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Britain and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Is Britain's approach to the ongoing war undermining its regional strategy and diplomatic credibility?

Britain was a crucial partner in the establishment of the State of Israel. Since then, it has pursued a foreign policy in the Middle East that positions Israel as an important strategic ally. In this paper, Pickthall House argues that Britain's recent substantive support for Israel's policies in the Occupied Palestinian Territories has undermined its official foreign policy and historically non-partisan approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. We argue that this threatens Britain's regional interests and credibility on the international stage. Without a change in policy, Britain risks the Middle East falling outside its diplomatic sphere of influence.

Central to British policy in the Middle-East has been its warm relations with many Muslim countries - and an unassailable reputation as a nation committed to even-handed diplomacy and respect for international law. Britain has had to carefully balance its relationship with Israel and neighbouring Muslim countries, particularly in the Arab world, which have often been in conflict with Israel or have refused to normalise diplomatic relations with the country.

In recent years, however, successive British governments have undermined Britain's official foreign policy towards Israel. This has especially been the case since the Hamas-led attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and Israel's ensuing war in Gaza. Britain's "unequivocal" backing for Israel has caused severe damage to the nation's reputation and credibility across the world - particularly in the Muslim world and has led to a situation in which Britain could find itself drawn into a broader conflict in the Middle East. This has occurred alongside serious discontent in Muslim countries towards the United States' support for Israel's war.

The result could be a permanent dent in Britain's perceived credibility, potentially contributing to an erosion of the country's economic ties with countries in the Muslim world and a decline in British soft power.

Britain’s official policy on Israel and the occupation

The UK recognises the State of Israel but not Palestine. However, the UK’s official position is that Israeli settlements in the “Occupied Palestinian Territories” are illegal and an obstacle to peace. Moreover, Britain officially supports a two-state solution, which means the creation of a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel, based on 1967 lines and with Jerusalem as a shared capital.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government blundered in its Middle East policy when the Foreign Office abolished the post of Middle East minister in February 2022. The post was restored in September the same year under his successor, Prime Minister Liz Truss.

Truss and her successor Rishi Sunak, however, provoked serious concern among Muslim countries when they both considered moving the UK’s embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. It would contradict Britain’s long-standing position on Jerusalem, which is that its status should be determined only as part of a settlement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The proposals resulted in several Arab officials, including from Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), warning the British government that such a move would threaten a free-trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), important for Britain’s economic interests post-Brexit. Sunak’s government dropped the proposal.

Since then, however, the government’s commitment to its own official policies has come into question. In 2023, proposed legislation appeared to undermine British policy on Israel’s illegal occupation. The Economic Activity of Public Bodies Bill, which entered its committee stage in the House of Commons in September 2023 (and was passed in January 2024) outlaws support by public bodies for the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. BDS calls for boycotts and sanctions on Israel with the aim of pressuring it to comply with international law. The Labour Party opposed the bill, as did some Conservative MPs - including Alicia Kearns, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Significantly, the bill forbids public bodies from boycotting not just Israel, but the Occupied Palestinian Territories and the Golan Heights. This contradicts British foreign policy; Britain is a signatory to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2334, which "calls upon all states to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967". Foreign Office officials reportedly privately warned Downing Street that the bill risks the UK breaching its commitments under UNSC resolution 2334 - and would be used by Russia to argue that Britain does not uphold the international rules-based system. Despite these warnings, the government pushed ahead with the bill and it was passed.
Britain’s commitment to its own official stance on the two-state solution has also been questioned. In November 2023, Chris Doyle of the Council for Arab-British Understanding told the Guardian: “The government acts as if Israel is in favour of a two-state solution, but the Israeli government coalition formally opposes it. Ministers never call them out on this.”

The Likud Party Platform (1977), Likud being the party of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, states that "between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty". More recently, in December, Netanyahu publicly said: "I'm proud to have prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state."

The Israeli ambassador to the UK, Tzipi Hotovely, declared in December that there should be no Palestinian state.

This opposition to a Palestinian state has been substantively supported by the expansion of illegal settlements in the Occupied West Bank over the last several years.

Given that Britain backs Israel but does not engage with or address the Israeli government's opposition to the two-state solution, it is widely considered by the international community to be supportive of Israel - and not neutral in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Britain's support for Israel's war in Gaza and the Muslim world's approach

In the second half of the twentieth century, Britain balanced its relations with Muslim (especially Arab) countries and Israel by maintaining neutrality during wars. During the Yom Kippur War of 1973, in which Israel fought a coalition of Arab states, the British government refused to supply weapons either to Israel or its Arab opponents. It also refused to allow American planes carrying weapons bound for Israel to stop at Britain's military bases. Then in 1982, when Israel invaded Lebanon, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher urged the US to maintain a "balanced policy". She imposed an arms embargo on Israel until 1994.

