



ISO107 | 2018
09/07

EGIC
Euro-Gulf
Information
Centre

Boris Johnson: A Legacy of Chaos

By Antonino Occhiuto

The UK Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Boris Johnson, was hired to ensure cohesion among the different factions of the Conservative party and provide Britain with a stable government to guide the country through Brexit. However, Johnson's time in office not only fell short of that goal but also provided unprecedented uncertainty over the UK's foreign affairs role. In the Arab Gulf—the focus of this Info-sheet—are situated traditional allies, strategic resources and keys to British foreign policy which are set to become even more important after Brexit.

Boris of Arabia?

The UK and Saudi Arabia have long-standing relations. Their origins go back to WWI, when Abdulaziz ibn Abdul Rahman Al-Saud signed the 1915 Treaty of Darin with the British government to ensure military cooperation against the common Ottoman enemy. The UK's role as a security guarantor for Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab Gulf continued until 1971; the date of the UK's withdrawal from East of Suez. The UK's legacy remains substantial. Until today, for instance, Britain supplies weapons and services to Saudi Arabia's Armed Forces under the Saudi-British Defence Cooperation Programme (SBDCP) and the SALAM Project. The UK-Headquartered arms company, BAE Systems, is the main non-US supplier of weapons to the Kingdom. As far as trade and economic relations are concerned, there are more than 200 joint ventures between British and Saudi companies, worth some \$17.5 billion (USD), and roughly 30,000 British nationals live and work in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is the UK's prime trading partner in the Middle East. Their economic relations have been identified by UK's Prime Minister, Theresa May, as vital for the UK's post-Brexit economy. This was explicitly stated by May during her participation to the 2016 GCC Summit. In contrast to May's efforts, in December 2016, Johnson accused Saudi Arabia of waging proxy war in the region rather than focusing on bridging the sectarian divide. Three days later, during a joint conference in Riyadh with his Saudi counterpart, Adel Al-Jubeir, Johnson then reiterated Britain's long-standing friendship to Saudi Arabia, but the feeling of fragility in their friendship prevailed throughout Johnson's time in office.

The UK in the Gulf

The importance of the Gulf in the UK's post-Brexit strategy is further underscored by ongoing British efforts to revive, albeit in a significantly altered form, Britain's pre-1971 role of security guarantor with the smaller Arab Gulf states. Talk of the UK restating its commitment to the region can be traced back to a Defence Cooperation Accord (DCA) signed between the UK and the UAE in 1996, one of Britain's largest defence commitments outside of NATO. In March 2016, the UK and Oman agreed as to the deployment of 45 British training teams to the country. In 2019, more British troops are expected to follow as Britain gets set to redeploy to the Sultanate its service personnel currently stationed in Germany. Additionally, in December 2016, May announced the creation of a UK-GCC Joint Working Group steps to further liberalise trade between Britain and the GCC. The defence focus of such new relations is also evident in Qatar as Doha continues to purchase Typhoon fighter jets from the UK and the Qatar Air Force receives training from instructors of the Royal Air Force. Other small states in the Gulf, such as Bahrain and Kuwait, also positively eye the increasing UK commitment in the region. At the request of the government of Kuwait, the UK will be increasing its military presence in the country. Such an increase would come on the heels of a Joint Steering Group which focuses on defence cooperation and involves plans for the establishment of a UK permanent military base in Kuwait. As recently as April 2018, Britain opened its first permanent military facility in the Middle East since 1971 in Bahrain. The UK Naval Support Facility can house up to around 500 Royal Navy personnel, including sailors, soldiers and airmen, in a region where maritime security is crucial to ensure that oil shipments and goods make it safely from Asia to Europe.

The Qatar Crisis

Johnson's unpredictable rhetoric and his lack of a consistent vision for UK-Gulf relations is among the causes of Britain's waning importance in the unfolding Qatar crisis. The-year long (so far) dispute has no end in sight with Riyadh, Manama, Cairo and Abu Dhabi accusing Doha of supporting terrorism and regime change across the region. Johnson has failed to carve out any mediating role for the UK despite Britain's historical legacy in the Gulf and the strategic interests it retains in all countries involved. Instead Johnson issued conflicting statements which only added more confusion regarding Britain's position. He called on Qatar to do more to clamp down on the funding of extremist groups. He then criticised Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE for imposing a 'blockade' on Doha and urged them to change. By connecting Qatar to terrorism financing and calling the actions by Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE a 'blockade', Johnson left both sides alienated—weakening Britain's leverage in the dispute.

The JCPOA

Johnson has been even more ambiguous regarding Britain's relationship with Iran and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) a.k.a. the Iran Nuclear Deal. Crucially, Johnson acknowledged that British-Iranian economic cooperation—possible after the signing of the JCPOA and lobbied by the influential British Iranian Chamber of Commerce (BICC)—enhances the military capabilities of Tehran and its proxies which threaten the security of key UK allies in the region. Despite this, Johnson went as far as publishing opinion pieces on The Washington Post, Gulf News and the New York Times in which he made a strong case for Britain's backing of the JCPOA, urging Arab Gulf governments and the US Administration to do the same. Johnson argued that the JCPOA is the only mechanism in place to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

In the case of the JCPOA Johnson might have been a victim of the contradiction affecting his own political party, split between alignment to the US or the EU on Iran and influenced by BICC interests. However, in other cases, he was only a victim of his own mismanagement. During a Cabinet meeting he once stated that Britain 'has got to do something about the Saudi war on Lebanon...' leaving aside problems related to the Foreign Secretary's inability to distinguish Lebanon from Yemen, Johnson attempted to delegitimise Saudi Arabia's war efforts in Yemen in front of the entire Cabinet despite acknowledging several times that the Saudi-led Arab coalition intervened in Yemen to restore the UN-legitimised government which was ousted in 2015 by Iran-backed Houthi militias.

We at the Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC), will continue to monitor and assess the changing relations between the UK and the Arab Gulf countries in the wake of the US decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and going forward into a post-Brexit scenario. With this level of foreign policy confusion, the UK lost nearly two years of diplomacy in the Arab Gulf and desperately needs to catch up. The UK will always be a close ally to the states of the Arab Gulf so long as it pursues its natural interests. Johnson and the UK's support for Revolutionary Iran goes against those interests.