secretary to Qatar in March 2016, where he discussed military cooperation hot on the heels of a new DCA between the two countries (how such plans will be affected by the fallout of the current Qatari diplomatic crisis is unclear). Following the referendum on EU membership, a particularly intense string of official visits has clarified Britain's enduring commitment to the security of the region. As well as Mrs May's trade talks in Saudi Arabia in April, a visit by the Under-Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was made to Kuwait (reaffirming Britain's commitment to Kuwait's security). Royal stops were made in Bahrain, Oman and the UAE in late 2016.⁵¹

47. "Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Association*.

48. "Foreign Secretary speech: "Britain is back East of Suez", *GOV.UK*, 9 December 2016.

49. Christopher Hope, "RAF jets busiest for 25 years as they "pound" Isis positions in Iraq and Syria", *The Telegraph*, 11 December 2016.

50. Elizabeth Piper, Sami Aboudi and Noah Browning, "Britain plans to deepen security cooperation with Gulf", *Reuters*, 7 December 2016.

51. "Defence Secretary discusses tackling terrorism with Qatar", *GOV.UK*, 15 July 2016.

"UK affirms commitment to Kuwait security – Brexit path to more Kuwait business", *Arab Times*, 17 March 2017.

"Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall visit UAE", *GOV.UK*, 13 October 2016.

39. "Home Department: Changes in Immigration Rules", House of Commons *Daily Hansard - Written Statements Monday 9 December 2013*, 9 December 2013.

40. Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly, "A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf", op. cit., p. 2.

41. "The Minister of the Economy: trade between the UAE and Britain is targeted to increase to 157.2 million dirhams by 2020"

(Al-iqtisad tastahdif ziyadat hajm al-tabadul al-tijari bayn al-imarāt wa britania ila 152.7 milyār dirham fi 2020), *Emarat Al Youm*, 25 October 2015.

42. "Country Profiles", *Department for International Trade*, 2016.

43. Robert Booth, "Boris Johnson may regret portraying London as the 'eighth emirate'", *The Guardian*, 17 April 2013.

44. Camila Hall et al, "Qatar: what's next for the world's most aggressive deal hunter?", *The Financial Times*, 4 July 2013.

45. Tom Bower, "Why Al-Fayed sold Harrods, for £1.5 billion", *This is Money*, 22 August 2010.

46. Kamal Ahmed, "Qatar announces £5bn UK investment", *BBC*, 27 March 2017.

Jamie Robertson, "Qatar: Buying Britain by the pound", *BBC*, 9 June 2017.

Less than a fortnight after a visit to Abu Dhabi by Chancellor Philip Hammond, who restated Britain's commitment to engaging in military and defence-related cooperation with the UAE, joint naval exercises between the two countries took place in January 2017.⁵²

Britain's forthcoming departure from the EU has thrust business and economic interests to the fore, with Mrs May having made her interest in clinching a trade deal with Gulf States clear throughout her time in office.⁵³ The British government has mapped out investment opportunities in GCC countries across 15 sectors, estimated at a total of £29bn over the next five years.⁵⁴ This desire to bolster commercial ties has gone beyond political speeches and declarations. The UAE has reaffirmed its commitment to reaching the aforementioned trade target of £25bn by 2020, Qatar has earmarked £5bn to be invested in Britain's transport, property and digital technology sectors over the next five years, and steps have been taken towards drafting a FTA with the GCC.⁵⁵ This last development is rendered all the more salient given the longstanding difficulties encountered by attempts to draw up a trade deal between GCC countries and the EU, which have foundered since negotiations began in 1990. On December 7th 2016, Mrs May announced the creation of a UK-GCC Joint Working Group to "unblock remaining barriers to trade and take steps to further liberalise our economies".⁵⁶ April 2017 saw Britain's International Trade Secretary, Liam Fox, chair a conference on opportunities for UK companies to enter public private partnerships in the GCC,

52. Samir Salama, "UAE, UK seek to boost defence cooperation", *Gulf News*, 13 March 2012.

53. "Launching of 'Sea Dagger' joint military exercises between the UAE and Britain (Intilaq tamreen 'khanjar al-bahr' al-'askari al-mushtarak bayn al-imat wa britania), *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 16 January 2017.

54. Frank Kane, "Theresa May says Gulf states are keen on trade deals with UK", *The National*, 19 January 2017.

55. "GCC main runner for British investment after Brexit", *Middle East Monitor*, 12 April 2017.

