

# British Middle East strategy after Brexit

November 2018



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## KEY POINTS

- The UK has deep and enduring economic and security interests in the Middle East. These include ensuring energy security, fighting terrorism, expanding trade and investment. These vital interests are reflected by increased UK investment in aid, military infrastructure, and economic ties to the region.
- Brexit has fuelled a necessary debate about British foreign policy strategy and Britain's place in the world, as have global changes including US retrenchment and Russian resurgence. This paper provides an overview of UK policy, military assets, operations, and aid contributions to the region and makes the following recommendations for future policy and strategy:
  1. To advance British interests in the region, Britain must invest in activity that projects UK influence overseas such as diplomacy, trade, aid, military capability and cultural outreach. It can't do this on the cheap.
  2. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) budget needs to be increased so it can expand diplomatic posts and train diplomats. Just 30 per cent of FCO diplomats in Arabic speaking countries can speak Arabic, compared to 64 per cent of US diplomats in similar posts.
  3. Maintaining UK defence spending at or above 2 per cent of GDP (in line with the NATO target) is critical for armed forces capability and the UK's operational scope in the Middle East.
  4. With growing uncertainty about the US's global role, the UK needs to seek other partners such as local or European allies with shared interests such as France and Germany. Even after leaving the EU, British interests will be inextricably connected to European security and stability.
  5. Cooperation over shared interests with Russia is highly unlikely. The UK and its allies need to avoid the mistake of misjudging the impact of Russia's intervention in Syria and Britain should work with partners to confront Russia's assertive agenda.
  6. The UK's core interests are best protected by close ties with Gulf States and efforts to

contain Iran. Britain should deepen security cooperation and take a tougher approach to Iran's destabilising regional activity and remain committed to preventing Iran acquiring nuclear weapons. To deepen trade relations, the UK should seek a comprehensive free trade deal with the GCC states.

7. The UK should continue to seek defence cooperation and offer training to allies in the Middle East, especially in areas such as cyber, intelligence, and special forces where the UK excels. Regarding defence sales, policymakers should remain cognisant of their significance for UK regional influence, as well as jobs, whilst maintaining commitment to international law and standards.

8. Despite past experience which has made military intervention in the Middle East domestically unpopular, the UK has recently demonstrated new effective models of military involvement. UK participation in the fight against ISIS established a model of intervention against a clearly legitimate target that the UK public will support. Recent air strikes against the Assad regime's chemical weapons sites reaffirmed a policy option to protect civilians and uphold international standards.

9. To create conditions for progress between Israelis and Palestinians, the UK need not wait for the US. The UK can provide more support for Palestinian Authority (PA) governance, increase action against PA corruption, maintain support for PA security forces, invest more in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue projects and urge Israel to allow Palestinian development in Area C in the West Bank.

## INTRODUCTION: 'GLOBAL BRITAIN' AND THE CHANGING MIDDLE EAST

- **How will the UK advance its interests in the Middle East in the years to come?** Proponents of Brexit argue it will strengthen the UK's international position beyond Europe by enabling the UK to develop a wider network of international relations. Many sceptics in Whitehall and beyond fear that Brexit has reduced British global influence. Either way, as Britain is reconfiguring its global role, the

Middle East will remain a region of both direct significance for UK interests as well as of problematic instability.

- This briefing summarises the challenges for British Middle East policy in the years ahead, by highlighting changes to British foreign policy making as a result of Brexit and other international developments; assessing enduring UK interests in the Middle East; surveying the UK's current footprint in the region; and analysing trends that will shape the future of the region. It concludes by identifying and responding to consequent policy dilemmas and choices the UK faces in maintaining its influence and safeguarding its interests. The analysis reflects the UK's unique position stemming firstly from its historic role in the region and legacy of extraordinarily deep ties with many Arab states; and secondly Britain's enduring ongoing global significance – being one of Europe's two most capable military powers, a nuclear power, a G7 economy, a major arms producer, and a permanent UN Security Council member.

## PART 1: DECADES OF UK STRATEGIC ASSUMPTIONS IN QUESTION

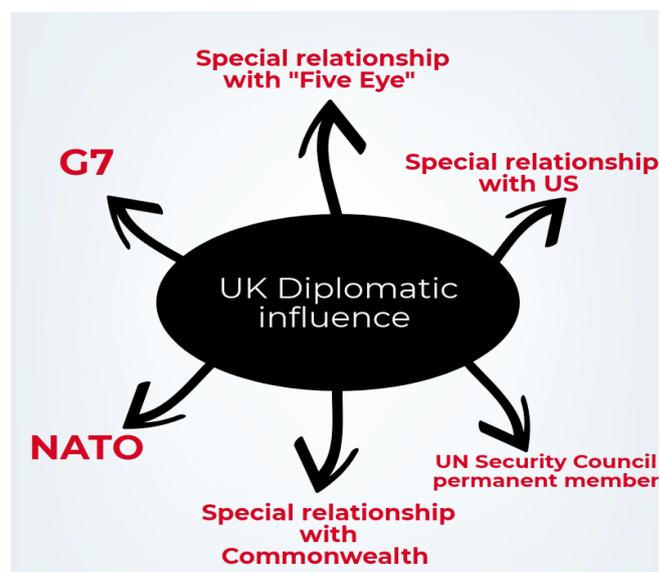
Aside from changes taking place in the Middle East, three developments are bringing far-reaching changes to the policy making context for British decision makers: Brexit; the changing politics in the US, and the deep contestation within the UK about its place in the world.

### Brexit raises questions over Britain's international influence

- Proponents of Brexit argue that it will strengthen the UK's international position by enabling the UK to develop a wider network of international relations. According to a [FCO memorandum](#), 'Global Britain' is intended to signify that Britain will, "continue to be open, inclusive and outward facing; free trading; assertive in standing up for British interests and values; and resolute in boosting our international standing and influence."
- Yet many sceptics in Whitehall and beyond, fear Brexit will reduced British global influence. Recently retired FCO Permanent Secretary

Simon Fraser has [warned](#), "In the short term, our decision has weakened our voice and created uncertainty."

- EU collective foreign policy has only ever represented one dimension of UK diplomatic influence, particularly with respect to key Middle East challenges relating to Iran and Syria. The UK remains a permanent UN Security Council member, a G7 power, a key player in NATO, and a significant military power and arms producer, with significant strengths in cyber security, intelligence and special forces. It also enjoys a special relationship with the US, as well as Commonwealth and Anglosphere allies, especially those represented in the 'Five Eyes' intelligence partnership. While this network will remain important, none of Canada, Australia or New Zealand share Britain's distinct set of interests in the Middle East – both economic and strategic (see Part 2 below) – and this also appears increasingly true of the US.



- Brexit will inevitably make it harder for the UK to project its agenda via the EU. The extent to which the UK will coordinate with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy is yet to be determined. Though the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee has called for the government to seek UK representation in the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC) (where senior member state diplomats coordinate day to day EU foreign policy)<sup>1</sup>, the UK will inevitably no longer have the influence of a member. Whilst Brexit will make the UK more flexible, where it speaks and acts outside the EU, e.g. through UN diplomacy or sanctions, it

will only represent itself, rather than the EU28, which collectively represents 500 million people and an economic bloc worth 20 per cent of global GDP. The context for UK policy will frequently be shaped by EU decisions it does not control. Yet the UK will not enjoy the 'safety in numbers' protection that common EU positions can give to EU members acting together, for example when enforcing sanctions, and may be more susceptible to pressure in response.<sup>2</sup> Nor will the UK be a participant in the significant collective EU development budget.

- **The EU's most powerful tools in international relations are economic**, thanks to the size of the European Single Market, including sanctions and proscriptions, which have been important in applying pressure on Iran, and isolating harmful non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah. Whereas in the past the UK has taken a leading role in sanctions policy, it is yet to be determined how sanctions will be coordinated after Brexit.

- **It is also unclear the extent to which UK diplomats will continue to coordinate with EU members** in missions around the world and in UN institutions, and with the EU's diplomatic service, the External Action Service (EAS). The EU's efforts to project its influence and norms to the Arab world have in any case consistently fallen short of its ambitions, and UK bilateral relations have been much more significant than collective EU relations with Arab states.

