BREXIT, THE EU, AND RELATIONS WITH THE GCC STATES

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Executive Summary

Although the UK officially left the European Union as a member on 31 January 2020, a transition period is still in effect until 31 December 2020, so that the two sides can determine the framework for their future relationship. This transition period can also be used to clarify issues relating to the EU’s role as a foreign policy and security actor, as with the UK’s departure, the EU as a whole has lost one of its most important geopolitical members. One particular area in which it would be good for the UK and the EU to outline their common interests and agree on a coordinated approach forward would be with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Ties between the EU, the UK and the GCC are unlikely to shift significantly as a result of the UK no longer being part of the EU equation. Due to its long-standing historical ties, the UK will remain as primus inter pares among European powers when it comes to the role Europe plays in the Gulf region. The EU and the UK also continue to have shared interests and overlapping areas of mutual concern when it comes to the Gulf region, with the result that frameworks such as the E3 (the UK, France and Germany) will continue to be utilised when it comes to broader foreign policy issues. Potential tensions could arise on the economic and trade fronts as the UK will be keen to score some quick wins in a post-Brexit environment. But even here the competitive business approach of all EU member states is likely to prevail, meaning that bilateralism rather than multilateralism will remain the predominant framework when it comes to European economic ties to the GCC states.

While the UK will see its hands being less tied when it comes to its future political, security and economic relationships with the GCC states, the EU should ensure that close coordination between the UK and the EU prevails when it comes to the strategic region of the Gulf. Over the years, the UK has maintained a greater and more consistent level of policy dialogue with the GCC than the EU has, with the result that UK positions tend to be more attuned to the thinking in GCC capitals, thus leading to a greater convergence of views and policies. At the same time, the EU cannot shy away from promoting its own policy tools, including its ‘soft-power’ toolbox of promoting regional integration and cooperation. Competition is likely to be more intense on the economic and trade fronts, but an active UK push for preferential trade arrangements and access to the GCC states could also provide a new impetus for the long delayed project of an EU-GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA).
Introduction

On 31 January 2020, the United Kingdom officially ceased to be a member of the European Union. All contractual obligations between the EU and the UK, however, remain in place until 31 December 2020 when the negotiated transition period expires. During this time, the UK remains in the EU customs union, the EU’s common market and continues to be subject to all EU rules and legislation. In the meantime, the EU and the UK will engage in negotiations during the transition period to determine the framework of their future relationship, of which a free trade agreement between the two sides is the most central part.

The United Kingdom’s exit from the EU holds numerous wide-ranging political, economic and social consequences for the EU and the UK itself. At the same time, many worldwide partners, including trading partners and other allies, that engage with the EU and the UK on a regular basis will be impacted – and this also applies to the six countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Given the UK’s long historic relationship with the GCC member states and their strong partnership across the economic, diplomatic, defence and cultural spheres, the UK’s exit means that there exist repercussions for the GCC’s relations with both the EU and the UK. This includes, for example, the EU-GCC cooperation agreement in place since 1989 to which the UK will now no longer be party to.

In order to explore some of the implications, the Bussola Institute held a roundtable discussion at its Institute in March 2020, bringing together specialists and policy practitioners in a roundtable format. The discussion looked into whether the UK will soon emerge as a competitor to the EU, in terms of a potential free trade agreement with the GCC, or in other aspects of preferential treatment for both goods and services. Another aspect examined was how existing strategic relationships may evolve in the wake of Brexit and the potential consequences for the region’s wider relations with the EU and its individual member states. Finally the roundtable considered how Brexit may impact on the EU’s political relations with the Gulf states, particularly at a time of shifting political priorities and polarities.

This paper will follow up on those issues, explore the future relationships that may evolve between the triangle of the UK, the EU and the GCC and analyse how those relationships will look in the areas of politics and diplomacy, economics and trade, defence and security, as well as social and cultural ties. The precise trajectory of how ties evolve is of course subject to a great deal of
uncertainty. Yet, a similar degree of ambiguity exists in terms of how relations between the GCC states on the one hand and powers such as China, India, Russia and certainly the U.S.A. on the other hand evolve in the same period. As the Gulf region is undergoing a period of fundamental transition on all levels - geo-politically, geo-strategically and geo-economically - it is important not to view the impact of Brexit in isolation.

