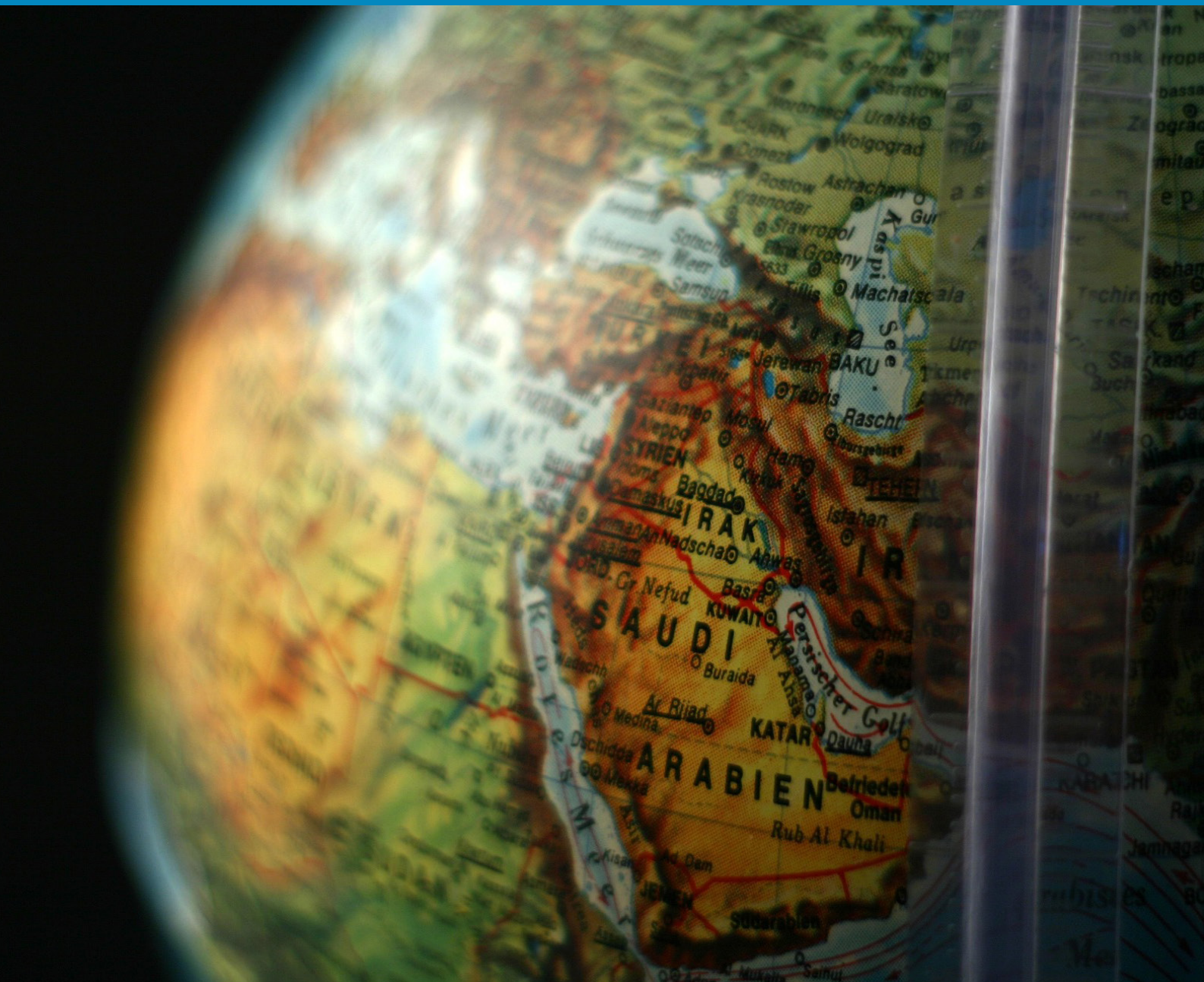


# Labour Party foreign policy in the Middle East – an analysis

November 2017



## Key points:

- The Labour leadership's approach to international affairs, as with other policy areas, is in flux as the radical left agenda that has defined Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters meshes with the possibility of facing the real world challenges that come with holding office.
- Labour's positions taken in the 2017 manifesto, and in Jeremy Corbyn's speeches and interviews since becoming leader, were more moderate than those to which he subscribed previously, though would still signal a major realignment, threatening to drive a wedge between Britain and its traditional allies – both Israel and Western-aligned Arab states.
- Labour has clearly committed to supporting a two-state solution, but a manifesto pledge to recognise Palestine would likely be swiftly fulfilled by a Labour government, boosting the Palestinians' campaign for recognition outside the context of an agreement with Israel, whilst having a chilling effect on UK-Israel relations. This could be compounded if the Labour leader's calls for increasing international pressure on Israel were expressed by a shift in its voting patterns in the United Nations, UNESCO, and the UN Human Rights Council to move closer to Palestinian positions.
- During a recent visit to Israel Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry stressed Labour's commitment to UK-Israel relations and her opposition to BDS, but also said she would personally avoid buying goods from settlements. Moreover, whereas the Conservatives have worked against local government boycotts, Labour has said local councils should set their own policies, raising concerns that pro-boycott positions – which have support on the Labour left – may gain ground under a Labour government.
- The way in which a Labour government might react to major events in the region, such as wars between Israel and Hamas or Hezbollah, will be just as consequential as any preordained policy shift.

## Introduction

- The results of the 2017 general election and subsequent polling indicate that a Labour government led by Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister is a real possibility. Labour's potential Middle East policy demands attention not least because Jeremy Corbyn's long record of positions on Middle East issues, in line with radical left positions which have shaped his career, give the potential for a radical shift. But to what extent would these ideas shape Labour government policy?
- This paper summarises the Labour leader's record on international affairs and the Middle East, before analysing statements by him and Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry.
- Any predictions are of course inherently uncertain. The possibility of holding office is forcing Labour's leadership to focus on building a winning electoral coalition, and to consider the difference between opposition rhetoric and the dilemmas that come with holding office. In addition, decisions in government would be shaped by the specific political conditions following an election (e.g. size of majority; portfolio allocations; potential coalition partners; balance of power and views in cabinet etc.), as well as the regional situation.