- **Some have suggested that the UK should aspire to a new 'special relationship' with the EU and its most powerful members post-Brexit.** Regarding the Middle East, one approach is to pursue a special partnership with France (which shares the UK's military capacity and historic role in the region) as Britain's closest Middle East and North Africa (MENA) partner<sup>3</sup>. Another model is to enhance quadrilateral consultation mechanisms between Britain, France, Germany and the US. On the Iranian nuclear issue, a triumvirate of Britain, France and Germany (the 'E3') developed to address the Iranian nuclear issue due to the George W. Bush administration's unwillingness to engage directly with Iran. It retained significance as Iranian nuclear negotiations advanced under the Obama administration, since the three represented the EU, whose collective sanctions were an important part of the economic pressure

which brought Iran to negotiate. It retains some enduring relevance as an international forum for engaging Iran, as the three are co-signatories on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, and working to keep it alive after President Donald Trump's withdrawal. The continuing coordination of Europe's three most economically and militarily significant states could remain relevant on other global issues including Syria. However, the configuration can make other major EU powers, such as Italy, resentful. It remains to be seen to what extent France and Germany would want to pursue foreign policy in partnership with a non-EU member Britain as opposed to states committed to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Overall, European powers are under US pressure to expand defence capabilities and are working on closer military coordination through the new PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) agency, though EU collective defence capabilities remain very limited.

### The US is no longer a policy anchor

- **The US, the key anchor for British Middle East policy since the 1956 Suez watershed, is increasingly insular, and unpredictable**, and it is unclear to what extent it will continue to share British interests and values. The UK can no longer confidently build its Middle East policy around its special relationship with the US, and the future role of NATO has been called into question.

- **The Obama administration's pivot to Asia signalled that the Middle East was of declining strategic significance to the US**, not least as shale gas made the US a net energy exporter. In an unusual example of continuity, President Trump shares Obama's antipathy for committing US forces to Middle East conflicts and shouldering the burden of stability in the region. Even whilst the US has the greatest military capacity in the region - including major bases in Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait - it has waged the campaign against ISIS with minimal ground forces. US airstrikes against the Assad regime in response to the use of chemical weapons were limited and symbolic, and were not tied to a broader strategy to shape Syria's future. The future of US forces in Syria is clearly an issue of **tension** in the US administration, with senior officials indicating the US is committed to a long

term presence to contain Iran and ISIS, but Trump repeatedly signalling his desire “to get out” – which would allow Russia and Iran to dominate.

*“UK-Israel bilateral trade reached a record high of \$9.1bn in 2017 and is set to increase by 8 per cent in 2018.”*

Trump’s presidency may be transitory but he reflects a deep reluctance among many Americans to shoulder the burden of international peace and security.

### Britain’s identity and role is contested domestically

- **Britain has its own deep internal divisions over its international role.** This has been illustrated clearly with respect to the Middle East in repeated debates over military intervention since the Iraq War. The 2013 Commons vote against a military response to the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons was a potent symbol of this. Though the UK has since joined military action – waged largely from the air – against Assad following his use of chemical weapons in 2017 and 2018, there has been little appetite for wider intervention, aside from targeting ISIS, which is regarded as a direct threat. Even intervention against ISIS divided the opposition Labour Party in 2015, with Jeremy Corbyn and 152 other Labour MPs voted against.

- **Whilst Conservative Brexiteers deny Brexit is a retreat from global affairs,** many who backed it favour a more insular Britain and are sceptical about globalisation, international interventions or investment in international development.

- **There is a significant chance that Labour could take power with a radical left leader who rejects the traditional consensus view of Britain and its role in the world.** Jeremy Corbyn is not only hostile to UK overseas intervention, but to global capitalism, and cool on NATO and the very notion of a US-led Western or neoliberal global order. A Corbyn government would shake up UK Middle East policy, with manifesto commitments to suspend defence contracts with Saudi Arabia and Israel<sup>4</sup> (see box below).

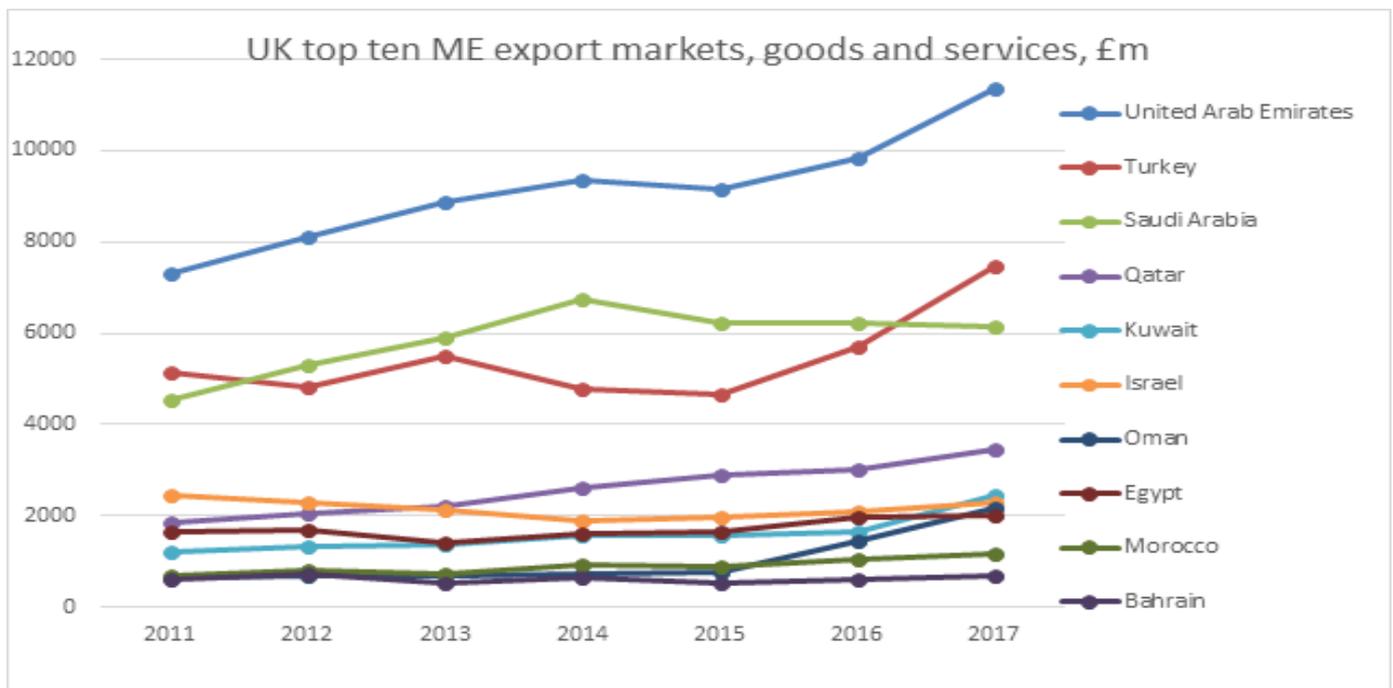
## PART 2: BRITISH INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

- **The UK has deep and enduring economic and security interests in the Middle East.** These interests include ensuring energy security; containing terrorism and extremism; and promoting and protecting trade and investment. For generations the cornerstone of British policy has been deep relations with Sunni Arab countries, especially Gulf states, several of which were once formally under UK protection. This was reflected in the declaration by Prime Minister Theresa May to a 2016 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit that “Gulf security is our security” and a commitment to work with the GCC to contain the threat posed by Iran.

### Economic interests

- **The Middle East will remain a key source of global energy supplies for the foreseeable future.** It accounts for around one third of the world’s oil and 15-20 per cent of gas. As Britain’s own oil and gas production continues to decline, its oil and gas import dependency is projected to rise from 38 per cent in 2018 to 69 per cent in 2035. Nearly a third of UK gas imports are liquified natural gas (LNG) sourced from Qatar, and UK dependency on LNG is expected to grow. Whilst Norway is by far the UK’s largest supplier of oil, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and UAE are significant suppliers, with the Gulf states especially significant for jet fuel.

- **The Middle East is important as an export and investment destination for goods and service, and a source of vital inward investment in the UK.** It is also a source of growing opportunity with soaring populations and oil rich economies keen to diversify. The UK exports more goods and services to the Arab world than to China, or to Brazil and India combined. The UK also sources significant sums of inward investment from the Gulf Arab states and is keen to remain the leading European power in the region. The UK is Qatar’s largest investment destination, with £35bn of investments in the UK including property and high end retail, and another £5bn planned in the next five years. When Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman visited the UK in 2018 the governments declared a



\$100bn target for procurement and investment over a 10-year period. Inward investment is key to counterbalance the UK's trade deficit. Britain's bilateral trade with Israel is also significant (**\$9.1bn in 2017**) and with a surplus in the UK's favour. The Open Europe think tank has identified Israel as priority country for UK economic engagement post-Brexit due to untapped trade potential. Meanwhile 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. In 2016 the UK defence sector generated £23bn turnover and provided 142,000 direct jobs.<sup>5</sup>

- **The economic significance of the ties with oil-rich Gulf States are increasing due to Brexit**, as the UK seeks to expand trade and inward investment beyond the EU and maintain the City of London as the world's premier global financial centre. Economic opportunities are expanding into new sectors as Saudi Arabia and other Arab states seeks to diversify their economies, creating new opportunities for UK businesses.