Whether the EU and the UK can resolve all their outstanding issues by the end of 2020 was questionable even prior to the developments surrounding the current COVID-19 crisis. With the current negotiations delayed as a result, an extension to the deadline appears likely. This would be particularly the case if negotiators feel that sufficient progress that would warrant continued talks is being made as the end of the year deadline approaches. Much of how the UK structures its foreign relations with outside powers, the GCC included, will depend on whether a deal is struck and how quickly this can be done. The EU’s chief negotiator Michael Barnier stated in March 2020 that “very serious divergences” will need to be overcome for a deal to be reached. Yet it is only when either a new deal is negotiated or a no deal scenario falls into place that the UK will have regained its complete and unrestricted sovereignty, a pre-condition, for example, to allow full free trade agreements with third parties.

This paper argues that GCC-EU-UK ties are unlikely to shift significantly as a result of the UK no longer being part of the EU equation. Some areas could witness increased competition, for example in trade relations where a UK conservative government will be keen to show some quick wins that would confirm that leaving the EU was the right choice. The levels of post-Brexit competition will thus certainly vary when it comes to the GCC but the fundamentals are unlikely to be significantly challenged.

Three main factors can be identified to support this assessment. Firstly, based on historical ties the UK will retain its position as primus inter pares among European powers when it comes to the role Europe plays in the Gulf region. The leaderships of both the GCC states and the UK have clearly underscored their determination to maintain a strong and close relationship with one another. Brexit does not fundamentally challenge the predominant position that the UK will continue to play in Gulf affairs as far as European countries are concerned.

Secondly, as far as wider political and strategic issues are concerned the EU and the UK will continue to have shared interests and overlapping areas of mutual concern when it comes to the Gulf region. Each sees many of the issues and their associated challenges as far as the Gulf is concerned through a similar lens. With those common perceptions in mind, the EU and UK are likely to coordinate their policies instead of emerging as geopolitical rivals in this part of the world.

Thirdly, on the economic and trade front the competitive business approach that has characterised the dichotomy of the EU’s bilateral vs. multilateral approach will also continue. As has been the case in the past, individual EU member states as well as the UK will pursue their commercial interests in the Gulf region largely in competition with one another rather than from a common approach perspective. Similarly, the GCC states will maintain their preferred mechanism of bilateral relations, dealing with European states individually rather than collectively. Taken together, it can therefore be argued that the UK’s separation from the EU could be far less disruptive in terms of relations with the GCC states than might have been initially feared.

What will be more important than how the UK structures its ties to the GCC states in the post-Brexit era will be how the UK and the EU manage their relations when it comes to the changing security paradigm that is emerging in the Gulf region. In order to promote common objectives of regional development, the EU and the UK must work closely together to ensure that their policies are aligned and that they are able to respond effectively to the challenges facing the Gulf region.

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security and stability, the key will be the close coordination between the EU and the UK to ensure that their policy approaches do not work at cross-purposes to one another. Here competing initiatives are more likely to cancel each other out rather than promote Europe with a greater voice in regional affairs.

Of equal relevance will be finding new mechanisms that reflect and accommodate the growing role the GCC states themselves play as foreign and security policy actors in the Gulf, in the wider Middle East and beyond. While the GCC states certainly see both the UK and Europe as elements important to their own security, they are also ready to engage with other actors in the search for stable and reliable partnerships. The growing uncertainty about the future direction of the United States has already resulted in more of an eastward orientation of the GCC towards Asian powers, including China, India, Japan and South Korea. This is not a rebuff to the West but more of an examination of where Asia, as a whole, offers solutions and alternative approaches. It is in this broader framework where it is in the UK's and the EU's interests to maintain close coordination when it comes to the Gulf, something that the GCC states themselves could also emphasise in their own bilateral discussions with both partners.