## What is Jeremy Corbyn's record on international affairs and the Middle East?

- Jeremy Corbyn has moderated many of his positions over the last two years. As the prospect of general election victory has become more realistic, his positions have increasingly reflected an interest in broadening his electoral appeal and avoiding a party split. Nonetheless, he assumed the role after a 30-year Parliamentary career in which his views were consistently articulated.
- Corbyn comes from Labour's radical left, and throughout his career was considered marginal in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). His approach to international affairs has typically been articulated in relation to

specific issues rather than an overarching ideology. Nonetheless, those positions have been consistent with an anti-capitalist, post-colonial and anti-imperial world view which tends to see the West, led by the United States, as a malign force which has exploited the developing world or “global south”. The hostility to Western capitalism feeds a “[campist](#)” mind-set, which tends to view all radical forces challenging Western hegemony as essentially aligned.

- This approach underpinned positions taken by Corbyn in international affairs before becoming leader: hostility towards NATO and the European Union; sympathy for those challenging Western hegemony including Russia and Venezuela; sympathy for radical armed movements considered emancipatory or post-colonial (including the IRA); a tendency toward pacifism which includes unilateral nuclear disarmament; blanket opposition to Western military interventions including even the 1999 Kosovo intervention; and a sense of common cause with Islamist groups and leaders.
- Corbyn’s political cooperation with Islamists has included working alongside the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Muslim Association of Britain, and support for radical armed groups Hamas and Hezbollah, whom Corbyn described as “friends” in a 2009 speech. From 2011 to 2015 Corbyn chaired the Stop the War Coalition, a campaign group mobilised in response to the US and UK led “War on Terror” following 9/11, which serves as an umbrella to mobilise radical left and Islamist activists in a sustained anti-Western and anti-Zionist campaign. The group has been an important source of organisational and campaign backing for Corbyn.
- Corbyn has a long record of support for anti-Zionist positions that frame Israel as a product of Western imperialism, a racist colonial enterprise, and an oppressor of Palestinian rights. This same conception frames the Palestinians as the archetypal, just, anti-colonial, national liberation movement. This approach regards Israel and its relationship with Arabs – those in the occupied territories and citizens of