### Security interests

- **The Middle East is set to remain influenced by radical anti-Western Islamist ideologies** that not only threaten the stability of Britain's Arab allies in the region but which have a proven capability to influence young Muslims throughout Europe, including in the UK, resulting in devastating terrorist attacks. Whilst most Muslims repudiate violent Jihadist ideologies, these ideologies will

remain potent for years to come (see Part 4).

- **Iran poses a particular threat** as a state built on a radical anti-Western Islamist ideology, with the ability to carry out acts of terror worldwide through proxies; an advanced nuclear program; the potential to disrupt oil shipping; and significant cyber capabilities.
- **Stability and security in mainland Europe is directly impacted by events in the Middle East, through migratory waves, and Jihadist threats, fuelling populist nationalism.** The economic and political stability of the continent – with whom the UK does nearly half its trade – remains of vital importance to Britain.

- **Events in the Middle East also resonate directly within British society.** A fringe minority of young British Muslims has proven vulnerable to the influence of radical Islamist ideologies, with hundreds inspired to attack fellow citizens at home, and more attracted to ISIS. Meanwhile intensified conflict between Israel and armed groups in Gaza have typically triggered increased incidences of antisemitism in the UK.

- **There is a significant presence of UK citizens in the region.** There are around 160,000 British citizens living in the Gulf, including around 120,000 in the UAE and 30,000 in Saudi Arabia, and hundreds of thousands more visit annually. British tourism to Egypt is recovering, with more than 500,000 expected visitors in 2018. The question of FCO travel advice to tourists is a sensitive bilateral issue with Egypt and Tunisia.

- All of these factors make the UK's interests and challenges regarding the Middle East, closer to those of its EU partners than the US (its traditional partner).

*“The UK’s energy dependency on the Middle East will increase from 38 per cent in 2018 to 69 per cent in 2035.”*

The US is not directly affected by refugee flows, has a Muslim population less exposed to radicalisation, is a net oil exporter, and under Trump has a complex relationship with Russia.

### PART 3: CURRENT UK MIDDLE EAST ACTIVITIES AND POLICIES

The FCO [declared](#) with respect to the Middle East: “We’re working for a more secure, prosperous Middle East and North Africa, with political stability based on open, inclusive political systems and economies. We use diplomatic influence, practical programming assistance and capacity building to support local efforts to respond to conflict, and build capable, inclusive institutions and economic growth.” The 2015 UK National Security Strategy identified the six GCC states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain) as “vital partners for the UK in working towards sustainable, long-term regional stability, in addressing direct threats to the UK from terrorism, extremism and organised crime, and for our energy security,” as well as stressing: “We encourage greater trade and investment in both directions.” These agendas are reflected by a broad based UK engagement, which currently involves a number of government departments including the FCO, Defence, International Development and International Trade. (Indeed, Foreign Affairs Select Committee Chair Tom Tugendhat has argued that military, economic, development and diplomatic dimensions of foreign policy should be more effectively unified through the creation of a “super ministry” overseeing all these departments, led by the Foreign Secretary.

### Military: Fighting terror threats, and safety for international shipping

- The UK has made significant investments to support its capability to project force into the region. The ability to contribute to multi-national interventions and stabilisation efforts is key to Britain maintaining influence with regional powers and ‘a place at the top table’ in international diplomacy.
- The UK is a major contributor to the campaign against ISIS (‘Operation Shader’). As of mid-2018 approximately 850 UK personnel support Operation Shader in Iraq and Syria. The UK has conducted 1,700 airstrikes and conducted many thousands of sorties providing approximately a quarter of intelligence and surveillance to the coalition. Though officially there are no UK ground forces, it is reported that UK special forces, including the Special Air Service (SAS), are fighting ISIS in Syria. Deployed Royal Air Force (RAF) assets include a mixture of combat, surveillance, reconnaissance, and refuelling/transport aircraft, including UAVs.
- The UK’s training contingent in Iraq is currently 500 personnel. The UK has been providing training to Kurdish Peshmerga forces and military advice to the Iraqi security forces. Specifically, the UK is co-ordinating the coalition’s counter-IED training programme, in addition to infantry skills and medical training.
- The UK provides substantial training and support to Jordan, which faces Jihadist threats from neighbouring Syria and Iraq. In 2017 the UK conducted four military exercises with over 3,000 personnel, and had over 350 Jordanian personnel training in the UK. In the first of two visits to Jordan in 2017, Prime Minister May [announced](#) expanded training and support to the Jordanian airforce.
- The UK provides assistance to the Saudi-led coalition in the Yemen conflict, aiding Saudi and UAE-led efforts to bolster the Yemeni government against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. Whilst the government stresses UK personnel are not directly involved in operations, Saudi officials describe UK and US personnel being present in command and control rooms and advising on airstrikes. In addition, the UK continues to provide routine engineering support

for UK supplied aircraft, and provide training courses and advice, including as part of the British Military Mission to the Saudi Arabian National Guard. The Iranian-backed militia in Yemen poses a major threat to neighbouring Saudi Arabia and has targeted Saudi cities with Iranian-supplied missiles. It also boosts Iranian regional influence and increases threats to shipping in the Gulf. However, the Saudi-led operation has been internationally criticised for the bombing of civilians and blockading of ports, making UK support for the mission highly controversial.

- **The UK provides support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF)**, in support of a US-led strategy to build LAF capability, as opposed to the Iranian-backed Hezbollah. Support includes training missions and [more than £60m](#) in the six years up to 2018 to help secure the Lebanon-Syria border. However, with Hezbollah part of the Lebanese government, Israeli officers [claim](#) Hezbollah has a hold on the LAF, and has threatened that it will not differentiate between Hezbollah and the Lebanese state in any future conflict.

- **The UK has significant military and security cooperation with Israel in several areas.** There is strong intelligence sharing on issues including Iran’s nuclear program and counter-terrorism, and growing cooperation in the field of cyber security.<sup>6</sup> Since 2008 the FCO and Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs have held an annual strategic-dialogue conference. The British Army’s new Watchkeeper UAV is supplied by a consortium including Israel’s Elbit Systems.

- **In the Palestinian Territories**, a small UK team support a US-led mission providing institutional development and professionalisation for the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF), and the UK supports an EU mission (EUPOL COPPS) to develop Palestinian policing.

*“FCO officers who can speak Arabic in Arabic language speaking posts has drastically fallen from 49 per cent in December 2017 to 30 per cent in July 2018.”*

- **UK forces have long-standing missions to protect the region’s sea lanes.** UK naval forces have a permanent presence in the Gulf. As part of [‘Operation Kipion’](#) ships are deployed to ensure Gulf shipping lanes are safe from mines, terrorism and piracy. The Royal Navy also provides air defence support to allied forces including the US Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain and works alongside other international forces. The UK currently leads the EU’s [‘Operation Atalanta’](#) focused on countering Somali-based piracy in the Indian Ocean, though this will change post-Brexit.

- **In addition to the presence of British officers in Saudi Arabia, Britain has a military presence spread across all the GCC countries:**

1. **Oman:** Britain recently opened the Joint Logistics Support Base in the Duqm Port complex, providing a permanent training facility and military logistics centre, connected to other Gulf countries by the Gulf Rail Project. The post has dry dock capability able to accommodate submarines and the UK’s new aircraft carriers. British forces conduct substantial training exercises with Omani forces, including the ‘Saif Sareea 3’ (‘Swift Sword 3’) in autumn 2018, with the participation of 4,500 British forces.
2. **Bahrain:** In April 2018 the Royal Navy reopened a permanent support base at the main Bahraini port of Mina Salman, called HMS Juffair. The facility will also allow the UK to provide better support for its vessels, including the new aircraft carriers
3. **Qatar:** The UK has an RAF squadron at the Al Udeid air base in Qatar and in July 2018 formed a unique joint [UK-Qatari squadron](#) (No. 12 Squadron), to be based in Qatar which will temporarily incorporate Qatari forces and help them integrate newly UK supplied Typhoon and Hawk fighters to the Qatari military. A staff college operated by UK-based company Serco trains Qatari officers.
4. **UAE:** The RAF has a Typhoon fighter squadron quietly stationed in the Al Minhad airbase, a discreet and well-guarded airbase south of Dubai.
5. **Kuwait:** British army units are [deployed](#) in Kuwait training local forces and officers.