**Less Disruption, More Continuity**

This paper will analyse primarily how the future approach of the UK towards the Gulf region could evolve as the disengagement process with the EU formalises. One argument is that while there are certainly risks of greater competition between the EU and the UK when it comes to the Gulf region, Brexit also allows for new opportunities, given that the UK will have greater flexibility to make decisions in terms of its foreign and security policy outside rather than inside the EU. This independence could complement the EU's policy in the Gulf, if managed and coordinated properly between all parties. Brexit, however, could lead to policies that contrast sharply with those advocated by the EU and the UK, not operating within the EU institutional framework, could also weaken the political and diplomatic leverage of both actors. The key will be to strike the right balance. In that context, Brexit is a chance to outline how future UK/EU ties could be structured when it comes to the Gulf, to ensure degrees of complementarity that take advantage of Europe's potential role as a geostrategic actor.
Much of the impact of Brexit will of course also depend on how Europe itself responds, both the individual EU member states and the EU as an institution. From the GCC perspective, the EU is at the moment not a significant geopolitical factor when it comes to the larger strategic issues in the region. With the Gulf and broader Middle East security environment very much in flux, the GCC states cannot afford to wait until the EU decides to act or have an impact. As a result, the current uncertainty about the EU’s readiness to commit resources to ensure greater regional stability tends to favour a more prominent role for the UK in the coming years, given the latter’s long-standing relations in the region and the fact that it brings both soft and hard power to the table. Yet, as has been mentioned in discussions in the GCC, the UK’s footprint in the region is not as prominent as it once was.2 Greater UK-EU convergence could therefore overcome existing deficits.

At the outset, what needs to be recognised is that, within the framework of European policies towards the Gulf region, UK-GCC relations will remain the core component. British involvement and cooperation with the region stretch back more than 200 years. This includes the 1798 treaty with Oman, the 1820 treaty with the Trucial States (what became the UAE and Bahrain), the Treaty of Darin of 1915 between the UK and Abdulaziz Al-Saud, then the ruler of the Najid and Hasa, and the 1916 Anglo-Qatari treaty. The UK further played the key role in guiding many of the GCC states toward their independence in the 1960s and 1970s. No other European country has had the kind of historical ties to the Gulf that the UK puts forward.

With the withdrawal from the territories ‘East of Suez’ announced in 1968, the UK’s predominant role in the Gulf was gradually replaced by that of the United States. Nevertheless, the UK’s ties to the ruling families in the Gulf and to their societies has remained persistently strong across many levels of engagement. There continues to exist a significant element of continuity at play here that cannot be underestimated. With the USA currently in the process of reassessing its own role in the Gulf region following the mounting costs, both financially and politically, of the invasion and occupation of both Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively, the UK has concurrently started to re-assess the scope of its own policy approach. A revised Gulf strategy from 2015 put forward the UK’s objective to revitalise effectively its engagement with the GCC states, including highlighting the importance that the UK places on the continued security of the GCC states and the relevance of having wide relations with each of these countries. This was underlined in the speech by Prime Minister Theresa May to the GCC states in December 2016 when she stated that the UK’s ambition was to “not just offer a message of continuity, but to begin to build a bold new chapter in our co-operation; not to develop a transactional relationship but rather to forge a strategic relationship.”

The direct result was the establishment of a GCC-UK Strategic Partnership which held its first meeting in December 2016, alongside a GCC-UK Joint Action Plan of specific policy actions to be implemented. The joint communique from the first summit meeting highlighted the intention “to foster closer relations in all fields, including political, defence, security and trade as well as enhancing people-to-people contact, and developing collective approaches to regional issues to advance their shared interest in stability and prosperity.” The two sides also underlined their “unequivocal commitment to secure, through the new GCC-UK Strategic Partnership, their shared security interests in the Gulf region, including to deter and respond to external aggression.”