This shows that Britain has a record of careful even-handedness on Israel and its opponents, which has often allowed it to operate on good diplomatic terms with states across the Middle East - and credibly claim a commitment to a peaceful resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Throughout the twenty-first century, however, successive British governments have decisively backed Israel in its conflicts.

Recent policy has lacked the careful approach of past governments. The aforementioned abolition of the post of Middle East minister in February 2022 comes to mind. But the recent war has caused unprecedented damage to the country's reputation in the Muslim world.

Days after the Hamas-led attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, with Israel's war in Gaza underway, Martin Griffiths, under-secretary general at the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said: *"My message to all sides is unequivocal: The laws of war must be upheld. Those held captive must be treated humanely. Hostages must be released without delay. Throughout hostilities, civilians and civilian infrastructure must be protected. Civilians must be allowed to leave for safer areas. And humanitarian relief and vital services and supplies to Gaza must not be blocked. The whole region is at a tipping point. The violence must stop."*

His statement stood in stark contrast to the full-throated backing the United States gave to Israel. Importantly, it was markedly different to Britain's approach too. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak offered Israel Britain's "unequivocal" support. On 18 October, Britain was the only country apart from Russia to abstain on the UN resolution calling for "humanitarian pauses". The US vetoed the resolution. That same month Britain also deployed a naval task force to support Israel.

All this placed Britain in lockstep with the US but at odds with the policies of its Muslim allies, especially the major powers. For example, Saudi Arabia has announced it would have no diplomatic relations with Israel until an independent Palestinian state is established and Israel withdraws from Gaza. Qatar, meanwhile, has accused Israel of genocide and pushed for a ceasefire through brokering negotiations between Israel and Hamas. Turkey has strongly condemned Israel's war without cutting ties to the country, pushing for a deal aiming at a two-state solution and a guarantorship model to safeguard any deal.

A delegation of foreign ministers belonging to various Muslim countries (Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Nigeria, the Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) was set up in November to tour the five permanent United Nations Security Council member states, including Britain, to push for a ceasefire. In Britain, they were unsuccessful. Evidently, Britain's support for Israel's war has put it at odds with important allies in the Muslim world.

Damage to Britain's reputation in the Muslim world

There is serious evidence that Britain's unconditional backing for Israel in its war in Gaza is causing severe damage to its international reputation. This was argued by Lord David Cameron, Britain's own foreign secretary, shortly after he took the position in November 2023. Two journalists at Middle East Eye wrote on 28 November: *"Privately, we have been told that Cameron warns of the deep damage being done to Britain's international reputation, especially with Arab governments, by the blank cheque handed to Netanyahu on Sunak's visit to Israel last month."*

On 18 October, a report in the Financial Times stated that officials for Western countries had been accused of hypocrisy by developing nations over support for Israel and condemnation of Russia's war in Ukraine. The report also quoted an unnamed senior G7 diplomat who said: *"We have definitely lost the battle in the Global South… All the work we have done with the Global South [over Ukraine] has been lost . . . Forget about rules, forget about world order. They won't ever listen to us again."*

An Arab official reportedly told Western officials: *"If you describe cutting off water, food and electricity in Ukraine as a war crime, then you should say the same thing about Gaza"*. Notably, when questioned by Alicia Kearns in a Liaison Committee on whether he would describe Israel's actions in Gaza as war crimes, given the precedent set by his colleagues' comments on similar atrocities in Syria and Ukraine, Prime Minister Sunak refused to do so. Meanwhile, a senior European Union official described Israel's war as a *"gift from heaven for Russia"*.

According to the Guardian, diplomats from Arab countries in London said in November 2023 that they felt excluded from the Foreign Office, criticising what they saw as the perception among UK ministers that normalisation between Israel and Arab states is an alternative to the Palestinian issue.

US diplomats in foreign capitals reportedly warned that same month that opinion is turning against the West among elites in non-Western countries.

David Hearst, Editor-in-Chief of UK-based Middle East Eye, wrote in November: "US diplomats and intelligence chiefs are experiencing bruising encounters with their Arab and Turkish counterparts on their regional tours." They were being told that the US's "support for this war is shredding its image in the Muslim world". It follows that since British policy has largely aligned with US policy, the damage is to Britain's reputation too.

On 14 December 2023, Peter Oborne - former chief political commentator of The Daily Telegraph and current associate editor of Middle East Eye - reported from the Doha Forum, which drew policy makers from across the world to Qatar's capital, that it was "impossible to miss the sense of disgust bordering on hostility towards the United States." He said that the Jordanian foreign minister Ayman Safadi described himself as "extremely disappointed" by US support for Israel's war, and that everyone he spoke to in Doha "agreed that the Americans can no longer be trusted to take the mediating role in handling peace talks, though there was no agreement of what or who would replace the US."