# British Military Interests

## Mediterranean

## The Levant

**Mediterranean:** EU Naval force Operation Sophia / Multi-national NATO deployments

**Iraq:** 500 person contingent training Kurdish Peshmerga forces / Provide military advice to Iraqi security forces / UK co-ordinate coalition's counter-IED training programme, infantry skills and medical training

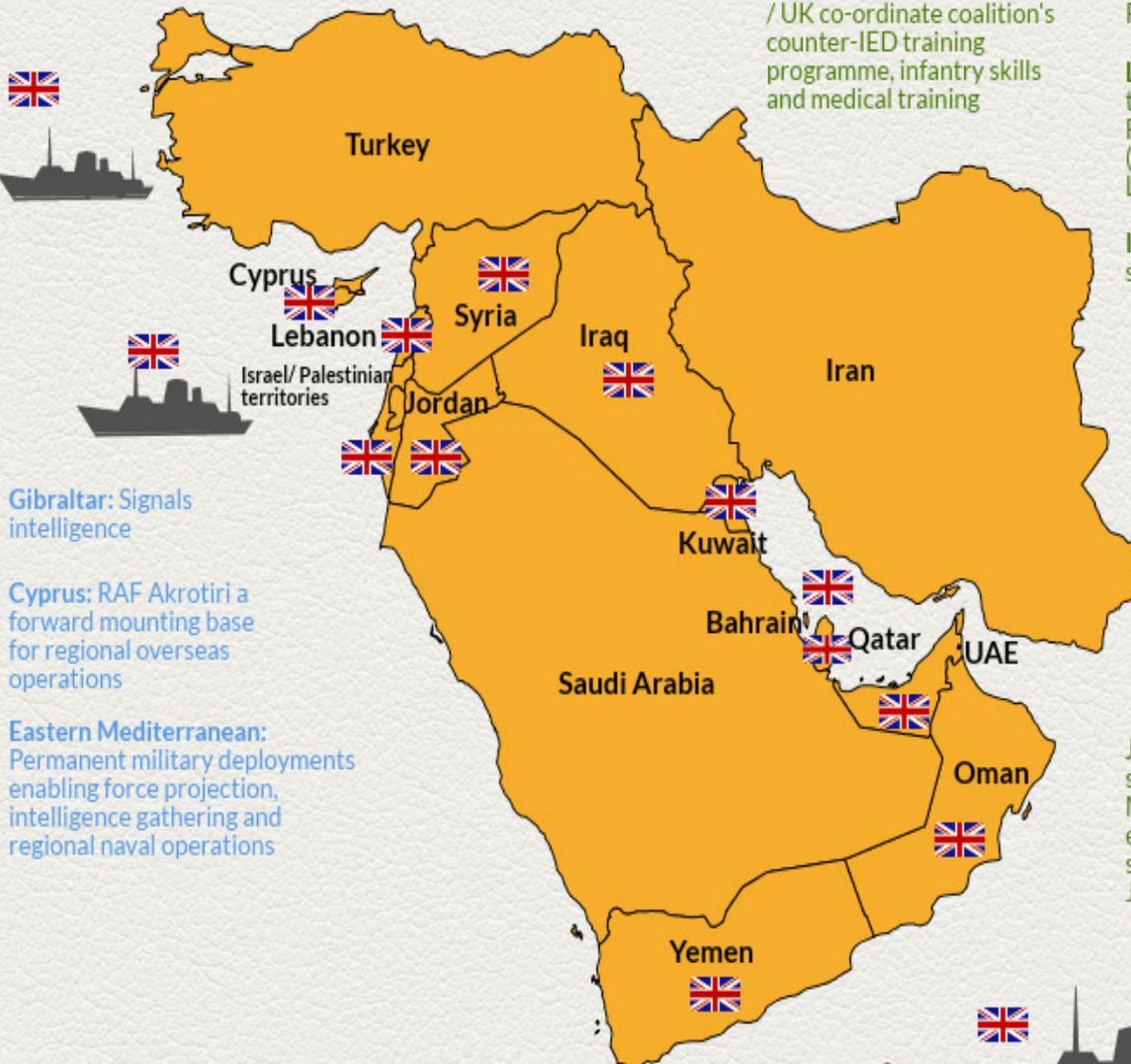
**Iraq & Syria:** 'Operation Shader' against ISIS; 850 UK personnel + RAF assets

**Lebanon:** support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) / £60m (2012-2018) to secure Lebanon-Syria border

**Israel:** intelligence sharing

**Palestinian Territories:** Part of US-led mission providing institutional and development professionalisation of PA Security Forces / UK support for EU mission developing Palestinian policing (EUPOL COPPS)

**Jordan:** Training and support. In 2017, PM May announced expanded training and support to the Jordanian airforce



**Gibraltar:** Signals intelligence

**Cyprus:** RAF Akrotiri a forward mounting base for regional overseas operations

**Eastern Mediterranean:** Permanent military deployments enabling force projection, intelligence gathering and regional naval operations

## The Gulf

**Gulf:** 'Operation Kipion': UK naval forces deployed ensuring Gulf shipping lane safety

**Kuwait:** UK army units training local forces and officers

**Qatar:** RAF squadron at Al Udeid air base / UK-Qatari squadron / Serco operated staff college training Qatari officers

**Oman:** New Joint Logistics Support Base in the Duqm Port Complex provides permanent training facility and military logistics centre, connected to other Gulf countries by the Gulf Rail Project / Training exercises with Omani forces

**Bahrain:** Royal Navy permanent support base, HMS Juffair, at port of Mina Salman

**UAE:** RAF Typhoon fighter squadron at Al Minhad airbase, Dubai

**Yemen:** significant assistance to Saudi-led coalition

- [The UK also has permanent military deployments in the Eastern Mediterranean](#), enabling force projection, intelligence gathering and naval operations in the Middle East.
- [RAF Akrotiri within the British Sovereign Base Areas on Cyprus](#) is used as a forward base for overseas operations in the Middle East. The RAF has six Typhoon FGR4s and eight Tornado GR4s deployed. The base is also significant for signals intelligence, whilst signals intelligence in Gibraltar also covers North Africa.
- [Royal Navy ships form part of the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean Operation Sophia](#) as part of the European-wide response to migration flows from conflict zones.
- [The Royal Navy participates in multi-national NATO deployments in the Mediterranean](#), including NATO's multi-national Standing Maritime Group 2.

### [Development: Humanitarian relief and political stability.](#)

The Middle East has received a growing share of UK Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) in recent years in response to the war in Syria and refugee flows to neighbouring countries, especially Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Most of the ODA budget is spent by Department for International Development (DfID), though other departments involved include [FCO, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, MoD, Home Office and others](#), including through the cross-departmental Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF).

- [Syria \(including Turkey\) \(Planned DfID budget for 2018/19 - Syria: £130m, Turkey: £140m\)](#): The humanitarian consequences of the conflict in Syria poses serious risks to UK interests including the stability of neighbouring states, migration into Europe, and radicalisation and terrorism risks. DfID provides services for refugees in Syria and Turkey, which now host 3.6 million Syrians. Further money is spent through the CSSF to support Syrian communities in opposition areas. As of August 2018 the UK had [committed £2.71bn](#) in response to the crisis, its largest ever response to a humanitarian crisis.
- [Yemen \(Planned DfID budget for 2018/19:](#)

[£120m\)](#): After three years of war, 80 per cent of Yemen's 22 million people need humanitarian assistance with millions at risk of starvation. The UK's aid is focused on immediate humanitarian assistance including emergency food via the World Food Program and programmes to address malnutrition.

- [Lebanon \(Planned DfID Budget for 2018/19 £100m\)](#): Lebanon, with an ethnically divided population of around 6.1 million, and dominated by the powerful, Iranian-backed Shia militia Hezbollah, is supporting 1.5 million refugees, mostly Sunni Muslims, from neighbouring Syria. Poverty and social tensions risk further radicalisation and violence. The UK is investing in humanitarian aid and educational services and led the international community in agreeing the 'Lebanon Statement of Intent' in London in February 2016, offering international support for education, jobs and humanitarian assistance, in exchange for Lebanon giving refugees certain rights including employment in certain sectors. At the same time the UK is reportedly preparing to increase pressure on Hezbollah (which is part of the Lebanese government) by proscribing it in its entirety under UK counter terrorism legislation. It remains unclear if this will effect broader UK engagement in Lebanon.