Israel – as an instance of Apartheid. In the 1980s Corbyn was a supporter of the Labour Movement Campaign for Palestine which supported replacing Israel with a secular democratic state of Palestine and called “to eradicate Zionism” from “the Labour Movement”. Corbyn is a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign which is ambiguous about a two-state solution but which calls for the right of return for Palestinian refugees of 1948 and their descendants – interpreted by Israel as a threat to its existence as a Jewish nation state – and which opposes what it terms “the apartheid and Zionist nature of the Israeli state”. In a 2015 interview shortly before being elected Labour leader, Corbyn [stressed](#) that the “right to return” of even fourth generation Palestinian refugees was “key” to solving the conflict. Israel’s security barrier – built to prevent Palestinian terrorists reaching Israeli population centres after a wave of suicide bombings in 2001-2 – was described by Corbyn as “an absurd piece of 21st century civil engineering built upon the principle of apartheid”.<sup>1</sup>

- Corbyn and some of his leading supporters have also tended towards a narrow view of antisemitism, which sees it as a malaise of the fascist and racist right, without acknowledging the deep roots of antisemitism on the left, and the links between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. Whilst Corbyn has repeatedly stressed that he abhors any form of antisemitism, he has in the past associated with groups and individuals with overtly antisemitic views. When the revelation of antisemitic views among Labour office holders mired the party in controversy after Corbyn’s election, he commissioned a report to address the challenge and backed rule changes to strengthen procedures for expelling members. However, many remain unconvinced that he has truly grasped the problem, and the failure to permanently expel former mayor of London Ken Livingstone for engaging in Holocaust revisionism is seen as exemplifying a half-hearted response.

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Rich, *The Left’s Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Antisemitism* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016).

## What policies has Labour proposed and what would their effects be?

- The following summary of Labour policy positions draws on Corbyn's recent speeches and interviews, the 2017 manifesto, and comments from other members of Labour's front bench, principally Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry. Overall these reflect a conscious moderation by Corbyn of views he articulated previously, as well as the tension of trying to bridge between the left-wing agenda of Corbyn and his support base, and the more centrist views of the bulk of the Parliamentary Labour Party, and the wider electorate.

### *Cooling relations with US*

- Labour appears ready to back away from a "special relationship" with the US. This is a long-standing pillar of UK foreign policy aiming to maximise Britain's own global influence, whilst promoting shared goals including Western strategic interests, global stability, and liberal political and economic standards. The special relationship is rooted in shared culture, language, extensive economic ties, and exceptionally deep and long-standing intelligence and defence cooperation. It has seen Britain broadly align with US international policies, especially in the Middle East, and British prime ministers and their teams seeking to maximise influence through warm personal ties with US counterparts. This approach was criticised as excessive in the case of Tony Blair's relationship with George W Bush, and especially his support for the Iraq War. Whilst the basis and utility of the special relationship have been thrown into doubt by the election of Trump and his "America First" agenda, Prime Minister Theresa May has made conspicuous attempts to establish a rapport, even whilst openly disagreeing with US President Donald Trump on issues such as the Iran nuclear deal. Other world leaders, including President Macron of France, have similarly taken the approach of embracing rather than distancing from Trump.
- By contrast, Corbyn and Thornberry have been unreserved in their criticisms of Trump.

