

# Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Middle East policy

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## Introduction

UK policy in the Middle East aims to preserve economic and security interests such as energy supply, fighting terrorism and expanding trade and investment. To achieve this, the UK invests in aid, military infrastructure and boosting economic ties to the region. The most pressing issue now is the containment of the crisis with Iran over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and heightened tensions with Iran in the Persian Gulf. The UK has deployed naval assets to ensure free shipping in the Gulf, while the UK is also working to secure the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a British-Iranian dual citizen who has been detained in Iran since April 2016. Boris Johnson was forced to apologise for a false statement he made as Foreign Secretary suggesting Ratcliffe was in Iran teaching journalism, a comment that Iran seized on to impose a harsher punishment.

The UK has a small military presence in Syria and is part of the international coalition against ISIS. In Yemen, the UK seeks a political solution to the war and takes a leading role at the UN Security Council. The UK supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and continues to criticise any Israeli Government policies that appear to make that solution more difficult such as the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. The UK has close relations with Saudi Arabia and Gulf States, and is committed to their stability and security.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson will have to address these challenges. Will he take a different approach to Theresa May? This paper attempts to answer that question by examining Johnson's previous statements in three main areas: The challenge from Iran; Stability in the Gulf; and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## The Challenge from Iran

*The future of the JCPOA nuclear deal:* Johnson has emphasised that the UK believes the JCPOA is the best vehicle to deal with Iran's malign regional activities. Johnson said he regretted the US withdrew from the deal, [telling](#) the House of Commons that the UK had "no intention of walking away" and would "strive to preserve the gains" made by the agreement. He added: "We remain adamant that a nuclear-armed Iran would never be acceptable to the United Kingdom; indeed Iran's obli-

gation not to 'seek, develop or acquire' nuclear weapons appears – without any time limit – on the first page of the preamble to the JCPOA."

In early July, following the US "maximum pressure" campaign and Iranian aggression in the Gulf, Johnson [described](#) the JCPOA as "looking increasingly frail" and called for "ways of constraining Iran's disruptive behaviour in the region". But he emphasised that "I continue to believe that engaging with Iran and persuading Iran not to go forward with a nuclear weapons programme is the right way forward for our country and for the region."

He has also warned Iran against leaving the deal: "I would urge again the Iranian government to think very, very hard about scrapping the JCPOA and breaching their commitments on the Iran nuclear deal. It has been a good guarantor of stability in relations certainly with the EU and with America and I think they should stick with it and I think it would be a great mistake now for Iran to abandon that approach of restraint and go for enrichment of nuclear materials I think that would be a serious error."

Johnson recently told the London [Jewish News](#) that he was prepared to restart sanctions on Iran and, as Prime Minister, would do everything in his power to "constrain Iran's disruptive behaviour in the region". But he has also prioritised diplomacy. Speaking at a Conservative leadership hustings, Johnson said Western allies should focus on diplomatic solutions to prevent Iran from building a nuclear weapon. "I'm going to be very candid with you all tonight: If you say that going to war with Iran now represents a sensible option for us in the West, I just don't believe it is."

*Iran's ballistic missiles:* Johnson has previously expressed concern about Iran's missile arsenal. In a [written statement](#) to the House of Commons in October 2017, Johnson said: "the Government share serious concerns about Iran's ballistic missile programme and its destabilising activity in the region. Addressing these issues is a fundamental part of the Government's policy towards Iran and we will consider further appropriate measures." He added that there was no contradiction between dealing with this threat and adhering to the JCPOA. "The nuclear deal does not prevent us from tackling these issues. On the contrary, removing the most dangerous threat of nuclear weapons allows us to focus our efforts on challenging on the other areas of Iran's destabi-

lising activity.”

Israeli military actions against Iran in Syria: In February 2018, Johnson [expressed](#) support for Israel after Israeli forces shot down an Iranian drone that entered its airspace and carried out airstrikes against Iranian targets in Syria: “We support Israel’s right to defend itself against any incursions into its territory”. He also [referred](#) to the “disgraceful behaviour of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the missiles that are fired from Syria at Israel and elsewhere.” And in March 2017, Johnson joined the US in [railing against](#) the “absolutely preposterous” UN criticism of Israel for bombing Hezbollah positions in Syria.