- [Jordan \(Planned DfID Budget for 2018/19: £82m\)](#): Jordan, a resource poor country of around 10 million, is hosting 650,000 registered Syrian refugees. Though long considered a pillar of relative stability, the Kingdom faces perpetual risk from extremism. UK aid focusses on humanitarian assistance, educational services and supporting the Jordanian government in creating job opportunities.

- [Palestinian Territories \(Planned DfID budget for 2018/19 £59m\)](#): The UK provides more than £30m annually to UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugee in the Near East (UNRWA), which provides aid and social services to Palestinian refugees and their descendants. The UK also provides direct budgetary support to the PA to help lay the foundations for the long-term development of a future Palestinian state.<sup>7</sup>

- [Iraq: Planned DfID budget for 2018/19 £30m:](#) Whilst ISIS has been defeated territorially in Iraq, the country remains highly fractured, violent and unstable, with large numbers of

displaced people and a high risk of jihadist activity. UK development funding is focussed on humanitarian assistance, and promoting a more inclusive and stable political environment, with additional resources from CSSF.

- **North Africa: The UK has a £50m development programme** for good governance in North Africa, including promoting stability, institutional and political development and countering corruption in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco.

## Diplomatic engagement

- **Iran/JCPOA:** Despite US pressure, the UK remains committed to the enforcement of the JCPOA, in concert with France and Germany, as well as the EU, Russia and China. The UK argues that the JCPOA is holding back Iran's nuclear programme and should be separated out from Iran's other destabilising behaviour. Britain backs the EU blocking statute implemented to neutralise the effects of the re-implementation of US sanctions on EU companies. It remains to be seen whether Iran, which faces severe financial difficulties, will remain within the JCPOA.
- **Israeli-Palestinian arena:** The UK remains committed to a two-state solution, with Jerusalem as a shared capital of both states, and has typically sought a balanced diplomatic stance, being both a significant donor to the PA and UNRWA, whilst promoting trade and security relations with Israel. The UK has a longstanding policy of no direct contact with Hamas, which is a proscribed terrorist organisation across Europe. The UK has traditionally backed US-led diplomacy and resisted attempts by EU partners to supplant the US role. However, recent US decisions, including its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and its decision to defund UNRWA, have been [opposed](#) by the British government.
- **Syrian civil war/Geneva process/chemical weapons and other war crimes.** In the face of battlefield successes by the Assad regime and their Russian and Iranian allies, UK diplomats are adopting a pragmatic stance in support of de-escalation and the diplomacy led by UN envoy Stefan di Mistura in pursuit of the Geneva Process towards an end to violence and an inclusive political system. The current focus is on the formation of a constitutional committee

involving the Assad regime and opposition representatives, as a stage towards eventual elections. The UK has condemned the actions of the Assad regime and its backers.

*“As of mid-2018 approximately 850 UK personnel support Operation Shader in Iraq and Syria.”*

The UK participated alongside the US and France to take limited military action in response to the regime's use of chemical weapons in April 2018. The UK supports UN-led evidence gathering of human rights abuses with an eye to future prosecutions and has also led moves at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to increase the international chemical weapons watchdog's powers.

- **Libya:** The political fragmentation and in-fighting in Libya following the overthrow of Gaddafi in 2011 (aided by UK military intervention) has led to increased illegal migration across the Mediterranean to southern Europe, and an increased risk of terrorism. (Manchester suicide bomber Salman Abedi carried out his attack four days after returning from a visit to Libya, where he was [in contact](#) with ISIS affiliates.) The UK forms part of the P3+1 group (along with the US, France and Italy) [in support](#) of the UN Action Plan for Libya, which aims to reconcile competing political factions and hold elections, and is led by UN-envoy Ghassan Salame. The UK recognises the legitimacy of Fayeze al-Sarraj, President of the Presidency Council, which leads the UN-endorsed Government of National Accord. In December 2017 [the UK led](#) efforts to impose UN sanctions on six Libyan people traffickers. Stabilising Libya, whilst less obviously core to UK regional interests, cannot be disconnected from the Gulf, with it being one of the arenas where intra-GCC competition plays out.
- **Yemen:** Whilst providing equipment and advice to the Saudi-led coalition, UK ministers are also calling for negotiations with the Houthis, and back diplomacy spearheaded by UN envoy, former British diplomat Martin Griffiths. The UK is also the [‘penholder’](#) for Yemen at the UN Security Council, responsible for drafting

resolutions on the issue.

- **Saudi-led boycott of Qatar.** Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt cut off diplomatic relations and severed transport links with Qatar in June 2017, issuing demands on Qatar including ending support for the Muslim Brotherhood, scaling back ties with Iran, and closing down *Al Jazeera*. The UK, which has close ties with all sides, has sought a balanced posture calling for de-escalation.

- **Region wide Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood:** The question of whether and how to engage with Islamists, which cover a wide range of political views and approaches, has challenged UK policy makers for many years and remains controversial. Whether the Muslim Brotherhood catalyses or defuses violent jihadist trends remains hotly disputed. It is banned by several of the UK's Arab allies, but not by the UK. The FCO [outlined](#) its current position in response to a report of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee in 2017, stating: "We have not met the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood at ministerial or official level since 2013 ... We continue to judge the extent to which extremism is evident in the case of any individual group to decide whether UK engagement is appropriate. Such judgements can change over time and are kept under review."

#### **PART 4: FACTORS DRIVING MIDDLE EAST INSTABILITY**

The combination of demographic trends, underdeveloped economic and political systems, and radical ideologies will be major risk factors for instability in the Middle East for decades to come, with ongoing spillover effects into Europe in terms of terrorist threats and large scale migration. The trends point to both significant threats and opportunities for UK interests.

#### **Sectarian, strategic and ideological rivalry will remain potent**

- **Sectarian and political rivalry between Iran and its Sunni Arab neighbours will remain a defining issue.** Iran's regional influence has expanded in Lebanon – where its proxy Hezbollah is the most powerful military force and part of the governing coalition – as well as in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The sense of threat from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who have shown

greater readiness to confront Iran openly, and have built a closer covert alliance with Israel. The struggle between Iran and Israel on whether Iran will be able to cement a long-term position in Syria will continue.

- **Saudi Arabia, the most populous and oil rich of the Arab Gulf states,** is now led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has shown a zeal for urgently-needed economic reforms, but also lack of judgement in response to both foreign challenges and domestic dissent.<sup>8</sup>

- **There is a threat of a regional nuclear arms race if Iran approaches nuclear threshold status.** Whilst advocates of the JCPOA argue that it is holding Iran back from nuclear development, even within the JCPOA framework, restrictions on Iran's nuclear capabilities will begin to 'sunset' in 2024. By 2031, Iran will be permitted to stockpile enriched uranium without limits and is well advanced with technologies to produce a warhead. Saudi Arabia has publicly committed to match Iran's capabilities. Riyadh is in negotiations with the US on a nuclear technology agreement and is in the early stages of a nuclear fuel programme. Saudi Arabia could also source assistance from Pakistan. Egypt, the UAE and Turkey are other states to watch for long term proliferation potential. Saudi Arabia and other US-aligned Arab states have diminished confidence in the US to protect them or deter Iran.

- **A deepening split between Sunni powers is another evolving regional dynamic.** Saudi Arabia and the UAE find themselves backing rival forces from the pro-Muslim Brotherhood Turkey and Qatar in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and the Palestinian Territories.<sup>9</sup> This is awkward for Britain which has important relations on both sides of the divide.

- **President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey has ambitious visions for restoring Turkey as a leading power in the Sunni Islamic world.** Meanwhile, Turkey's sharp authoritarian turn, Erdogan's anti-Western rhetoric, and its recent arms deal with Russia, are all antithetical to its position in NATO.

- **The region will continue to be troubled by several failed states** including Syria, Libya and Yemen; and states ridden with internal conflict

and instability including Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Tunisia. This instability means there is significant potential for violence, radicalization, and further waves of migration. Some five million people have fled Syria

*The FCO stated: "We continue to judge the extent to which extremism is evident in the case of any individual group to decide whether UK engagement is appropriate."*

since the onset of the civil war, putting enormous strain on Lebanon and Jordan in particular, and creating major spillover into Europe via Turkey.

