



Conservative
Middle East Council

BRITAIN AFTER BREXIT

OLD FRIENDSHIPS AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

CRISPIN BLUNT MP

KWASI KWARTENG MP

SHASHANK JOSHI

MARK LITTLEWOOD

GENERAL SIR GRAEME LAMB



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THE DEFENCE AND SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF BREXIT

Shashank Joshi

Shashank Joshi is a Senior Research Fellow at RUSI. He specialises in international security in South Asia and the Middle East, with a particular interest in defence policy. Shashank looks at the potential impact of Brexit on defence at home and in the region.

As Britain prepares to leave the European Union (EU), it is natural that we look to areas beyond Europe where we might make compensatory reinforcements to our diplomacy. While the so-called Anglosphere, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America have all been discussed in this context, with varying degrees of plausibility, the Middle East is a more natural geographic and historic choice. Britain's decision to turn to Europe at the end of the 1960s was informed by its withdrawal 'East of Suez', and it would be some irony if Brexit were to give a fillip to Britain's position in the Persian Gulf. Britain already enjoys defence and security relationships with the Middle East that are deeper and more extensive than with any set of nations outside of NATO, the most important of these with the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and non-member Jordan. Over the past five years, as the Middle East has grown significantly more unstable, these relationships have expanded in important ways, in part guided by a dedicated Gulf strategy.

UK-GCC defence and security ties – almost all bilateral – span military basing and associated operations, the provision of arms and training, and intelligence cooperation. In terms of basing, the two most important sites are the UAE's Al Minhad Airbase, which served as a crucial part of the air-bridge to British forces in Afghanistan, and HMS Juffair, the Royal Navy's permanent port at Bahrain that was opened in October 2015. The former gives the Royal Air Force a range of options for supporting military operations in the region and beyond, which would otherwise require more costly and difficult flights from UK or Cyprus bases. Juffair can host the Royal Navy's most advanced destroyer and support the new Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers. Britain also has a military presence in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Oman.

These facilities support mine-clearing ships, combat and surveillance aircraft, and possibly drones. More broadly, the UK trains military forces across the region, and particularly in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Finally, British arms sales are seen both as a way of generating revenue, strengthening friendly states, and cementing these relationships – although critics argue that they encourage and abet destabilising military action by these very same partners.



The GCC is dominated by insecure and – Saudi Arabia apart – small states that fear Iranian subversion and domestic rebellion. They view Britain’s presence as a stabilising force, not least at a time when the relationship between the United States and GCC is at its lowest ebb in decades and Iran is seen to have expanded its influence in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. These concerns were exacerbated by the landmark nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), agreed in October 2015 between Iran and six world powers including Britain. The JCPOA was a inventive and important agreement. But it did give Iran more leeway to support the Assad regime in Syria against Gulf-backed rebels, and elevated Tehran’s diplomatic and economic standing, evident in Iranian President Hassan Rouhani’s visits to Rome and Paris in January 2016.

For its part, Britain values a stable and predictable order in a region that hosts a large British diaspora, provides energy to the UK, and faces a severe threat from multiple, powerful jihadist groups that contain significant numbers of British nationals. Britain’s presence enables it to participate in counter-terrorism missions such as the counter-ISIL campaign in Iraq and Syria, support local forces engaged in other counter-terrorism missions as in Lebanon or Tunisia, and deter conventional threats such as potential Iranian closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

There is evidence that British intelligence agencies have benefited not only from liaison, but also joint operations, with Saudi Arabia and Jordan in particular, against mutual threats such as Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, ISIL, and the Taliban. British access to multiple sites in Oman also enables the collection of important signals intelligence, particularly through taps of under-sea cables. Such access can only be understood in the context of a longstanding and extensive relationship that includes meaningful benefits for the host or partner countries. The fact that many of the reciprocal benefits to Britain may be necessarily secret complicates the task of the government.