Potential implications

There is a considerable risk that anger among the governments of Muslim countries over Britain's support for Israel could lead to a long-term, and even permanent, loss of international credibility and soft power.

This has been argued extensively by experts. In November 2023, Dr Andreas Krieg, a senior lecturer at King's College London and a fellow at the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies, told The New Arab: "The West is isolating itself increasingly in this global war over narratives and this global competition over narratives… We don't understand yet what the complete damage is, but it will be considerable because now every single time we call out Russia in Ukraine, they will tell us, 'Yes, but Gaza,'... That is something that will undermine the legitimacy and the credibility of the US in particular for generations to come."

David Hearst, wrote that same month that Israel's war has been a disaster for US President Joe Biden's foreign policy. He wrote that Israel's war "wrecked [Biden's] strategic military withdrawal from the region, the Abraham Accords, and much of his authority in the Muslim world and the Global South." With the weakening of the US's authority comes the damaging of Britain's position.

In December, Peter Oborne argued that Israel's war was a "gift" to Russia, rescuing it "from opprobrium over Ukraine in the same way that the British-French-Israeli invasion rescued Russia from global ignominy over Hungary in 1956." He added that China is also taking advantage of the situation.

Likewise, a report for Foreign Policy in January 2024 claimed that "China has focused on harnessing the widening divide between Washington's and the global south's stances on the war to boost Beijing's own foreign-policy ambitions."

The British foreign secretary's suggestion in January that Britain could potentially recognise a Palestinian state "when the time is right" does not seem to have changed international perceptions of Britain's role, since the country continues to back Israel's war. Moreover, most Muslim countries already recognise a Palestinian state.

Furthermore, Western backing seems to have encouraged Israel to pursue its war in Gaza in a way that has undermined its objective of defeating Hamas. Prior to 7th October, support for Hamas in Gaza was extremely low, but the aggressive response from Israel may prove to be the catalyst for renewed support. Such a scenario, in which there is mass popular support for the violent tactics employed by Hamas puts the prospect of peace in greater peril.

Charting a new course

In his Lancaster House speech, the Secretary of State for Defence, Grant Shapps, emphasised the renewed threat the West faces of large-scale global conflict with an Eastern bloc led by China and Russia, acting in a "no limits partnership". The Middle-East, therefore, is an intermediate zone in which both sides are vying for influence.

Despite his acknowledgement of this fact, it appears that continuation of Britain's unequivocal support for Israel is making conflict more likely for Britain, and weakening it in precisely this region. The past few months have seen mobilisation of the RAF in the form of multiple flights from the Akrotiri base in Cyprus to Israel, for as yet undisclosed reasons, though likely relating to the war in Gaza. Similarly, despite Shapps' denials, the Gaza war is the most significant cause of the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea.

Aside from the question of Britain's strategic gains from participation in such conflicts, is the concern held by many about Britain's preparedness for major conflicts in the coming years. British military infrastructure requires upgrading and reinforcing, with current spending below 2.5% of GDP. This however comes amid demands for increased spending to realise domestic ambitions which reduces the likelihood of significant investment in military capability.

These facts raise questions about the need for a reassessment of British policy towards Israel. Indeed, commentators have raised similar concerns regarding the United States' policy in the region. Jon Hoffman of the Cato Institute, has criticised American foreign policy in the Middle East,

describing it as a failure, specifically as a result of the strategy it has pursued towards Israel and Saudi Arabia. He writes:

"The two crucial U.S. partners in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia, are liabilities to the United States, not assets […] they both consistently undermine U.S. interests and the values that the United States claims to stand for. Washington should fundamentally reorient its approach to both countries, moving from unconditional support to arm's-length relationships."

He went on to address the particular significance of the Palestinian desire for statehood as central objective for a successful new strategy in the region:

"the war in Gaza should demonstrate that trying to sidestep the future of the Palestinian people is a foolish strategy […]. It remains intimately tied to the broader aspirations of the Arab masses for genuine political, economic, and social freedom—and it is something that cannot be forcibly sidelined through frameworks such as the Abraham Accords.

U.S. support for the accords and Saudi-Israel normalization framework is based on the flawed underlying assumption that the United States and its partners are capable of forcibly upholding an illiberal regional order in the Middle East without incurring considerable political, human, and economic costs in the process. Providing Israel or Saudi Arabia with a U.S. security guarantee would amount to a catastrophic miscalculation with long-term ramifications for the United States."

Though Britain does not play the leadership role in the Middle East it once did, there is an opportunity to divert course and take on such a role once again. Britain's security interests are far more dependent upon regional stability, and good relations with Muslim nations, than those of its anglophone allies. A cautious approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict, committed to international law and focussed on securing a lasting peace between Israelis, Palestinians and the wider region, is of vital importance in maintaining Britain's international stature.