56. "The UAE and Britain are seeking to increase bilateral trade to around \$33 billion"

(Al-imat wa britania tas'yan li raf' al-tabadul al-tijari baynahuma ila nahwa 33 milyar dular), *The New Khalij*, 22 April 2017

Kamal Ahmed, "Qatar announces £5bn UK investment", BBC, 27 March 2017.

Dominic Dudley, "Gulf States to Turn the Screw on Brexit Britain in Trade Talk", *Forbes*, 20 September 2016.

56. "Prime Minister's speech to the Gulf Co-operation Council 2016", *GOV.UK*, 7 December 2016.

announcing that Britain's export credit agency would henceforth provide support in all Gulf currencies.⁵⁷ Mr Fox has paid visits to Oman, Bahrain and Kuwait.⁵⁸

However much Britain commits to the Gulf, it will in no way threaten the US' position as the region's top foreign power. While analysts identified the Obama administration's supposed "pivot" to Asia as a decisive moment for Britain to take up a greater role in the Persian Gulf, America's regional military deployment (40 warships including nuclear-powered "super-carriers") continues to dwarf that of the UK.⁵⁹ The discovery of shale gas may have reduced the US' reliance on Middle Eastern oil, but maintaining an armed presence in an area racked by war will remain among the White House's central concerns. Despite its considerable investment and diplomatic standing, Britain will remain a peripheral actor, more likely to continue playing second fiddle to the US than embarking on any ambitious unilateral diplomatic or military initiative. The UK's return "east of Suez" may even be seen as a means of maintaining a degree of geopolitical relevance, as the British government strives to convince America of its ability to take the initiative in forging deep alliances with states (both bilaterally and through the GCC) in a region of the highest strategic importance. But the wish to bolster Britain's image as a confident global power, irrespective of its EU membership, paints only part of the picture: trade between the UK and the region will only grow in importance as Britain's sets course to weather the economic headwinds stirred by leaving the union.

The current Qatari diplomatic crisis, which began with a Saudi-led breaking of diplomatic ties by a number of countries including Bahrain and the UAE, has laid bare the limits of Britain's influence on GCC politics. That Qatar first called on the Trump administration to solve the row – Britain's help not being sought until three days later – clearly illustrates the regional pecking order. The UK's response paled before even that of other European states, despite its position as the top importer of Qatari liquefied natural gas in Europe.⁶⁰

57. "Enhancing economic relationships between the UK -GCC through PPP", *GOV.UK*, 19 April 2017.

58. Tom Batchelor, "Brexit: UK Government 'prioritising trade over human rights' in pursuit of Middle East deals", *The Independent*, 24 January 2017.

59. James Golgdrick, "The British military presence in the Persian Gulf", *The Strategist*, 9 December 2014.

60. Adam Vaughan, "Qatar crisis highlights rising UK energy reliance on imports", *The Guardian*, 8 June 2017.

While the British government contented itself with a call for the boycotting states to “de-escalate the situation”, the German Foreign Minister repeatedly inveighed against the Saudi-led coalition’s actions targeting Qatar.⁶¹ Similar forcefulness was displayed by his French counterpart, who shuttled around the region in an attempt to clarify France’s support for the Kuwait-led mediation initiative.⁶² Qatar’s allies in the Middle East have also demonstrated their ability and desire to influence regional affairs: Iran has stood firm beside Doha and the Turkish parliament has ratified the deployment of troops to a base on the peninsula. The UK’s relative inaction does not stem from its lack of influence alone. Britain is wary of antagonising Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two key British allies spear-heading the campaign to isolate Qatar. But the crisis has also shone light on the fact that, however much it invests in its military presence and trade ties, the UK is unlikely to be able to play a significant role in shaping regional developments. Conscious of its partnerships straddling geopolitical cleavages and lacking America’s international clout, the British government will keep well out of harm’s way.

Stepping over stumbling blocks

Geopolitical uncertainty may threaten UK’s reinvestment in its regional presence. In 2013, the aforementioned RUSI report expressed concern that Britain’s military presence could pull the UK into a regional conflagration, with its limited troop deployments “large enough to get us into trouble but too small to get us out of trouble once it starts”.⁶³ Its renewed involvement in the Persian Gulf has notably been accompanied by a hardening in official rhetoric directed at the Islamic Republic. While the Prime Minister has stood firm in her commitment to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), she has variously declared herself “clear-eyed about the threat Iran poses to the Middle East” and decried its “malign involvement” in such countries as Bahrain.⁶⁴ After having retorted to Mrs May’s

61. Andrea Shalal, “Saudi demands from Qatar ‘very provocative’: Germany”, *Reuters*, 26 June 2017.
 “Britain’s Theresa May urges easing of Gulf tensions”, *Al Jazeera*, 15 June 2017.