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2 Discussion with senior GCC official, December 2019.
This revised Gulf strategy was accompanied by the UK’s effort to solidify the many other institutional ties to the GCC states already in existence. Examples include the 8th Joint GCC-UK Cooperation Committee held in April 2019; the UK-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council of March 2018, which included a first UK-Saudi Energy and Industry Dialogue; and the 19th meeting of UAE-UK Task Force held in February 2020. In the communique from this task force meeting, the UAE and the UK “firmly committed to pursuing advanced prospects for cooperation in key sectors” such as peace and stability; security and crime; trade and investment; climate change; and cultural collaboration as well as women’s and girl’s empowerment.5

By taking the initiative to streamline its approach to the GCC states, the UK has taken the lead in defining its strategic posture in a post-Brexit environment. How this might further evolve and what the impact could be on the broader UK-EU-GCC relationship can be analysed by focusing on four main categories of interaction: the political realm, economic and trade issues, strategic and defence ties, and the cultural and societal domains.

**Politics and Diplomacy:** Politically, UK-GCC relations are likely to remain strong and well-developed. The UK has always dealt with the region from a long-term perspective, understanding that Gulf royal families do not simply represent four-year governments in place. The UK’s approach is that the GCC governments are going to be here for a long time and as such they require long-term guarantees if successful relationships are to be built and to last.

Outside the EU’s umbrella, the UK is set to expand its engagement with the ruling governments of the GCC with a degree of commitment that the EU finds more difficult to pursue. The current ties with Saudi Arabia are a case in point. Here, and despite the fallout from the Jamal Khashoggi affair, the UK’s high-level interaction with the Saudi leadership continues, probably in a more consistent and stronger manner than any other European country has with Saudi Arabia. The underlying message from the March 2020 meeting in Riyadh between Dominic Raab, the UK’s foreign minister, and Saudi Arabia’s King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman was that the UK deals with Saudi Arabia as a whole and not just with the Crown Prince. Given the widespread reaction inside the EU towards the Khashoggi fallout and the level of attention that is being paid to the issue of human rights throughout the GCC states, for example by institutions like the European Parliament, the EU finds it difficult to pursue such a policy course. This is not to say that

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concerns over human rights practices or the course of domestic politics within the GCC states do not exist on the UK side. It simply highlights the fact that the UK tries to combine both a realpolitik and a normative approach when it comes to its GCC allies.

In general the UK tends to be more drawn into discussions with GCC leaders on issues that play a role in the larger context of the Middle East, including developments pertaining, for example, to Yemen, Syria and Egypt. In each of these cases, the UK has maintained a greater and more consistent level of policy dialogue with the GCC than the EU has done over the years. The result is that UK positions tend to be more attuned to the thinking in GCC capitals, thus leading to a greater convergence of views and policies. Within the GCC, the UK is likely to explore more consistently whether there exists a potential space for mediation in the current crisis over Qatar and how UK efforts could better support the initiatives pursued by Kuwait, for example, to bring the GCC rift to a resolution. The UK’s role as an effective interlocutor when it comes to issues of concern is seen within GCC capitals as simply being more attuned to present realities than a similar role potentially being played by the EU.

At the same time, the UK and the EU share many of the assessments when it comes to developments in the Gulf and Middle East regions. A regular dialogue with the UK within the EU’s own policy approach to the Gulf and Middle East is therefore one policy instrument that could ensure that both the UK and the EU maintain similar analyses. Continued coordination should also be of interest to the UK, as the EU still has significant policy roles it is playing in its southern neighbourhood. For example, the UK will no longer be part of the EU delegation when it comes to the Middle East Quartet on the Peace Process and the EU will continue to be the key contributor to development aid that plays a role in much of the Middle East.

Another critical role for the UK could emerge in terms of transatlantic relations. While on the surface, Brexit could lead to the UK losing some influence around the world, also due to the fact that at times there is an underappreciation of the diplomatic cover that the EU provides, London could play a critical part in trying to bridge increased US-European discord when it comes to a region like the Gulf. By managing the balancing act between the two approaches skilfully, the UK could pursue an independent approach that reflects the state of security in the Gulf and the range of views held by the other stakeholders in these equations. By taking on such a bridging function, the UK would further avoid becoming caught in the middle of pendulum swings, with neither the US nor the EU taking UK considerations and interests seriously.