But while the UK’s presence has grown, it has fallen short of the ambitions set out in the early period of David Cameron’s government. Senior British military officers have argued for the deployment of a light battalion – 500-1,000 troops – at a base such as Minhad, on a persistent (i.e. rotational) basis. This would allow for more training missions, and could be surged in times of crisis to reassure and protect partner governments, disrupt or deter emerging threats, or even to pursue British interests in South or East Asia. Naturally, the unprecedented stretching of British military resources along with additional commitments to NATO means that this would not be easy to achieve.

Would a deeper British relationship with Arab powers have implications for its dealings with Iran? Some argue that Tehran’s economic re-emergence from sanctions after the JCPOA and its heightened stature in the region suggest that Britain ought to pursue a more balanced posture in the region, less encumbered by its web of existing relations to the GCC. Indeed, Britain has incrementally upgraded its diplomatic relationship to Tehran over 2015-2016, each side appointing ambassadors to the other in September 2016.



This is a welcome process, and it may help produce points of convergence – if not within the Middle East, then potentially further east in places like Afghanistan. We should also remember that while Iran and its Arab rivals compete for power and influence, they also have deep and extensive economic, political, and social connections to one another. Although these ties were disrupted after an attack on Saudi Arabia’s embassy in Tehran in January 2016, they remain intertwined. Our own engagement therefore need not be solely with one or the other. Nevertheless, we should acknowledge that UK-Iran ties are likely to be constrained in important ways.

First, Iran is not, and in the medium-term cannot be, a substitute for Arab partners. Iran is a divided polity, with hardliners constraining the power of the pragmatists in the elected parts of government. Iran’s Supreme Leader would not permit significant cooperation, let alone the degree of intimate defence and security cooperation outlined above, even if we were to distance ourselves from current partners. It would be foolish to abandon existing cooperation for the mere possibility of future cooperation. Second, Iran’s present policy in Syria is fundamentally incompatible to a durable political solution as well as basic humanitarian criteria. The UK should continue to press for a meaningful political transition away from the Assad regime, consistent with the preservation of Syrian state institutions – not to pander to Gulf allies, but because this is the formula most likely to bring long-term stability.

Third, while Britain cannot and should not aim to “roll back” Iranian influence in the region in the manner that some Gulf states seek, even routine British reassurance of partners will at times raise the risk of entanglement with Tehran. This is especially so with maritime operations in the congested Persian Gulf, where the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps’ Navy is an assertive and risk-acceptant presence, as we saw with the Iranian seizure of two US Navy boats in January 2016 and the more dramatic seizure of Royal Navy personnel in 2007. This could become a greater challenge if HMS Juffair supports a larger forward-deployed naval presence and, over the longer-term, if the US Navy shifts resources to the Pacific.

If Britain wishes to influence the Middle East in line with its security and economic interests there, including remaining able to project military force, it requires partners. These partners will bring benefits and carry obligations, although the balance between these is continually negotiated, especially in time of rapid change. Given the autocratic nature of all Gulf states, and the oftentimes blurred boundaries between internal dissent, foreign subversion, and external security challenges, it is particularly difficult for British governments to defend their partnerships. Political and social freedoms have, overall, worsened in the five-plus years since the Arab uprisings began in 2011. But Britain’s choice is probably between existing arrangements on the one hand, and a loss of influence – to friends like France and adversaries like Russia – on the other.



Finally, Brexit is both an opportunity to reconsider our current partnerships but also a constraining factor. In part, Brexit will have a negative impact on UK-GCC relations if prime ministerial and ministerial attention is absorbed in the priorities of domestic politics and negotiation with the European Union. David Cameron was due to visit Saudi Arabia in early 2016, but this was disrupted by Riyadh's execution of a Shia cleric in January, then by the referendum campaign, and finally by the Prime Minister's resignation in June.

Theresa May is not due to visit the region this year. While the royal family's ties are important in a region dominated by monarchies, these are no substitute for high-level political attention. Moreover, a beefed-up air, naval, and ground presence will be especially difficult given the likely squeeze on military spending. Professor Malcolm Chalmers estimates that the post-Brexit fall in the value of sterling could increase the cost of defence imports by around £700 million per annum from 2018–19, amounting to 2 per cent of the whole defence budget. This does not rule out light-footprint deployments to the Gulf, but it certainly makes the finances trickier.