62. “Le Drian in the Gulf to act as a ‘facilitator’ in the Gulf crisis (Le Drian dans le Golfe pour jouer un rôle de ‘facilitateur’ dans la crise)”, *Le Point*, 15 July 2017.

63. Gareth Stansfield and Saul Kelly, “A Return to East of Suez? UK Military Deployment to the Gulf”, op. cit., p. 14.

64. “PM: We are clear-eyed about threat from Iran”,

comments by labelling Britain “a source of evil in the Middle East”, Iran’s Supreme Guide Ali Khamenei has described the UK as an imperialist power and enemy of Iran.⁶⁵ Britain’s hardened stance vis-à-vis Iran has been adopted at a time of diplomatic turmoil: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has blamed Saudi Arabia for two terror attacks committed on its soil and Qatar has been subjected to a Saudi-led blockade (backed by the UAE and Bahrain) since early June 2017, partly in response to its ties with Tehran.⁶⁶

But fears of an impending conflict are excessive. While those warning of a full-scale war point to the involvement of the IRGC and Iran-backed actors in such conflicts as those being waged in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic Republic has largely favoured fighting proxy wars over direct military involvement. Localised incidents such as that of April 27th 2017, when an IRGC vessel came within 1000 metres of a US destroyer, inevitably carry the risk of escalation.⁶⁷ Yet Iran has little to gain in waging a frontal war against its Arab neighbours in the Gulf. Sir John Jenkins, Executive Director of the Middle East branch of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, holds that misgivings regarding the risk that Britain might be sucked into a local conflict are overblown. He contends that Iran has consistently proven itself cautious to avoid escalating geopolitical tensions throughout its recent history, deeming it inconceivable that Britain would participate in a war in the Gulf without being backed by the US (or even France), rendering the likelihood of the UK entering a local conflict all the more remote.⁶⁸

In addition, British public opinion’s sensitivity regarding human rights abuses committed by Gulf States is unlikely to shape the UK government’s foreign policy. Opposition politicians had pledged to curb arms sales to

GOV.UK, 7 December 2016.

“PM May to Al Arabiya: I have concerns about Iran malign activities”, *Al Arabiya English*, 8 December 2016.

65. “Iran’s Khamenei brands Britain a ‘source of evil’ after PM May’s criticism”, *Reuters*, 17 December 2016.
 “Khamenei accuses Britain of threatening Iran’s security (Khamen’i yuttaham britania bi tahdeed ‘amn iyan)”, *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 8 January 2017. .

66. Patrick Wintour, “Gulf plunged into diplomatic crisis as countries cut ties with Qatar”, *The Guardian*, 5 June 2017.

Monavar Khalaj, “Revolutionary Guards blame Saudi Arabia for Tehran terror attack”, 7 June 2017.

67. “US navy ship fires warning flare at Iranian vessel in Persian Gulf”, *The Guardian*, 26 April 2017.

68. Interview with the author, 18 May 2017.

repressive regimes, with Labour party leader Jeremy Corbyn stating that weapons exports would be blocked “when there is a clear risk that they will be used to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law”.⁶⁹ Yet the Conservative government has shown no such compunctions. The UK’s close relationship with Saudi Arabia has drawn much flak: British newspapers, opposition politicians and NGOs have decried successive governments’ tolerance of the House of Saud’s authoritarian rule and bloody intervention in Yemen (in which the UAE is also a key actor). Much criticism has also been directed at Britain’s relationship with such states as Bahrain, including that levied in a damning report drafted by a House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.⁷⁰ Yet despite the heavy-handed quashing of protests in 2011, the forced dissolution of the main opposition party in July 2016 (referred to as a “political society” by a recent Foreign & Commonwealth Office report⁷¹) and recent, bloody raids in Shia villages, Britain has stood fast in its support for the regime. The government recently refused to back a joint UN statement condemning Bahrain’s human rights record, the UK delegation arguing that the text “does not recognise some of the genuine progress Bahrain has made”.⁷²

Successive prime ministers, including Tony Blair, David Cameron and Theresa May, have downplayed Saudi human rights violations, drawing attention to the Kingdom’s role in fighting terrorism. The official government line has long been that positive engagement with Gulf monarchies – allowing the UK to directly pressure repressive regimes – is ultimately more effective in discouraging autocracies from committing human rights violations. But this approach has raised questions. In 2016, Britain sent a £2.1m “reform assistance” package destined to be spent on the Bahraini security sector. Although such funding projects are described as allowing recipient states to benefit from British “experience and best practice”, they have been denounced for both their opacity

and ineffectiveness, doing little to prevent the perpetration of abuses.⁷³ With human rights concerns partially responsible for the breakdown in EU negotiations to seal an FTA with Gulf countries, the UK is likely to shelve such qualms for the foreseeable future to press ahead in laying the groundwork for future trade deals.

