



Theresa May's Leadership in Times of Brexit


By Emily Curryová (Guest Contributor)

On 04 April 2017 the British Prime Minister Theresa May shook hands with the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef and Sarah al-Suhaimi, head of Saudi stock exchange, during a visit to Saudi Arabia, an act which was to confirm the UK's commitment to embark on an **enduring partnership based on cooperation in the areas of security and trade**. The visit can be understood as another step towards securing a **stronger post-Brexit position within the Gulf region**—this time with the UK's largest trading partner from the Arab world. As the UK prepares to leave the EU, May seems to have taken a firm grip on striking new deals, a strategy that is to make a “strong and global Britain.”

The visit to Saudi Arabia is a follow-up of May's longer-term strategy involving the Gulf, which commenced in December 2016, when she travelled to Bahrain to be the first ever British PM to attend the Gulf Cooperation Council meeting. Her speech abounded with references to historical ties that the UK has to the Gulf states and the need to renew the partnership and friendship in the future by focusing on the areas of hard as well as soft power. The projects will include investing some £3 billion into defence and constructing a permanent military presence in the region. The commitment in defence cooperation as well as building on economic ties was affirmed by the launching of the Strategic Partnership between Britain and the GCC, which also includes the goal of forging a new trade arrangement for the whole region. During her visit May emphasised the importance of “shared prosperity” and “shared interests” that the countries should develop together.

Both regional visits demonstrates the PM's goal to demonstrate her policy of “getting on” with Brexit. So far, May's discourse has been rich on reiterating the UK's positive outlook in the post-Brexit world. Forging strong relations with the Gulf countries seem to be part of her vision of building a “truly global and internationalist Britain.” The rhetoric that May has been deploying since taking office indicates her resolute attitude towards positioning the UK among the global leaders in the realms of trade and security cooperation.

However challenging the Brexit negotiations are, the nation's divorce from the EU also represents an opportunity to portray strong leadership skills. The PM seems to have embraced a leadership style that marries innovativeness together with traditionalist approach as well as a sense for urgency. May relies on a rhetoric stressing the relevance of strengthening historical relations and

A decorative header featuring a repeating geometric pattern of interlocking lines forming a complex, lattice-like structure in shades of light blue and grey.

advocating UK's strong position in the world. On the other hand though, she also appears to use the opportunity of Brexit to opening some new chapters in the nation's political and economic cooperation. Her decision-making in regard of the future of the nation has taken place during a time of increased tensions in consideration of the Brexit talks and hence indicates the urgency of the need to adopt a clear stance.

Nevertheless, when discussing the aforementioned traditionalism in light of May's leadership, it is also necessary to consider national values and norms. If one is to assess her attitude of looking beyond the EU to a wider world in regard of political and economic cooperation, many of the PM's critics have pointed out to the necessity to consider the humanitarian situation in some of the countries of her renewed focus. For example, Saudi Arabia's records on human rights make the nation a rather controversial ally for Britain - a country that has for centuries proclaimed the significance of ethical domestic and foreign policy. Several human rights pressure groups opposed May's visit to the Gulf States and claimed that future closer ties with the region must not overshadow UK's historically strong commitment to human rights. In her defence, May turns the argument to her side and claims that only by stepping up and engaging with the countries it will be possible to encourage any plans for reform and "build societies that work for all."

The pressing urge to demonstrate an unwavering stance during the Brexit negotiations, coupled with the need to affirm her conviction of the national values, may require some kind of a balancing from the side of the PM. Promoting trade and investment, pushing for tighter relations with the Gulf region and at the same time proving interest in human rights issues undoubtedly present a challenge for Theresa May. The question is whether she will be able to marry and harmonise the national interests with the national values and what it would mean for the future of the Brexit negotiations. One thing is for sure – May's political leadership in times of Brexit will most likely be evaluated against the backdrop of an attuning act.