

Will There Be A British Middle East Policy After Brexit?

Chris Doyle

Abstract : Britain is facing its most challenging foreign policy crisis since the Second World War after voting to leave the European Union. Divorcing Brussels would always be a major step, but is now even more so, as no British leader has yet to articulate a clear vision and strategy for the future. Whether the Britain will become a shrinking and inward-facing island or an outward-looking global trading engine, fighting fit at the top table of international politics, remains unclear. Laden with this burden, it appears that it will be some time before Britain will take the initiative in the Middle East once again. In all likelihood the new government will maintain a “business as usual” approach, but with little enthusiasm for any major commitments or initiatives. The EU itself is likely to continue to be self-absorbed as it struggles to hold itself together.

Introduction

On 23 June, Britain voted to leave the European Union (or to so-called “Brexit”) in a narrow referendum victory to the leave side of roughly 52 percent to 48 percent. This may lead to what the Financial Times has described as “the most fundamental reshaping of Britain’s foreign policy since the 1960s”¹ when Britain gave up its empire.

It followed what many saw as a negative, divisive and ill-informed debate: a fact that is likely to shape future politics in the UK. The referendum campaign highlighted a divided and fragmented Britain at every level. London, Scotland and Northern Ireland largely voted to remain, but the rest of the country was in favour of leaving. Divisions were clear also by age, with the younger voters far more in favour of remaining.

HOW AGES VOTED	
18-24	71% Remain
25-49	54% Remain
50-64	40% Remain
65+	36% Remain ²

(YouGov poll)

There will remain an ocean of uncertainty. Barring extraordinary events, Britain will leave the EU sometime between 2018-2020. That being said, conceivably a new deal could be formulated to allow a British government to go back to the electorate, perhaps to decide exactly what future relationship the UK will have with the EU. It is fair to expect a bout of inward navel-gazing to overcome the British public.

Stitching the country back together again will be an immense challenge. The person in charge of this repair work is the former Home Secretary, Theresa May, who recently succeeded David Cameron as Prime Minister. At the same time, the Labour party is in open civil war, the referendum result triggering a huge Parliamentary rebellion against Jeremy Corbyn, the party leader. The outcome of the leadership contest may determine whether there is an effective loyal opposition to the government. Given that the Labour party tends to be more pro-human rights, anti-American, pro-Palestinian and anti-war, Theresa May and her new Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson may get a freer hand in the Middle East in the absence of seismic improvements across the Parliamentary aisles.

Naturally, the rest of the world is wondering what this might mean for Britain's place in the world and future foreign policy. The UK is after all a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a G7 and G20 member, a leading NATO and Commonwealth member and one of the world's largest economies.

Moreover, questions are also being asked about the future of the EU itself. Further down the line, will this have any impact on the British approach to the Middle East, an area of the world that Britain has been a key player in for over 100 years? In the past Britain has sometimes stood half way across the Atlantic between the EU and the US, often trying to act as a strategic bridge. Crucially, this stance was broken over Iraq in 2003, when Britain defied the majority of the EU to invade Iraq with the US. The other key factor, which will not change for many years, is a dependency on energy resources from the Gulf. In particular, the UK's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE are pivotal to how it sees the region. The problem is that the past may not be an accurate guide to the future. Britain is a changing country struggling to find its compass.

How might this change as a result of the referendum? As ever, to deduce what British positions might be on the Middle East, one has to assess what they will mean for Europe and for the United States, as well as examining the domestic situation. It is rarely Middle Eastern factors that drive the British approach to the region. In this case, how Britain divorces from the EU is key, as well as the handling of internal divisions and the new US President taking office in January 2017. With such a heavy load on a new government and its foreign affairs team, the Middle East may struggle to get the usual attention.

Domestically, the referendum debate revolved around issues of sovereignty, identity, immigration and economics. However, fears over mass uncontrolled immigration were the deciding factor, as well as a strong disillusionment with Britain's establishment and political leadership. This is similar to such sentiment in the United States, as seen in the surge of support of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders over the last twelve months. This highlights a lack of trust in the political leadership of all parties (except the SNP), meaning that Westminster politicians will have to reconnect with grassroots movements that feel alienated.