In a speech to Chatham House in May 2017, Corbyn said Labour would want a "strong and friendly" relationship with the US, before criticising the Trump administration's "reckless" and "erratic" foreign policy. He criticised Theresa May's "hand holding with Donald Trump" and declared that, "Britain deserves better than simply outsourcing our country's security and prosperity to the whims of the Trump White House." Thornberry described Trump's reasons for believing the Iran nuclear deal is not working as "a figment of his fevered brain". Such language no doubt plays into a broad based distaste for Trump amongst the electorate but would surely undercut the goal of a "strong and friendly" relationship if carried into government. Most likely once in government the Labour leadership would be more diplomatic, but how exactly they would seek to handle relations with the US, and gain influence with the Trump administration is unclear.

### *Lukewarm on NATO*

- Jeremy Corbyn has dropped his former blanket opposition to the NATO alliance – which is a cornerstone of British defence policy and the framework for British military involvement in Afghanistan. During the 2017 election campaign Thornberry described Corbyn as having "gone on a journey," adding that "there have been a number of discussions. It is quite clear that the predominance of opinion within Labour is that we are committed to NATO". That said, Corbyn's commitment to common defence is lukewarm at most. In interviews since becoming leader he has avoided committing to send British forces to defend a NATO ally under attack.
- At Chatham House, Corbyn spoke about the need to "halt the drift towards confrontation with Russia" and of "winding down tensions on the Russia-NATO border." In preferring to see a reduced US role in the world, ambivalence regarding NATO, and being content to allow Russia a greater role, Corbyn may, ironically, find he has some views in common with President Trump.

## Opposition to military intervention in general

- A Labour government would likely set the bar for military intervention very – if not impossibly – high. The Labour leader has sought to avoid being branded a pacifist clarifying in his Chatham House speech: “I accept that military action, under international law and as a genuine last resort, is in some circumstances necessary.” But he defined the choice in the election as “between continuing with the failed policy of continual and devastating military interventions, that have intensified conflicts and increased the terrorist threat ... or being willing to step back, learn the lessons of the past and find new ways to solve and prevent conflicts”.
- Labour’s 2017 manifesto also reflected this thinking, declaring that: “We cannot seek to solve the world’s problems on our own, but instead must exhaust diplomatic solutions alongside international, regional and local partners within the framework of international law.”
- Whilst this agenda reflects Corbyn’s own long-standing opposition to military intervention, it also taps into a public mood of scepticism, which is a lasting legacy of the Iraq War in particular.
- Corbyn’s view on drone strikes also indicates movement from the fervent opposition he expressed before becoming party leader, when he led anti-drone demonstrations. His current position is much less clear. When asked if he would order a drone strike in September 2017 he [said](#): “I think we have to look at very carefully the effects on the civilian population of any bombing that takes place before a decision takes place. You have to look at all the facts.”

## Opposition to intervention against Daesh/ISIS

- With the US-led coalition to destroy ISIS’s territorial base now in advanced stages, it is unclear what future role the US-led coalition, including the UK, will take. That said, a Labour government would likely pursue a

drawdown of UK military involvement in the Middle East and oppose future interventions. Corbyn said in his Chatham House speech: “The ‘war on terror’ which has driven these interventions has not succeeded. They have not increased our security at home – many would say just the opposite”.

- Corbyn opposed airstrikes against ISIS in the House of Commons in 2015 along with 152 other Labour MPs. Deputy Party Leader Tom Watson was the only member of the current Shadow Cabinet among the 66 Labour MPs to vote in favour.
- Corbyn’s comments since becoming leader reflect a view which perceives Islamist extremist violence as driven by justified grievances held towards the West and its policies in the Middle East. He told Labour party conference in September 2017, “terrorism is thriving in a world our governments have helped to shape, with its failed states, military interventions and occupations.”
- He argues that military interventions have made things worse by fuelling those grievances and increasing the motivation of individuals to attack the West, including Britain. Speaking shortly after the May 2017 suicide bombing in Manchester, Corbyn said: “Many experts, including professionals in our intelligence and security services have pointed to the connections between wars our government has supported or fought in other countries, such as Libya, and terrorism here at home.”
- In talking about the growth of ISIS he has focussed on its sources of financial and military support, rather than its ideology. In an interview with *Al Jazeera* in July 2017 he said, “ISIS has grown because it’s had money; because it’s had arms; because it’s had space,” adding that his policy to confront it would be, “total isolation of ISIS, at the same time as promoting a political settlement in Syria”.
- The UK is currently the second largest contributor to the US-led military campaign against ISIS. Between September 2014 and

