



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

Workshop 7

## **Post-Brexit Britain, Europe and Policy towards Iran and the GCC states: Potential Challenges, and the Possibility of Cooperation**

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### **Abstract**

Britain's unprecedented withdrawal from the EU presents a unique challenge both to the UK and the EU in defining their policies towards the countries of the Gulf, whether together, in friendly rivalry, or in less constructive competition. The regional dynamics in the Middle East, especially the destabilizing behavior of Iran, the ambitions of Saudi Arabia and the Qatar Crisis, has increased the levels of uncertainty in which European policies will be played out. Individual as well as collectively European states and the EU have been seeking to play a more critical role in the Gulf. Given Britain's historical role played in the Gulf, it is not surprising that it has been seeking to reestablish itself

as an influential actor, alongside and sometimes in competition with France, both perhaps aware of the more unpredictable role of the United States and the growing interest of China in the region. It is possible, however, that, due to the challenges the UK is likely to face in the years following Brexit, it will lose its place in the region. This workshop seeks to identify and explore the most urgent questions associated with this ambiguity both in relation to Britain and other European states as well as to the Gulf states themselves.

## **Description and Rationale**

### *Objectives and scope:*

In the case of the UK, though the date for its withdrawal from the EU is set for 29 March 2019, the nature of its withdrawal and its future relationship with the EU, economically and in terms of foreign and security policies remain uncertain. Several EU summits are likely before we know the terms of the UK-EU ‘divorce’, and the future relationship beyond any implementation period which is meant to last less than two years. The widely differing views on Brexit, not least within the Conservative Party, pose a challenge to the UK, made more so by the possibility of a general election if the May Government was defeated a growing support for a second referendum, though if one was to occur, whether the question posed would include the possibility of remaining within the EU remains unknown. With such a lack of consensus at home, it makes it particularly difficult to predict UK foreign policy beyond the platitudes of ‘Global Britain’.

One unknown of the UK’s withdrawal is its future relationship with EU-level security resources and institutions, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) at a time of some possibly significant developments especially of the latter with moves towards Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and closer collaboration on defence equipment through the European Defence Agency. If there is progress, it means that the UK will not benefit from the advantages available to the EU27, at the same time as it loses the voice ‘magnification’ that EU membership has brought it. Moreover, a second unknown is the indirect consequences for the UK’s ability to pursue any grandiose policies independent of its erstwhile EU partners if the British economy suffers adversely from leaving the European market.

Moves within CSDP point, too, to third unknown – the extent to which the EU itself sees and acts on the potential of better relations with the Gulf states. On the one hand, the economic relationship between the EU and the GCC might have reached stalemate despite some efforts by, for example, Chancellor Merkel to restart negotiations on a free trade agreement during her visit to the Gulf in 2017. |Meanwhile German bilateral trade has been continuously improving. Both may well impact on the UK’s ability to sign any advantageous free trade agreements with either the GCC or individual Gulf states. On the other hand, France has for some time been seeking to establish itself, via, for example its base in Abu Dhabi, as a key security actor in the region.

A fourth unknown is the role of the United States in the region and the relationships both a post-Brexit UK and the EU27 may seek to establish with it. The UK has always

been at great pains to maintain its historical relationship with the US, which post Brexit may be of even greater importance given President Trump's endorsement of the Brexit vote – symbolized in the reciprocation of official visits in January 2017 (Ms. May's visit to the US) and in July 2018 (President Trump's visit to the UK). But the UK faces a dilemma – as does the rest of Europe – in its relationship with the Trump Administration. The President's unpredictability, his clear dislike of multilateralism whether expressed through NATO or the WTO create tensions in the Atlantic relationship. The President himself may not rue the loss of the UK as a diplomatic 'bridge' between the US and Europe but certainly past Administrations have seen it as useful. The British government may remain confident in the continuation of the 'special relationship' especially in terms of intelligence sharing and yet US policies create difficulties. One area of difficulty is in relations with the Gulf, and America's strong support for Saudi Arabia and its condemnation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) with Iran.