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the public pressure on a British government to take tougher lines on relations with Muslim-majority states as well as refugees. The anti-Muslim far right, led by a party like UKIP, may flourish. The rise in Islamophobia in the UK and in the EU must be a concern to major Muslim states. Anti-Muslim attacks have already surged after the Brexit referendum results.

European leaders are nervous because they want to regain control of the situation. The greatest fear is one of contagion. Many other EU states have increasingly Eurosceptic populations who would also like to have such a referendum. According to opinion polls, France is more Eurosceptic than Britain and has elections in 2017.³ Marine Le Pen, the country's National Front Leader, was delighted with the British vote. Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland, Sweden, Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary are just some of the other countries who may wish to carry out their own vote.

That said, opinion polls have shown that one effect of the nervous uncertainty of Brexit has been to dampen Euroscepticism.

The current EU mood seems to be that Britain should be seen to pay a price for this exit in order to discourage others, especially France. In contrast, Angela Merkel has said that the EU should not be too harsh on the UK. Donald Tusk, the President of the European Council, talked of seeking a "velvet divorce" on meeting with Theresa May.⁴ Nevertheless, Britain's large economy means that EU states would also be damaging their own trade by hurting Britain. In fact, Theresa May is now more anxious than ever to reassure key allies that Britain is still very much with them and will not change course. She has talked of a "sensible and orderly departure."⁵

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dle East. Human rights were already more a lip service issue than one of substance. It has been trade that has counted with this government, and under Liam Fox, the new Secretary of State for International Trade, it will come even more to the fore. Core markets such as the Gulf will be a priority before developing more niche areas.

Britain has to negotiate trade deals with its major trading partners, including the US. This will take time and energy. Thousands of new UK rules and regulations will be needed. Separate international and bilateral trade deals will need to be negotiated and drawn up. This would include over 50 new trade deals to replace those Britain is currently tied to as part of the EU.

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Britain might become more isolationist and nervous of becoming embroiled in time and resource –sapping international issues that are not crucial to its post-Brexit priorities. Major international issues will be decided more by blocs of states and alliances than on an individual basis, so Britain could lose significant influence. It is more than likely that Britain will shift more towards the United States than away from it, depending on who is in the White House.

For the broader Middle East, it means the EU as well as the UK will be fixated on their internal agendas, unlikely to engage



in creative initiatives to resolve conflicts in the region such as Israel-Palestine. The international conference on Palestine promoted by the French may still take place, but will there be the same level of diplomatic effort?

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For the present, the British approach to Israel-Palestine is unlikely to change. The leadership of the government is still dominated by those close to Israel, who shy away from serious criticism of Israeli illegal actions. There will be no change in the opposition to Boycott Divestment and Sanctions, not least given Boris Johnson's charmless and ignorant comments about those who support this⁶. Broadly, criticism of Israel's settlement policies and public support for a two-state solution will continue. However, as with other states, Israel may well prove to be a prize that Britain chases for a trade deal or an association agreement so the government will maintain and even enlarge the burgeoning trading relationship in the high-tech sector David Cameron was so keen on. The French initiative will be supported but with limited enthusiasm or expectations.

Syria may be seen solely through the prism of combatting ISIS and reducing refugee flows. Turkey has lost in Britain a key proponent of its accession to the EU. On Syria the reality is that despite its proximity and the impact of the crisis, the European Union has had precious little impact. Internationally, the two top level players are Russia and the United States, and the key regional actors are Tur-

key, Saudi Arabia and Iran. France and Britain have both become increasingly frustrated.

However, as with so much in the EU, its foreign and security policy rarely stands up to much scrutiny. The lesson of Syria is that in all likelihood it will be France, Germany and Britain who remain the lead European actors in determining the approach just as they did in the past over Iran, Palestine and Syria.