## Stability in the Gulf

During a visit to Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as Foreign Secretary in July 2017, Johnson [said](#) that “Britain’s close and historic friendship with all of the Gulf states is becoming even more relevant and important in today’s volatile world” adding that “as our Prime Minister has said: The Gulf’s security is our security and we remain deeply committed to the stability of the region and to working with our friends in the Gulf to keep all of our people safe.” As London mayor, Johnson [supported](#) Gulf investment in London, saying there was “plenty of room” for Gulf states and companies to buy up London property and invest in major developments, and he jokingly described himself as the “mayor of the eighth emirate”. During a keynote speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ Manama Dialogue in December 2016, Johnson [argued](#) that exiting the European Union would allow the UK to negotiate new free trade agreements with its Gulf partners.

*Relations with Saudi Arabia:* In December 2016, Johnson was censured by Downing Street for [suggesting](#) that Saudi Arabia was engaging in “proxy wars” in the Middle East, breaking the Foreign Office convention of not criticising its key regional ally: “There are politicians who are twisting and abusing religion and different strains of the same religion in order to further their own political objectives. That’s why you’ve got the Saudis, Iran, everybody, moving in and puppeteering and playing proxy wars.” Johnson added that what was needed in the region was “visionary leadership”.

He has remained a supporter of Saudi actions in the Yemen conflict. In May 2018, Johnson [stressed](#) that “The United Kingdom remains committed to supporting the legitimate security needs of Saudi Arabia and guarding against the danger of regional escalation”, and also [emphasised](#) that “we have the most scrupulous possible invigilation of whether or not Saudi Arabia remains in conformity with international humanitarian law, and our lawyers believe that it is still on this side of the line”. In June 2019, it [emerged](#) that as Foreign Secretary, Johnson recommended that the UK allow Saudi Arabia to buy British bomb parts expected to be deployed in Yemen, days after an airstrike on a potato factory in the country had killed 14 people in 2016.

*Tension within the GCC:* In June 2017, Johnson [called](#) on Qatar to do more to clamp down on funding of extremist groups, while urging the GCC to end the embargo of Qatar: “Qatar is a partner of the UK in the fight against terrorism but they urgently need to do more to address support for extremist groups, building on the steps they have already taken to tackle funding to those groups.” Johnson added: “I am also concerned by some of the strong actions which Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain have taken against an important partner, and urge them to ease the blockade on Qatar. I call on all states to take immediate steps to de-escalate the situation and to find a rapid resolution through mediation.” In July 2017, Johnson [welcomed](#) Qatar’s renewed commitment to combat terrorism and pledge to resolve the remaining differences with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain through dialogue and Kuwaiti mediation.

## The Israeli-Palestinian political process

*Relations with Israel:* Johnson has said he is a strong supporter of Israel, describing himself in July 2019 as a “passionate Zionist” and Israel as “great country” that “I love”. In 2015, on a visit to Israel, he praised the country for “the audacity, the bravery, the willingness to take risks with feats of outrageous derring-do.” [Speaking](#) in the House of Commons on the centenary of the Balfour Declaration, Johnson said: “A century after those words were written, I believe that the Balfour Declaration paved the way for the birth of a great nation. The state of Israel has prevailed over every obstacle, from the harshness of nature to

the visceral hostility of its enemies, to become a free society with a thriving and innovative economy and the same essential values that we in Britain hold dear. Liberty, democracy and the rule of law have found a home in Israel – more so than anywhere else in the Middle East. Most of all, there is the incontestable moral purpose of Israel to provide a persecuted people with a safe and secure homeland.”

However, Johnson has been critical of Israeli military action in Gaza. In 2014, he [described](#) Operation Protective Edge as being “disproportionate, I think it is ugly and it is tragic and I don’t think it will do Israel any good in the long run.” In 2019, Johnson qualified those statements by saying: “It’s totally unacceptable that innocent Israeli civilians should face the threat of rocket fire and bombardment from Gaza. I understand why Israel reacted in the way that it did and I understand the provocation and the outrageous behaviour that occasioned that response. All I’m saying is that you know in any such response it’s always right to be proportionate.” In June 2018, during a visit by Prime Minister Netanyahu to the UK, Johnson [said](#) the government is “concerned by the deaths of over 120 Palestinians in recent weeks and the deteriorating situation in Gaza”, and urged Netanyahu to open an independent investigation into the deaths by Israeli troops during violent protests on the Gaza border.

*Relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas:* Johnson’s relations with the PA have been somewhat frosty. He has visited the West Bank and hosted PA President Mahmoud Abbas in London. But his public support for the Balfour Declaration during the centenary, and 2015 [comments](#) about supporters of the movement to boycott Israel caused anger in Ramallah, and led to part of his visit to Ramallah as part of a trade delegation to be cut short. “I cannot think of anything more foolish than to say that you want to have any kind of divestments or sanctions or boycott against a country that, when all is said and done, is the only democracy in the region, is the only place that has, in my view, pluralist, open society – why boycott Israel?” Johnson added that “The supporters of this so-called boycott are really just a bunch of corduroy-jacketed...lefty academics who have no real standing in the matter and I think are highly unlikely to be influential in Britain.” Johnson has also been critical of the PA for payments to families of terrorists in prison, [describing it](#) as “ludicrous that there should be any kind of finan-

cial incentive or compensation for terrorist activities.” Discussing Hamas, Johnson [told](#) the House of Commons that: “There may be in the end the prospect of Hamas being brought in, but before that can happen they have to renounce terror, they have to recognise the right of Israel to exist, they have to cease and desist from violent antisemitic propaganda, they have to abide by the Quartet Principles” [the recognition of Israel; the renunciation of violence; adherence to previous diplomatic agreements.] Referring to calls for the UK to unilaterally recognise a Palestinian state, Johnson [argued](#) it would happen when Palestinian leaders “meaningfully recognises Israel and stops threatening to revoke recognition”.

*Final-Status Negotiation Issues:* Two-state solution: Johnson supports the UK Government’s long-standing policy of a ‘two states for two peoples’ solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An article in the [Daily Telegraph](#) ahead of the Balfour Declaration Centenary set out what he called ‘My vision for Middle East peace between Israel and a new Palestinian state’: “I have no doubt that the only viable solution to the conflict resembles the one first set down on paper by another Briton, Lord Peel, in the report of the Royal Commission on Palestine in 1937, and that is the vision of two states for two peoples. For Israel, the birth of a Palestinian state is the only way to secure its demographic future as a Jewish and democratic nation. For Palestinians, a state of their own would allow them to realise their aspirations for self-determination and self-government.”

*Palestinian refugees:* Regarding refugees, Johnson called for a “just, fair, agreed and realistic solution to the Palestinian refugee question, in line with UN Resolution 1515. In practical terms, this means that any such agreement has to be demographically compatible with two states for two peoples and a generous package of international compensation must be made available.”

*Borders:* Johnson wrote: “The borders should be based on the lines as they stood on June 4, 1967 – the eve of the Six Day War – with equal land swaps to reflect the national, security, and religious interests of the Jewish and Palestinian peoples. There must be security arrangements that, for Israelis, prevent the resurgence of terrorism and deal effectively with all threats, including new and significant threats in the region; and, for Palestinians, respect their sovereignty, ensure freedom of movement, and demonstrate that occupation is over.”

*Jerusalem:* Referring to Jerusalem, Johnson said: “The final determination of Jerusalem should be agreed by the parties, ensuring that the holy city is a shared capital of Israel and a Palestinian state, granting access and religious rights for all who hold it dear.” Johnson was [criticised](#) for describing the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital as a “moment of opportunity” for peace, though he subsequently qualified his statement by declaring that: “Clearly, Jerusalem now having been recognised by the US as the capital of Israel, one would expect some symmetrical movement in the other direction to get things moving.” In a recent [interview](#), Johnson said he “could see the logic” in moving the British Embassy to Jerusalem but believed “the moment for us to play that card is when we make further progress”.

*Settlements:* As Foreign Secretary, Johnson consistently opposed the expansion of Israeli settlements. In January 2017, he told the House of Commons he believed that “the continued expansion of illegal settlements in the West Bank is by no means conducive to peace” and in October 2017, Johnson [joined](#) the EU’s condemnation of the advancement of plans for additional settlement units, saying “the UK strongly condemns the advancement by the Israeli authorities of plans, tenders and permits for thousands of settlement units across the West Bank”. He has also said that the Government “regard settlements as illegal in so far as they are in occupied Palestinian territories. Members will be absolutely clear that sooner or later – I hope sooner rather than later – there will be a deal and an understanding that involves land swaps.”

Johnson was Foreign Secretary when the UK government was [criticised for voting in favour of UNSC Resolution 2334](#) which was considered heavily critical of Israel. Since then, he was the first Foreign Secretary to [pledge to vote against Item 7](#) at the UN Human Rights Council, [saying](#) that ‘the UK also supports efforts to address Agenda Item 7’s disproportionate focus on Israel, which does not improve the prospects for a two-state solution’. He has [criticised](#) UNHRC bias against Israel, calling it “disproportionate and damaging to the cause of peace”.

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