- **Non-Western powers** are increasing their influence in the region, and challenging, even if they do not replace, the dominance of the US military and security guarantees, and US, British and French security and defence ties. and instability including Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Tunisia.

This instability means there is significant potential for violence, radicalisation, and further waves of migration. Some five million people have fled Syria since the onset of the civil war, putting enormous strain on Lebanon and Jordan in particular, and creating major spillover into Europe via Turkey.

- **Non-state Islamist movements with radical anti-Western ideologies will remain a threat to Western-aligned regimes for years to come.** Whilst ISIS has lost most of its territory in Syria, many of its fighters and adherents remain, and the threat of resurgence in Iraq is especially potent, as well as groups affiliated or inspired by it in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere.

1. **Russia** is establishing itself as a permanent military power in Syria with Assad as its client, and shares Iran's agenda to weaken and divide Western powers.
2. **China** has growing interests in the Middle East, due to energy demands and its planned Maritime Silk Route project, which includes major investments in the Suez Canal area and a new naval base in Djibouti at the mouth of the Red Sea. Those infrastructure

investments may create opportunities for UK contractors, but also mark the increasing interests of another great power in the region.

- **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict looks set to remain deadlocked**, with the current Israeli leadership highly sceptical about a two-state solution, and the Palestinians irreconcilably divided and politically dysfunctional. The Gaza Strip, with its fast growing population and collapsed infrastructure and economy will remain a conflict risk so long as its underlying infrastructure and access challenges remain unresolved – a problem very difficult to fix so long as Hamas is in power. The stability of the West Bank will be challenged when 83-year-old PA President Mahmoud Abbas is no longer able to function. The impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on wider regional dynamics is limited, though it is a cause exploited by Islamists of all stripes and one that prevents a closer alignment between Israel and Western-aligned Sunni powers.

### **Demographic expansion and uneven development multiply governance challenges**

- **The Middle East population is soaring** and expected to grow from 570 million to 840 million by 2050 (including Iran and Turkey). Europe's population overall will decline over the same period, though the UK's is projected to grow from 65m to 77m by 2050. Even though Middle East fertility rates have fallen considerably, the high number of women of child bearing age mean there is still considerable population momentum. Egypt will remain the most populous nation, projected to reach 154 million by 2050, with Iraq and Sudan also growing rapidly to surpass 100m, and overtaking the declining populations of Turkey and Iran in the 2050s. The burden on the Nile, and Euphrates-Tigris river basins will grow considerably. Whilst the population is growing it will also be aging. Today's challenge of catering for a large young population will be joined by the future challenge of serving the needs of a growing population at retirement age age.
- **The large youth population will remain a major social challenge for years to come.** Almost half of the region's population is under 24, and high youth unemployment – even among the educated – is a major risk factor for civil unrest, and a driver of migration.

- **The long-term trend of urbanisation will continue** with significant rises in urban populations in states including Egypt, Morocco, Yemen and Sudan. Urbanisation is associated with health and social challenges. These include providing employment, and ensuring food security, with urban populations relying more on food imports rather than rural production. It also adds to the strain on infrastructure and services in urban areas.

### Religious and cultural diversity dilutes traditional sources of legitimacy

- **The expansion of internet access and social media means Arab rulers can no longer control information as they once did.** The 2018 [Arab Youth Survey](#) reported that 63 per cent of Arab youth (aged 18–24) obtain news from social media, 51 per cent from TV, 38 per cent from online news sources and 18 per cent from newspapers. The effects are complex. Some see it as a positive driver for democratisation via powerful and progressive transnational social movements. This also means the underlying drivers for social change of the Arab Spring – somewhat suppressed by the fear of chaos as illustrated by Syria, Libya and Egypt – still

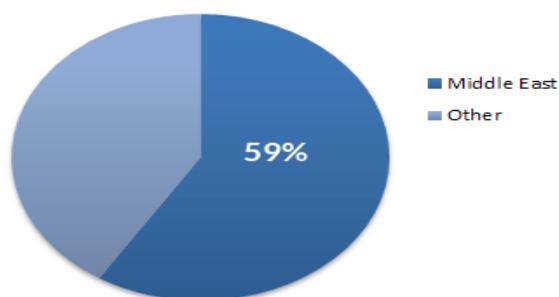
lie beneath the surface.<sup>10</sup> Others argue that authoritarian governments can also use social media to disseminate misinformation, or to monitor dissent. Extremist groups have also proved adept with these tools.

- **Communications technologies are also driving new patterns of Islamic belief that are varied and complex.** The region is seeing a trend towards new forms of synthesis between religion and modernity, and privatisation of Islamic revival through online forums and tele-evangelism, as opposed to traditional religious institutions, the Muslim Brotherhood, or the state. Co-opting established religious authorities no longer serves to legitimise the state. According to more optimistic analyses, “this may well be a harbinger of an autonomous political sphere leading to democratisation”.<sup>11</sup> However, the ability of the state to use centralised religious authorities as a source of legitimacy is diminished.

- **Calls from regional leaders such as Egyptian President al Sisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to promote a more moderate form of Islam,** motivated by the desire

## British Economic Interests in the Middle East

UK Defence Orders 2007-2016



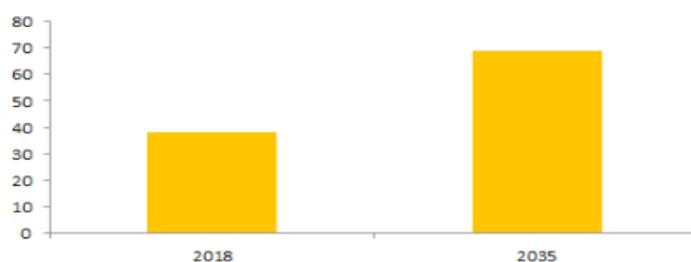
### Global Energy Supply

- Britain's own oil and gas production continues to decline
- UK dependency on Middle East energy sources will rise from 38% (2018) to 69% (2035)
- Whilst Norway is the UK's largest supplier of oil, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UAE are significant suppliers, with the Gulf states especially significant for jet fuel

### Protecting Trade

- In 2018 the British and Saudi governments declared a \$100bn target for procurement and investment over a 10-year period
- UK-Israel bilateral trade: In 2017 a record \$9.1bn. Grown by 8% in the first half of 2018 - \$4 bn (2017) to \$4.33bn (2018)
- UK exports more goods and services to the Arab world than China or to Brazil and India combined
- 2007-2016: Middle East accounted for 59% (c. £70bn) worth of UK defence orders

UK Dependency on Middle East Energy (%)



to exclude the Muslim Brotherhood, will struggle against decentralising trends.

- **Political Islam remains a highly influential ideological trend, albeit in increasingly fragmented forms.** Even after the overthrow of Morsi in Egypt and the challenges facing Ennahda in Tunisia and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, [survey](#) data shows the Muslim Brotherhood continues to attract sympathy from a third of the public in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, where the organisation is outlawed.

- **ISIS aligned groups and fighters will remain a significant threat throughout the region and in Europe, even after Islamic State lost its main territorial base.** Surveys suggest support for violent Islamist groups like ISIS and Al Qaeda in the low single figures. However, severe socio-economic insecurities, and weakly governed regions create ample opportunities for jihadists to recruit and operate, and Jihadist ideologies, and small numbers of returning ISIS fighters pose a threat to European security.

- **The decline of non-Muslim populations, and notably Christian minorities** in the face of violence and discrimination has continued apace with many Christians leaving the region.

### **Economic models must change, especially for oil-rich states**

- **Oil exports have been key to the region's economy for the past century,** not only for oil rich states who have lived off a 'rentier' model, but other states who have benefitted from their citizens' remittances earned in the oil wealthy states. The significant inequality between resource rich and poor Arab states drives a brain drain from poorer countries like Egypt to the wealthier GCC states. However, for several GCC countries, hydrocarbons will run out in the lifetime of citizens born today. Saudi Arabia has plentiful oil for the time being, but has a ballooning population, which coupled with unstable energy markets mean the rentier model is not sustainable.

- **Now needing to diversify their economies, create employment, cut back subsidies and bring in taxation, Gulf states can expect pressure for major social and political changes,** as tax paying populations expect more responsive and

accountable governance. Female participation in the workforce is low – typically ranging between 10 and 30 per cent for MENA countries<sup>19</sup> – and needs to be expanded through employment opportunities, education and skills

*“The UK’s planned £120m Overseas Development Assistance (2018/19) in Yemen is focused on immediate humanitarian assistance including emergency food via the World Food Program.”*

in ‘STEM’ subjects (science, technology, engineering, maths). Diversification creates economic opportunities for the UK in many fields including education.