September 2017 the RAF flew more than 8,000 sorties providing strikes, surveillance and reconnaissance, air-air refuelling and transport. The UK has 1,400 UK military personnel deployed, including 600 in Iraq, training and supporting local forces. Special forces are also operating in Libya. The coalition fighting ISIS in Syria also includes France, Germany, Canada, Australia and the Netherlands in a range of strike and combat support roles.

### *Withdrawal from Syria*

- Corbyn said in his Chatham House speech that, “a vote for Theresa May could be a vote to escalate the war in Syria, risking military confrontation with Russia, adding to the suffering of the Syrian people and increasing global insecurity”. He told *Al Jazeera* that “the only way forward has to be a ceasefire that involves Russia, America, involves the European Union, involves the neighbouring states and involves the Syrian regime”.
- The extent of Western military commitment to the moderate opposition in Syria is dictated primarily by the US, which has shown reluctance under both Presidents Obama and Trump to direct US military involvement, creating a situation in which Russia and Iran are the dominant external players. Having helped turn the tide in favour of the Syrian regime, Iran and its proxies are now competing with Western-backed forces, including Kurdish forces to gain control of territory vacated by ISIS. The entrenchment of Iran’s position in Syria, close to Israel’s border, is increasing the risk of a clash with Israel.
- Given the Trump administration’s acquiescence to Russian dominance in Syria, a reduction in UK commitment would not substantially change the existing situation. But were the US, under the current or a future administration, to take a more proactive approach to containing Russian and Iranian influence – as some in Washington are [advocating](#) – they can expect to receive little support from a British Labour government.

### *Warming ties with Iran*

- A Labour government would likely bring a significant change in tone with respect to Iran. Labour’s commitment to maintain the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – which temporarily curbs Iran’s nuclear programme in return for lifting sanctions – is no different from the Conservative government. However, the position of the current government is still that Iran is a threat to the stability of the region. In a speech to Gulf leaders in December 2016 May declared: “We must also work together to push back against Iran’s aggressive regional actions, whether in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, Syria or in the Gulf itself.”
- This tone is unlikely to be sustained by Labour. Corbyn has a very different view of Iran. In the past he has [expressed](#) his general opposition to sanctions against Iran, his understanding for the Islamic revolution in 1979, his sympathies for Hezbollah, and has emphasised the negative historical role of imperial Britain in Iran. He was paid up to £20,000 for appearances on Iranian state-run *Press TV* between 2009 and 2012, even after it was banned in the UK for broadcasting the forced confession of Newsweek journalist Maziar Bahari. He participated in a visit by a cross party group of MPs to Iran in 2014, before becoming leader. Labour under Corbyn has also clashed with Arab ambassadors in the UK who consider Iran their primary threat.

### *Downgraded relations with Western-orientated Arab states*

- Labour has clearly signalled it will take a cooler approach to relations with Sunni Arab states. Arab League ambassadors decided collectively to cancel their annual reception at the Labour party conference in September 2017 after the Saudi and Sudanese ambassadors were barred from attending. In his conference speech Corbyn chose to highlight “the cruel Saudi war in Yemen” and “the crushing of democracy in Egypt [and] Bahrain”. He declared Labour would “put our values at the heart of our foreign policy,” and

added that “democracy and human rights are not an optional extra to be deployed selectively”.