Tackling ISIS and other extremist groups will top the UK's non-EU foreign policy agenda. Here Ministers will have plenty of scope to demonstrate that Britain remains European if not part of the EU. Britain has top class intelligence facilities and agencies that other European states will want to benefit from in counter-terrorism activities. Far from retreating on this front the probability is that Britain will build upon its role in the anti-ISIS coalition. Yet the winning line is miles off and in private foreign office officials admit that whilst ISIS has been limited territorially in Iraq and Syria, its ability to mount attacks across the globe is alarming.

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On Iran, it was Federica Mogherini, the EU High Representative, who led the talks. After Britain leaves the EU, will this remain the same, and what will be the UK's role, assuming that issues with Iran do not disappear? Iran actually welcomed Brexit, one presumes from a desire to see a weaker EU and Britain. One senior commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard called it payback



for “years of colonialism and crimes against humanity.”⁷

Yet further down the road Britain will have an independent foreign policy at least from the EU. Could this mean that a future government might take risks on the Palestine file? Could the UK recognise Palestine or perhaps enter into initial discussions with Hamas and Hizbollah as so many diplomats favour? It might go in a different direction where the British position becomes even weaker on issues such as settlements and Gaza. A Conservative government would be unlikely to change path but a Labour government conceivably could.

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An open trade approach could lead to greater business engagement with Iran. The Iranian energy minister has already met with Rolls Royce representatives in London. Many companies remain nervous, as US sanctions remain in place and the deal with Iran could fall apart. Turkey might also be a target for business as well, if it settles down after the failed coup.

One area that some fear could be under threat is international development. Many on the right of the Conservative party, including the new Secretary of State, Priti Patel, do not believe in the commitment to 0.7% of GDP on aid. With Brexit likely to hit the UK economy a debate on how much aid Britain should give is likely. Patel is also in favour of the death penalty in Britain so may want to push to change Britain’s longstanding opposition to those countries who use it.

What might this mean in practice? British aid will in effect drop as the economy shrinks. Many saw Britain as an aid superpower, not least over Syria where it is the second largest bilateral donor. Probably because of its high profile status, funding to Syria may not be affected in the near term but aid to Palestinians may be hit.

The EU will change as well as a result of the British departure. Many believe that the EU would be less influenced by the US. There is a chance that it could present a more coherent external relations policy. Yet it would lack Britain’s world class diplomatic service and intelligence apparatus. Yet as Professor John Bew of King’s College argues “the UK must develop a vision for what type of EU it would most like to see, and encourage its development. If there is one lesson from our history, it is that stability on the European continent must remain as one of the highest priorities in national security.”⁸ The UK Defense Secretary has stated that Britain would still participate in many EU military missions including in the Mediterranean tackling people smugglers, and also anti-piracy operations off Somalia.⁹

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Fashioning a new approach to the world will be tough. James Watt, the former British Ambassador to Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon, believes that “What Britain needs above all at this stage, having been shaken out of the cocoon of EU membership, is principled, hard-nosed and visionary leadership, in foreign policy as much as in the debate on the United Kingdom’s identity itself. Less spin, less self-delusion would help. More learning from history.”¹⁰ Many in Britain would argue this is a little too late, adding it is a pity that this was not on the agenda before the June 23rd vote.



Patience will be required for those in the Middle East desperate to detect changes in British policy towards the region. Uncertainty inside Britain will be reflected in its external affairs, a situation that will last years not months. Yet just perhaps, Britain might exit this process all the stronger, compelled to review its role in the world as opposed to plodding along as before.

Endnotes:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Doyle is the Director of the Council for Arab-British Understand, an NGO based in London. He is an expert on the Middle East and a frequent commentator on British and Middle Eastern politics in the media.

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The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. It will do this through public-spirited research, promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue and social justice.

Address: Yenibosna Merkez Mah. 29 Ekim Cad.
Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 blok kat:6 No.:52 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org