The JCPoA epitomizes especially strongly contemporary tensions. As a member of the EU3, the UK worked hard to develop a better relationship with Iran. On the one hand, it was firm in supporting EU-level sanctions regime as the part of the comprehensive strategy that, on the other hand, also included negotiations to bring Iran's nuclear programme under control. The success of that strategy lay in the JCPoA of 14 July 2015. When he became Foreign Secretary, Boris Johnson, remarked: 'I hope this will mark the start of more productive cooperation between our countries, enabling us to discuss more directly issues such as human rights and Iran's role in the region, as well as ongoing implementation of the nuclear deal and the expansion of the trading relationship between both our countries'. The decision by President Trump to pull out of the agreement in May 2018 – despite, *inter alia*, Boris Johnson's last minute efforts to persuade the Trump administration to the contrary – left the UK government at odds with the US and working with the EU27 in an effort, along with Russia and China, to save the agreement. Whether this is possible remains, of course, to be seen, the so-called Special Purpose Vehicle, designed to side-step US sanctions being as yet [in September 2018] only a proposal. Some UK interests, some British banks and British Airways seem already to have assumed it to be unlikely.

But the US decision places the UK in a particularly delicate position not simply in its relationship with the US but also with Saudi Arabia. The British Prime Minister, Theresa May, during her visit to the Gulf in December 2016 may have wanted 'to assure you that I am clear-eyed about the threat that Iran poses to the Gulf and the wider Middle East; and the UK is fully committed to our strategic partnership with the Gulf and working with you to counter that threat'. But the Iran deal had considerable economic and financial potential that has had to be weighed against the existing significance of the relationship with Saudi Arabia, The UAE and Bahrain especially. Considering the challenges to EU/US relations, post-Brexit policies towards Iran remain particularly uncertain.

The GCC states are crucial partners for the UK, sharing deep-rooted relations in a number of contexts, including diplomacy, trade, military/security cooperation, culture, education, and relations between the royal families. Though the UK government is ready to fully engage with the GCC, the GCC's internal issues, such the Qatar Crisis that started in 2017, impede full cooperation. Theresa May participated in the Gulf Cooperation Council of 2016, and discussed relations between the GCC states,

highlighting the historical ties between the UK and the GCC, and stating her ambition ‘to build new alliances but more importantly, to go even further in working with old friends, like our allies here in the Gulf, who have stood alongside us for centuries’. And clearly the UK will be seeking agreements on a basis that may give it an advantage over the EU27 though the extent that that is possible may well depend on the UK’s final agreement with the EU.

That will also in part determine the extent to which a post-Brexit UK will retain its attraction as both a global financial hub and an attraction for inward investment from the Gulf. While there may be few challenges to the City of London as a financial centre in the immediate future, there are predictions of a movement of financial services towards other European centres. Whether the UK can remain the ‘eighth emirate’ to use the words of Tony Blair in 2006 and echoes by Boris Johnson a decade later, may well be of crucial importance given the levels of investment by the Gulf states, and not just the UAE. In part, for the UK, the importance of continued investment lies in whether it can persuade Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to invest beyond the London property market. It is also a question of whether the ambitious visions and plans of the Gulf states remain attractive to British capital – but not of course only British capital, Germany and the other EU countries are also following such plans closely.

Britain and the other EU member states have inevitably hedged their bets in the crisis over Qatar. Given the need to attract inward investment from both sides in the Gulf dispute, most European states have been supporting the mediation attempts of others, especially Kuwait, and certainly, visits by the Saudi Crown Prince and the Qatari Emir to Paris, London and Berlin resulted in new commitments for investment and lucrative sales deals.

However, the sales of arms and military equipment, while increasingly significant for both British and French manufacturers, has also exacerbated tensions of the war in Yemen and human rights issues. In such circumstances, the extent to which Brexit reinforces the importance of Saudi purchases may create further embarrassment for the British government. On the other hand, Britain’s move to increase its physical presence in the Gulf has appealed to other sectors of the British polity in a similar way, perhaps as France’s physical presence enhances French support for the continuation of the concept of a Global France.