- The Conservative government has followed the tradition in UK foreign policy of close relations with Sunni Arab states. This approach builds on historic ties, and is driven by strategic considerations including: the importance of Gulf stability for global oil markets and the global economy; strategic partnership against Islamist extremism; and the importance of the region as a market for British goods and source of investment. UK exports to GCC countries were worth £20bn in 2015.
- Both May and former Prime Minister David Cameron visited the Gulf, embraced and supported Gulf leaders, and sought to reassure Gulf states of British support in containing Iran. This commitment to Gulf security has included the recent opening of a UK naval station in Bahrain.
- It is generally easier to emphasise human rights concerns in opposition than when in government and Labour in government would likely hear voices of caution from Foreign Office, defence, and trade establishments who see UK’s relationships with Gulf states as vital for British economic and security interests.
- A withdrawal of UK commitment to Gulf security may increase the chances of those Gulf states seeking warmer ties and defence contracts with other Western powers, but also Russia, with whom Saudi Arabia has been warming ties against the backdrop of uncertainty about future relations with the US.

### *Restricting arms sales to the Gulf*

- The thorny issue of arms sales similarly exposes the tension between interests and values in foreign policy. When Labour came to power in 1997, then-Foreign Secretary Robin Cook emphasised an “ethical dimension” to foreign policy, including more stringency on exporting arms to regimes that might use them in internal repression or external

aggression. Implementing such a policy has always proved difficult, given the challenge in applying rules consistently and the threat posed to British exports of withholding sales. The current government operates according to a list of criteria but ministers make decisions on a case by case basis.

- This tension is reflected in Labour’s 2017 manifesto. On the one hand Labour commits “to support development and innovation” in the UK’s “world leading” defence sector and to publish “a Defence Industrial Strategy White Paper.” But at the same time it promises to “review all training and equipment contracts with repressive regimes, to ensure that Britain never colludes in the mistreatment of civilians”. The manifesto also explicitly promises to “immediately suspend any further arms sales for use in the conflict [in Yemen],” where a Saudi-led coalition is fighting Iranian-backed rebels, and is accused of targeting civilians.
- During the election campaign Jeremy Corbyn emphasised in his Chatham House speech (quoting Eisenhower) the dangers of “unwarranted influence by the military-industrial complex”.
- In the period 2007-2016 the Middle East accounted for 59 per cent of Britain’s close to £70bn worth of [defence orders](#), with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman all major importers. BAE Systems, Britain’s largest defence contractor, which manufactures Eurofighter Typhoon jets, employs 34,600 people in the UK, but recently announced 2,000 job cuts due to lack of orders. Halting weapons sales to Saudi Arabia would damage UK standing with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf allies, whilst also reducing the appeal of Britain as a defence supplier, likely damaging sales and causing job losses.

### *Pro-Palestinian alignment*

- Under Corbyn’s leadership Labour has remained within the national and international consensus on a two-state solution, in contrast to the more fervent position of those on Labour’s radical left

who reject Israel's legitimacy. Corbyn himself has shown movement on the issue. When addressing a Labour Friends of Israel reception at Labour party conference in 2015 he was berated for failing even to say the word "Israel". But when addressing the same event in 2016 he was more conciliatory saying: "I'm genuinely glad to be here today to come together to campaign for a two-state solution for both Israelis and Palestinians." In a pre-election interview with Jeremy Paxman in 2017 he said that whilst he thought Hamas should be part of peace talks he did not agree with them, and he acknowledged a peace rally that had recently been held in Tel Aviv.

- Similarly, Thornberry said in a Commons debate in 2017 that "we want to see a peaceful process of negotiation towards a two-state solution, including an end to all acts of terrorism towards Israel and an end to all illegal settlements". In a speech to the BICOM-*Jewish News* conference in November 2017, she said: "The Balfour Declaration is so important, because it enshrines the existence of the Jewish State, and the rights of its people as a formal principle of our foreign policy, and that will never, ever change."
- That said, Corbyn remains firmly committed to a Palestinian narrative on the conflict, and does not follow the convention of balancing his criticisms of Israel with parallel criticisms of Palestinian incitement or violence. He told the 2017 Labour conference that Labour should "give real support to end the oppression of the Palestinian people, the 50-year occupation and illegal settlement expansion". On the centenary of the Balfour Declaration he called for "recognising Palestine as a step towards a genuine two-state solution" and "increasing international pressure for an end to the 50-year occupation of the Palestinian territories, illegal settlement expansion and the blockade of Gaza".
- It is unclear to what extent a British Labour government might pursue international pressure and what it would amount to in