Nor are concerns regarding the funding of jihadist organisations likely to hinder the UK’s Gulf-oriented rapprochement. A number of figures and organisations have called for a public inquiry into the role of GCC countries in supporting terrorism, pointing the finger at their activities both in Britain and overseas. Such demands have emerged from across the political spectrum. The Henry Jackson Society, a right-leaning British think tank, published a report identifying Saudi Arabia as the foremost promoter of Islamist extremism in Britain.⁷⁴ Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has condemned Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States for having “funded and fuelled extremist ideology”.⁷⁵ The government has notably been criticised for failing to publish a report, originally commissioned by David Cameron in 2015, which aimed to investigate the funding of extremist Islamist organisations in the UK. Although the British Home Secretary has cited “national security reasons” as behind her decision against making the document public, critics have contended that the government was driven by fears that the report would have a negative effect on relations with Saudi Arabia.⁷⁶ Mrs May’s government has not indicated that it would address concerns linked to donations to Islamist organisations. As is the case with human rights, the Prime Minister will follow her predecessors’ lead; the disquiet expressed concerning Gulf States’ jihadist ties will remain unheeded.

69. “Jeremy Corbyn’s Chatham House speech, full text”, *The Spectator*, 12 May 2017.

70. “The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain: Fifth Report of Session 2013–14”, *House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee*, 22 November 2013, p. 89.

71. “Human Rights Priority Country status report: July to December 2016”, *GOV.UK*, 8 February 2017.

72. Jamie Merrill, “EXCLUSIVE: UK refuses to back UN statement on Bahrain rights abuses”, *Middle East Eye*, 1 March 2017.

73. Ben Quinn and Karen McVeigh, “Human rights abuses in Bahrain cast shadow over £2m UK aid support”, 13 January 2017.

74. Nafeez Ahmed, “Think tank behind Tory foreign policy promotes Arab world fossil fuel hegemony”, *The Guardian*, 7 May 2014.

“Saudi Arabia has ‘clear link’ to UK extremism, report says”, *BBC*, 5 July 2017.

75. Caroline Mortimer, “Jeremy Corbyn calls for ‘difficult conversations’ with Saudi Arabia and Gulf states over extremism funding”, *The Independent*, 5 June 2017.

76. Michael Holden, “UK government declines to publish review on funding of extremism”, *Reuters*, 12 July 2017.

Conclusion

The prospect of Brexit has left the UK scrambling to set up trade deals and shore up its international relevance. Relations with Gulf States have proven a useful vector through which to pursue such goals. As a succession of speeches, official visits, and agreements (both commercial and military) illustrate, Britain's forthcoming departure from the EU has sped the rate at which it continues to reaffirm its role in a geopolitically sensitive part of the world. Following a sustained emphasis on nurturing relations with GCC countries since 2012, the UK's more active stance in the Persian Gulf is an intensified articulation of its past policies.

The reasons behind Britain's engagement with the GCC remain largely the same, the promise of lucrative economic deals and access to strategic bases continuing to form the core of Britain's interest in the region. What has changed is the urgency with which such interests are pursued. The referendum's result has left the UK striving to make up for the loss of revenue and global standing that will follow Brexit. While Mrs May's general election victory has left her weakened, she will carry on pushing for deeper commercial and military ties, further increasing the UK's influence

across (and dependence on) GCC member states. The low probability of war with Iran, coupled with muffled concerns over the repressive methods employed by local rulers, will fall well short of bucking the trend towards stronger cooperation with Gulf States.

Yet the renewed attention devoted to the region must be put into perspective. Although reinforcing security ties firmly rooted in a shared past ensures that Britain will maintain a military presence in the region for years to come, it is inconceivable that the UK will replace the US as the primary guarantor of stability in the Persian Gulf. It may be able to pull off such feats as clinch a trade deal with the GCC, but Britain's peripheral role in the ongoing Qatari crisis underlines the limits to both its influence and desire to adopt a proactive political role in the region. That said, Britain's increased investment in solidifying its relationships with Gulf States reveals the priorities of a post-Brexit world. Foreign policy will revolve around maintaining trade flows, diplomatic influence and military footholds. Beyond a few vague, perfunctory statements, the funding of extremism and human rights violations will continue to go ignored.◇

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