This workshop aims to consider how these different tensions and unknowns may interact for the future of relations between a post-Brexit UK, the EU and the countries of the Gulf including Iran. By the time of the next GRM, we will know the outcome of the Brexit negotiations and we will better be able to track moves that may change British and EU27 relations with the Gulf states – or whether traditions and the weight of history reinforce current patterns. Against this has to be set the changes in the Gulf, the present disputes and the trajectories of at least economic reform. And, not necessarily in the background, are the changing positions of the United States and China that are likely to impact on Europe’s interests.

### ***Contribution to Gulf Studies:***

Recognising Brexit as a unique moment in the development of UK and European politics, making a change in the foreign policy of the last 40 years, the outcomes of this

workshop will close a gap in the existing research, by focusing on relations between a post-Brexit UK and the GCC and Iran. Most existing research into the aftermath of Brexit focuses on the future of UK-EU relations, or considers UK foreign policy elsewhere only generally. A very limited number of investigations explore UK foreign policy in the Middle East, and especially the Gulf. Taking into consideration the nature of their previous engagement in the Gulf, this workshop will open a discussion about whether it will be possible for the Britain to return to the Gulf as a global power, or if the UK's future foreign policy will not play such a key role.

## **Anticipated Participants**

Participants are encouraged to examine a wide range of issues associated with, but not limited to, the following themes:

- How might the policies of the UK and the EU in the Gulf region be affected by the uncertainty of the Brexit deal?
- How might UK policy towards the Gulf states and Iran be determined by the nature of their relationship with the EU?
- Will EU policy towards the Gulf be affected by Brexit?
- How might the domestic opinion affect to the UK's foreign policy towards the GCC and Iran?
- How might the policies of post Brexit Britain and the EU27 towards the Gulf states and and Iran be affected by their relationship with the US?
- Will the UK continue its support for the EU position on the 'Iran deal' or follow the United States in rejecting it?
- How will President Trump's pro-Saudi position affect that of the UK in the Gulf?
- How does the US position affect the role of France and the EU27 in the Gulf?
- What can we expect of a post-Brexit UK's relationship with Iran/ the GCC?
- Both the UK and EU27 states have condemned Iran's destabilizing behaviour in the Middle East, will Brexit have any impact on how they deal with Iran?
- To what extent will the positions of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain influence a post Brexit UK policy towards Iran?
- By the time of the GRM, we shall know more about the Special Purpose Vehicle. Does the interaction of the E3 with Russia and China on the Iran deal presage new or changing coalitions?
- How does the GCC Crisis affect to the collaboration between the UK, the EU27 and the GCC states?
- To what extent will a post-Brexit UK and the GCC states co-operate on military, diplomatic, economic, trade, security, and cultural relations issues?

## Workshop Director Profiles

**Dr. Geoffrey Edwards** is Deputy Director Europe @POLIS; Reader Emeritus in European Studies, University of Cambridge; Jean Monnet chair in Political Science, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge; Emeritus Fellow, Pembroke College, Cambridge.

**Dr. Abdullah Baabood** is a graduate in business studies and international relations. He holds a master in Business Administration (MBA), a Master in International Relations (MA) and a Doctorate in International political Economy (PhD) at Cambridge University. He particularly focuses on the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and their economic, social and political development as well as external relations.

**Diana Galeeva** is a PhD candidate at the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University. Her research interests are philosophical and theoretical issues in international relations, especially concepts of power, transnational actors, international organizations and institutions. She particularly focuses on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreign policies, political Islam and post-Brexit Britain policies. She is a regular contributor to Al Arabiya English, with recent publications through the Al-Mesbar Studies and Research Center. She was an intern at the President of Tatarstan's office for the Department of Corporation and Religious organisations (2012), the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Tatarstan (2011), and the Ministry of Justice (2010). She received her M.A. in International Relations from Exeter University in the UK, and earned a degree in Governmental Law from Kazan Federal University.

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