practice. The Labour manifesto pledge to "immediately recognise the state of Palestine" (adopted under Ed Miliband's leadership) would likely be swiftly fulfilled, as a relatively easy but symbolically significant delivery of a manifesto pledge popular with the party base. The extension of recognition to Palestine by international organisations and some states in recent years has bolstered the international legal dimension of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) campaign for sovereignty on territory captured by Israel in 1967. It has also afforded the PA new opportunities to confront Israel in international forums and the International Criminal Court. The move would likely be welcomed with a great fanfare by the Palestinian Authority and involve ceremonial occasions such as the presenting of an ambassador and formal accreditation of an embassy.

- However, when such recognition has been afforded by others it has had no practical impact on the ground. Arguably the main effect of UK recognition would be to position the UK as one of the most pro-Palestinian states in Europe, with associated consequences for UK-Israel relations. The only West European state to have extended full recognition to the State of Palestine was Sweden in 2014. Doing so would drive a wedge between the UK and Israel, and potentially the US also. It would likely trigger Israeli diplomatic reprisals, including the recall of the UK's ambassador to Israel for consultations (as was the case with Sweden) and a general cooling of diplomatic relations.
- With Britain withdrawing from the EU, it will have greater scope to act independently on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, but less influence on EU members, though other states which have been considering recognition of Palestine, notably Ireland, could be inspired to follow suit.
- The shift to an overtly pro-Palestinian position would also likely be reflected in other ways, such as greater support for Palestinian diplomatic initiatives in UN fora to condemn and isolate Israel whilst giving support for



Palestinian positions. It is not clear that objections recently raised publicly by British officials to the disproportionate focus on Israel in the UN Human Rights Council would be sustained under Labour. Voting patterns could shift in other arenas such as the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). In recent votes on sensitive resolutions which ignore Judaism's connection with Holy Sites, the UK has voted in support of Israel, alongside the US, Germany, the Netherlands and others. Under Labour Britain could conceivably switch to abstaining (as has France) or even voting with the Palestinians (as has Sweden). Though opposition to all Israeli settlement building as illegal in international law is long-standing British policy, declarative policy condemning settlements and other Israeli policies relating to the occupation would likely escalate.

- Overall, a British shift to an overtly pro-Palestinian position would undo past UK attempts to position itself as a balanced third party trusted by both sides, and would likely lead Israel to try and freeze the UK out from any diplomatic involvement.
- During a recent visit to Israel Thornberry was keen to stress that UK-Israel relations would remain strong under Labour and to play down differences between Labour's position and the current government. However, there is clearly the risk of a broader 'chilling effect' on UK-Israel relations. The perception of a negative attitude of the Prime Minister and his circle to Israel would likely have a ripple effect through Whitehall, with Israel no longer being seen as a priority for UK engagement. The two-way traffic of ministerial visits would likely slow. This atmosphere could negatively impact years of government support for cooperation in research, hi-tech and trade built up under a succession of Prime Ministers warm towards Israel. The change of atmosphere could also lead to reduced Israeli investment in the UK, currently Israel's top investment destination in Europe.
- That said, there would be factors pushing in the other direction, such as commercial and private sector drivers for continued

cooperation; cultural, people-to-people and Jewish community ties promoted and reinforced by pro-Israel activism; institutionally embedded cooperation, especially in areas of security and intelligence; and engagement led by Conservative politicians and parts of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) sympathetic to Israel.

- In terms of financial support for the Palestinians Britain is already a significant donor, with the Department for International Development's Palestinian programme worth nearly £70m in 2016-7. There are no specific indications from Shadow Development Secretary Kate Osamor as to whether this would increase or shift focus under Labour.