- **Resource poor countries tend to have very high debt to GDP ratios,** notably Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan (the latter two also absorbing very high numbers of refugees), making them economically vulnerable. Austerity measures such as those applied to Greece are unlikely given the risk of instability of states key to the refugee crisis. However, according to one recent assessment, “a debt haircut together with long-term measures to promote private sector jobs growth will be inevitable sooner or later.”<sup>12</sup>

- **The region as a whole lags behind** in failing to reap the opportunities of globalisation and attract foreign direct investment because of conflict risks and protectionist policies. The most diversified economies are non-Arab OECD members Israel and Turkey.

### **Environmental changes will have complex effects**

- **Growing populations coupled with the effects of climate change create a complex network of opportunities and threats** for Middle Eastern states. Limited agricultural growth capacity coupled with growing population means greater dependency on global food markets, which in turn requires earning more foreign currency. Meanwhile there will be increasing competition for water resources particularly in the river basins of the Nile and Tigris-Euphrates, which encompass many countries. That said, population growth represents an opportunity for economic growth. Some Middle

## LABOUR PARTY FOREIGN POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST – AN ANALYSIS

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's foreign policy is consistent with an anti-capitalist, post-colonial and anti-imperial world view which tends to see the West, led by the US, as a malign force which has exploited the developing world or "Global South". Before becoming leader he expressed 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 and blanket opposition to Western military interventions.

In light of this, and based on previous speeches Corbyn has made, the following principles of a future Labour government can be identified:

**Cooling relations with US and NATO, and sympathy with Russia:** 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 and said: "Britain deserves better than simply outsourcing our country's security and prosperity to the whims of the Trump White House." Corbyn spoke about the need to "halt the drift towards confrontation with Russia" and of "winding down tensions on the Russia-NATO border." Corbyn has dropped his former blanket opposition to the NATO alliance. But his commitment to common defence is lukewarm at most and he has avoided committing to send British forces to defend a NATO ally under attack.

**Syria:** In his Chatham House speech, Corbyn said 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". Corbyn refrains from criticising the Assad regime or its Iranian ally for their actions. In 2018, Corbyn said that "The Syrian conflict has been fuelled by the military intervention of multiple powers. And it will need those same powers to deliver a negotiated peace settlement to end the killing and allow the return of the refugees." 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.

**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."

**Opposition to intervention against 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 voted against the UK taking part in airstrikes against ISIS in Syria.

**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) is no different from the Conservative government. However, in the past the Labour leader 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.

**Downgraded relations with Western-orientated Arab states:** Labour would take a cooler approach to relations with Sunni Arab states. An arms embargo on Saudi Arabia has been party policy since the 2017 Manifesto which states: "Labour will demand a comprehensive, independent, UN-led investigation into alleged violations of IHL in Yemen, including air strikes on civilians by the Saudi-led coalition. We will immediately suspend any further arms sales for use in the conflict until that investigation is concluded." In his 2017 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". A Labour government may also seek to restrict arms sales to the Gulf.

Pro-Palestinian alignment

Pro-Palestinian alignment: Under Corbyn's leadership, Labour has remained within the national and international consensus on a two-state solution. The Labour leader remains firmly committed to the Palestinian narrative of the conflict, and does not follow the convention of balancing his criticisms of Israel with parallel criticisms of Palestinian incitement or violence. In November 2017 he called for 'increasing international pressure for an end to the 50-year occupation of the Palestinian territories, illegal settlement expansion and the blockade of Gaza.'

The Labour manifesto pledge to "immediately recognise the state of Palestine" would likely be swiftly fulfilled. In September Labour adopted a new policy of an arms embargo against Israel and called for 'an independent international investigation into Israel's use of force against Palestinian demonstrators' in Gaza."

For more analysis read BICOM's November 2017 paper: Labour Party foreign policy in the Middle East.  
<http://www.bicom.org.uk/analysis/labour-party-foreign-policy-middle-east/>

East regions are projected to receive increased rainfall due to climate change, which also may represent an opportunity. In addition, some regional states, especially Iran and Saudi Arabia, have considerable potential for solar power generation.

## PART 5: PRIORITIES FOR UK POLICY MAKERS

Drawing on the previous analysis, the following priorities are framed from within the broad existing consensus of British post-1945 foreign policy, as opposed to the radically different anti-Western and anti-NATO world view held by Jeremy Corbyn and his circle. This assumes that Britain's interests and identity lead it to seek continued global influence, including in the Middle East.

### 1. Domestic politics of Middle East policy

- **UK capabilities:** Maintaining British interests overseas post-Brexit requires utilising all the nation's resources, as suggested in the 'Fusion Strategy' outlined in the March 2018 National Security Capability Review, but it also requires financial investment in government departments that project UK influence overseas. Brexit is projected to harm the UK economy in the short to medium term. Yet, if Britain wishes to remain an influential Middle East power – with significant capability to act in the advance of its interests, and with influence over actors in the region

and other third parties – it will inevitably have to invest more in diplomatic missions, cultural outreach, trade, aid, and military capabilities. It is important to counter the perception of Britain turning in on itself, and the 'Global Britain' slogan will have to be backed by a strategy to expand Britain's footprint. The 2010 spending review and 2013 spending round imposed deep cuts on the FCO's core expenditure, which fell from £1.22bn in 2010-11 to £1.02bn in 2014-5 (in 2013-4 prices), a 16.3 per cent real terms reduction in total.<sup>13</sup> The 2015 Spending Review determined that the FCO's overall resource budget would rise from £1.1 billion in 2015/16 to £1.24 billion by 2019/20<sup>14</sup>, and a further £42m was provided to help the FCO respond to Brexit. However, this still leaves the FCO budget significantly less than its 2010-11 resource when inflation is taken into account.<sup>15</sup> Over the course of 2018 the FCO announced close to 1,000 new posts, and it is essential that this be delivered, alongside investments that raise the skill and expertise level of officers.

- **Maintaining defence spending at or above the 2 per cent NATO target is also critical** not only for ensuring UK armed forces have the capability and resources to deliver, but also for signalling – to US and European allies, as much as to partners in the Middle East – the UK's continued global role, influence and capability. Indeed despite growing threats, the Defence Select Committee has warned of serious funding shortfalls effecting equipment and capabilities and called for defence spending to move towards 3 per cent of GDP.<sup>16</sup> The committee highlighted

potential shortcomings relevant to the UK's independent force projection in the Middle East that relate especially to the maritime arena, including limited ship-based missile options for attacking land targets; cuts to the Royal Marines; lack of ships to make up a fully independent carrier group for the new Elizabeth class aircraft carriers; reductions in the planned F35 squadron; and disposal of amphibious assault ships. Though extra funding for defence was [announced](#) in the October 2018 budget, much now depends on the 2019 spending review, which in turn will depend on the outcome of Brexit negotiations.

- **Language skills:** Only 30 per cent of FCO officers in Arabic speaking posts can speak the language adequately [see box]. FCO investment in Middle East language skills – Farsi, Hebrew, Turkish and Kurdish, as well as Arabic – should be significantly increased to ensure the UK has the human capital and long term regional expertise to maximise its influence.

- **Domestic support:** The House of Commons vote in 2013 was the boldest illustration that domestic politics can disrupt critical Middle East policy decisions. Policy makers need to focus on building a national consensus around the importance of Britain's global role, meaning there is political support when needed to take difficult intervention decisions, and the capacity to manage the tension generated within parts of British society. Whilst Iraq left a lasting suspicion of overseas entanglements, and the Brexit vote partially reflected a sentiment in favour of nationalism over internationalism, the case for investing in development, diplomacy and force projection needs to be made with greater energy and consistency by political leaders.