### What other potential policies towards Israel may emerge from Labour?

#### *Engagement with Hamas and Hezbollah*

- A Labour government may drop the current policy of non-engagement with Hamas and Hezbollah. In an interview with Jeremy Paxman in May 2017 Corbyn addressed concerns that he had described these groups as "friends" by saying that he was speaking about "the need for dialogue between Israel and all aspects of Palestine, including Hamas as well as including Fatah," and added, "I think to bring about a peace process, that is important". Both Hamas and Hezbollah are armed and supported by Iran and committed to Israel's destruction, but both are now involved in power sharing arrangements, within the PA and Lebanese government respectively.
- British diplomatic contact with both these groups is not unprecedented. There were low level contacts with Hamas officials prior to 2006, when the Quartet (US, Russia, EU and UN) set conditions on diplomatic engagement with Hamas including recognition of Israel. Various MPs have met Hamas representatives since then. Regarding Hezbollah, David Miliband as Foreign Secretary in the last Labour government publicly announced the UK was dropping

its non-contact policy in 2009. However, such contacts have always been sensitive, and official engagement, when permitted, has been kept at a low level. In the past, diplomatic contacts with Hamas have been opposed not only by Israel and the US, but by their secular Palestinian rivals in Fatah. A public outreach to either Hamas or Hezbollah would certainly garner a very negative reaction from Israel.

### Boycotting Israel

- In an interview with *Times of Israel* in November 2017, Thornberry expressed her opposition to BDS and even said she would “buy Israeli goods, positively,” but stressed that she personally would avoid buying goods from settlements because she would not “want to be encouraging the breach of international law”. Whereas the Conservatives have actively worked against boycotts in local government, Labour is opposed to this on the basis that local councils should have the right to set their own policies.
- Many on the Labour left are pushing for a tougher policy, including an arms boycott and a clear policy of support for boycotting Israeli produce from settlements. Were resolutions for such policies to reach the floor of a Labour conference, which could happen before the next election, they would likely pass. Such measures have not yet reached the conference floor out a desire to avoid a divisive split, since some members of the PLP would be opposed, and because opponents of boycotts controlled Labour’s Conference Arrangements Committee (which rules which motions can be debated) until this year, though they are now in a minority.
- It is not clear how rhetorical support for boycotting settlements would translate to concrete action in government. In any case, settlement produce account for a very small percentage of Israeli exports. Nonetheless, the situation raises concerns for a slippery slope in which pro-boycott positions in general gain ground under a Labour government.

- Were Labour to impose an arms boycott it would be of limited practical effect on Israeli security capabilities. Since the UK refused to sell arms to Israel between 1982 and 1994, and tightened up export licences during the Second Intifada, Israel purchases relatively little UK defence equipment, and the UK has actually acquired far more from Israel, for example UAVs.
- However, such steps would position the UK as the only state with diplomatic relations with Israel to back any form of boycott. Whilst the EU has moved to ensure Israeli imports from the occupied territories do not benefit from EU-Israel trade agreements, and followed the UK’s leads in issuing guidance that settlement goods be labelled as such, no European power has backed a boycott of settlement goods. The effect on UK-Israel diplomatic relations and government sponsored cooperation in trade, hi-tech industries and research would be very damaging. The UK would find itself subject to the harshest condemnations from Israelis across the board and government to government contacts would be strained.

### How might a Corbyn-led government respond to Middle East challenges?

- Much of foreign policy is reactive and the effects of a Corbyn-led government would be felt when the UK responds to events. The UK government would be more likely to back Palestinian diplomatic moves such as UN resolutions critical of Israel and attempts to secure recognition in international institutions. The UK would also be likely to immediately condemn Israel in a situation of escalated conflict such as fighting between Israel and Hamas or Hezbollah, in contrast to previous Conservative and Labour governments that supported Israel’s right to self-defence.
- However, it is important to stress that such questions, as well as many others discussed above, would be subject to internal deliberations among cabinet colleagues and within government ministries, which may

be influenced by wider political factors and considerations, as well as the specifics of what is happening in the Middle East.

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