## 2. Handling partners and rivals from outside the region

- **A range of alliances:** Where it is possible to establish a common front with the US in the Middle East, Britain will surely continue to do so as a preferred option. But with growing uncertainty about the US global role and the future of NATO, the UK may have to increasingly seek other partners to advance its interests, whether they be France and Germany, local actors, or others, especially as UK interests and

judgements increasingly converge more with EU partners than the US.<sup>20</sup>

- **Commitment to the EU neighbourhood:** Whilst some in the UK may see Brexit as an opportunity to insulate Britain from the security and

*“Between 2007-16 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.”*

migration challenges facing Europe from the Middle East, UK economic and security interests remain inherently connected to European stability, which in turn is directly connected to its southern neighbourhood.<sup>17</sup>

- **Containing Russia:** How should the UK relate to Russia? Despite Moscow's success in entrenching its position in Syria, the tensions accentuated by the Skripal case make cooperation over shared goals such as stability in Syria or reducing Iran's presence, highly unlikely. Whilst Corbyn calls to reduce tensions with Moscow, many will draw the opposite lesson from Syria, namely that the UK and its allies needs to avoid the mistake of failing to appreciate the potential impact of Russian intervention, and that Britain should work with partners to confront Russia's assertive agenda.<sup>18</sup>

## 3. Regional states and issues

- **Commitment to the Gulf:** Whilst some call for a warmer relationship with Iran alongside the Arab Gulf states, and others call for a more distant relationship with Saudi Arabia, the UK's core interests remain invested in efforts to contain Iran, and reaffirming ties with Gulf states. This means continuing to reassure Arab allies through deepening security cooperation and a tougher approach to Iran's destabilising regional activity, whilst promoting responsible governance.

- **Trade deals with GCC states:** The UK would benefit from signing a new trade deal with GCC states after Brexit, since the Gulf states have no free trade deal with the EU. The Saudi-led boycott on Qatar and split within the GCC is detrimental to the UK, which enjoys significant economic ties and mutual investments with both

sides of the dispute. The UK should continue to work to diffuse this split, and to secure post-Brexit trade deals with GCC members.

- **Caution on engaging Islamists:** How should the UK relate to the great variety of Islamist actors and ideologies that remain potent in the region? Clearly those that fail to commit to non-violence, to democratic processes and to international agreements are unacceptable. Those which claim a commitment to democracy and seek to participate in elections, including Muslim Brotherhood affiliates, should be viewed with open eyes regarding the potential threat posed by their ideology to Western interests and values, and the threat they may pose to adherents of other faiths or interpretations of Islam. Policy makers need to strive for a deeper understanding of these groups and closely monitor them as they continue to evolve. Experience has shown that participation in elections does not equate to accepting democratic processes. In addition, legitimising Islamist groups through open dialogue has implications for Arab governments which have outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood and consider it a major threat.

- **Promoting legitimacy and good governance:** The fallout of the Arab Spring and the socio-economic changes in oil-rich states have accentuated long running dilemmas of how to create governance which is effective, fair, stable, and enjoys broad legitimacy. Existing authoritarian powers – deeply invested in their own status – may offer relative stability, but closed political spaces risk brewing dissent which can express itself in radical or violent forms. Local rulers, who may acknowledge the need to open up their societies for the sake of responsive government and economic development, also highlight the risks of opening space for radical or revolutionary movements. Whilst policy makers should continue to promote democratisation and effective governance as part of a broad agenda for sustainable development, UK interests will demand a premium on stability and cooperation with existing allies, in order to contain threats posed by violent Islamist extremism to the region, to Europe, and to Britain itself.

- **Defence equipment:** Concern that the use of British weapons – notably by Saudi Arabia in

Yemen – may breach international humanitarian law, is a source of considerable domestic political concern. Yet arms sales to the Gulf states are important to the UK arms industry and trade balance and face stiff competition not only from allies like France, but from Russia, which has the motivation and capability to displace Western suppliers. Whilst the UK must remain committed to international law and work with Arab allies to ensure conformity, its interests will continue to involve promoting UK defence equipment and training, including investment in cyber, intelligence and special forces where the UK excels. This offers reassurance to Arab allies, safeguards benefits for the UK economy, enhances British influence and leverage, and avoids ceding ground to rivals including Russia.

- **Capacity to intervene:** The experiences of Iraq, Afghanistan, and to a lesser extent Libya, will make intervention with an anticipation of regime change extremely unlikely in future. On the other hand, Syria has shown that non-intervention can be no less catastrophic. UK-participation in the war against ISIS has established a model of intervention against a clearly legitimate target that the public will support. Meanwhile, punitive airstrikes – albeit limited – against Assad in response to chemical weapons, have reaffirmed that this remains an important policy option to protect civilians and uphold some measure of international standards. Maintaining UK capacity to significantly contribute to military coalitions will be vital to ensuring influence over such diplomatic and military processes in the future. This requires not only sustaining investment in military capability, but ensuring public support for an enduring British global role.

- **Preventing a nuclear arms race:** Hopes that the JCPOA might draw Iran into a more responsible regional posture appeared dashed even before Trump's election. Even if efforts to keep Iran within the JCPOA fail, the UK must remain absolutely committed to preventing Iran acquiring nuclear weapons capability, which could fuel a regional arms race. Iran's nuclear programme is the number one fear for Israel and the Gulf states.

- **Limiting Iranian influence in Syria:** The UK has invested considerable resources in the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. As Assad

extends his control with Russian and Iranian assistance, the growing question is how to influence the post-war reality, which ultimately requires a government in Syria with broad legitimacy. Having spent hundreds of millions to support refugees, will the UK now contribute to reconstruction, and will that investment secure any influence, especially if the US is not involved? The interests of UK security and regional stability mean preventing ISIS and other jihadists regaining strength in Syria or Iraq, but also preventing Iran cementing its position.

- **Creating conditions for Israel-Palestinian progress:** While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is of declining relevance to broader regional issues, its resolution would still unlock potential for building a pro-Western block to contain Sunni Jihadist and Iranian-backed extremism. The issue also remains potent in British domestic politics, especially when violence flares. The Trump administration is shaking up the issue, so far in line with the preferences of the Netanyahu government, through moving the US embassy to Jerusalem and defunding UNRWA, though there are hints that a yet-to-be-revealed peace proposal will lean towards Palestinian positions on some issues. UK policy makers will need to balance maintaining support for Israel as a key prop of regional stability, a valuable security and economic partner, and legitimate expression of Jewish self-determination, whilst still pressing for measures that will create conditions for addressing Palestinian rights and ultimately resolving the conflict. The UK need not wait for the US and can do more to actively promote progress on the ground including: more support for PA governance whilst pressing back on corruption, incitement and misuse of funds; maintaining support for PASF based on their cooperation with Israel; investing more in co-existence projects; and emphasising to Israel the need to allow for greater Palestinian development in Area C.

## Arabic speakers in decline

The FCO faces a significant and apparently worsening shortage of officers qualified in Middle Eastern languages. As of July 2018, the percentage of officers in Arabic language speaking posts with the target language qualification had [fallen significantly](#) to just 30per cent, from 49per cent in December 2017, according to [FCO data](#).

For comparison, data from the US State Department [published in 2017](#) reported that 64 percent of their Arabic language posts (185 out of 291) met their target language requirements. (They also reported 80 posts were vacant. Data for UK Arabic speaking vacancies was not available.) Overall, as of September 2016, 77 percent of State Department overseas language-designated positions were filled by officers who met the positions' language proficiency requirements.

Britain's shortage of qualified Arabists comes despite the FCO identifying Arabic as a priority language, and setting an overall target of 80per cent of speaking posts in all languages being staffed by officers with the target qualification by 2020. To this end the FCO opened a new foreign languages centre in 2013. [FCO data](#) shows that across all 550 FCO foreign postings designated as "speaker roles" in all foreign languages, 55per cent of officers had the "target level examination pass" as of May 2018, compared to 46per cent in July 2016. In 2017-8 FCO provided full time [language training](#) to 52 officers in Arabic, 24 in Mandarin and 46 in Russian, with some 700 officers taking part time tuition in a foreign language.

Arabic is the world's fifth most spoken native language and is set to grow with the projected rise in population in the Middle East. In 2015 the [British Council](#) ranked Arabic second in a list of languages important to the UK, after Spanish, but ahead of French, Mandarin, or German. A 2014 [Freedom of Information Act](#) release showed that out of 2903 UK-based FCO staff (1717 of whom are diplomatic staff), just 74 (2.55per cent) had either passed an internal FCO language examination or self-declared a language skill in Arabic, compared to 446 in French, 219 in German, 201 in Spanish, and 83 in Russian.

The need for FCO officers in the Middle East to speak local languages has only increased in recent years. This is because the growing complexity of the social and political situation requires engagement with an ever wider range of political and social actors, and because of the importance of following developments and engaging with local populations on social media. There is clearly a need to expand investment in Arabic language and expertise.

## ENDNOTES

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This report has been produced by BICOM's research team in consultation with British experts. We are grateful for their help.

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