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Much of course will depend on the amount of investment the EU makes in the UK’s diplomatic capabilities and if it sees these as positive multipliers to advance common policy objectives, instead of seeing them as initiatives with which to compete. To ensure that its own interests in the Gulf region remain reflected in the policy debates, the EU should see Brexit as an opportunity through which it can combine the need for coordinated approaches with the UK, when common interests overlap, and to promote EU initiatives that add value to European policy as a whole. For example, the EU must not underestimate the importance of its ‘soft power’ especially in terms of promoting regional integration and cooperation. The EU is still viewed as an accepted actor by all parties in the region, including Iran. In Yemen, the EU plays a critical role in advancing the work of the UN Special Envoy to bring about a peace settlement in the ongoing conflict. The EU should also ensure that the GCC states do not find themselves confronted by a myriad set of European policies from which they would have to choose. In this context, Brexit can also be used in the formation of an integrated strategy towards the Gulf region, instead of one compartmentalised between the GCC states, Iran, Iraq and Yemen. 

**Economics, Trade and Investment:** The GCC states see Europe more as an economic rather than as a strategic player. As a result this is the area where the greatest impact of Brexit will most likely be felt. It is also the arena in which the UK’s departure from the EU has the most direct consequences, when the UK regains its status as an independent trading partner. If Gulf relations are to become a potential area of competition between the EU and the UK, it will likely appear first in the economic sector.

In 2019 the UK already undertook an effort to establish 20 new bilateral continuity trade agreements covering 50 countries or territories. While the GCC states have so far not been covered in this initiative, former Prime Minister Theresa May stated in December 2016: “As the UK leaves the EU, we should seize the opportunity to forge a new trade arrangement between the UK and the Gulf. This could transform the way we do business and lock in a new level of prosperity for our people for generations to come.” Similarly, the communique of the GCC-UK Strategic Partnership meeting stated: “We will make it a priority, when the UK leaves the European Union, to build the closest possible commercial and economic relationship … to promote actively GCC-UK economic engagement beyond current levels.”

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8 Gulf Co-operation Council – United Kingdom, first summit 6 to 7 December 2016, Kingdom of Bahrain, Joint Communique, ibid.
The total trade balance between the EU and the GCC states in 2019 amounted to €121.26 billion.9 Within this balance, the UK is particularly important, comprising more than one-third of all of the EU’s trade volume with the GCC states - a total of €44.5 billion in 2019. The GCC is the UK’s 4th largest EU export market and 80% of all UK trade in the Middle East is done with the GCC countries. The UAE alone is the UK’s largest export market in the Middle East and its 13th biggest globally. Excluding direct trade, the GCC states are significant investors into the UK, with Gulf investments having played key roles in regenerating UK cities.10 Thousands of UK companies are active in the GCC economics, including being deeply integrated in the region’s energy business. Taken together, there is an inherent interest to keep economic ties stable to safeguard those arrangements.

As the UK is keen to show tangible advantages as a result of Brexit, London is determined to promote a range of policy initiatives aimed at strengthening UK-GCC economic ties. One emphasis will be to ensure that present investments are not adversely affected by the UK’s departure from the EU, while undertaking additional efforts to secure future investments in the UK rather than in the EU. Qatar, for example, has pledged to invest about £5 billion over a two-and-a-half-year period, starting in 2018. A second area will be to encourage private sector growth, with both the UK and the GCC promoting the potential for continued strong ties and lucrative commercial contracts. A particular focus of the UK is given to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 economic diversification programme. To position itself, the UK has named a Special Representative within the UK’s Foreign Office dedicated to Vision 2030 as well as naming special envoys in the areas of education and health to explore opportunities.11 Saudi Arabia is seen as a pioneer investment partner for the UK. The UK is also paying specific attention to Saudi Arabia’s presidency of the G20.

A potential area of competition revolves around the pursuit of the UK to try to conclude a free trade area deal either with the GCC as a whole or with individual GCC states. The UK has already indicated that it is keen to sign an FTA with the GCC states, for the simple reason that this will show the UK’s ability to put together new economic arrangements with key partner countries in a post-Brexit environment.12 For this reason, a dedicated UK Export Finance team was established in the UAE in 2018 and a joint working group has been established to remove trade barriers.13

Nevertheless there are several hurdles that present themselves. One is the ability of the UK to conclude such a trade arrangement while its own future trade relationship with the EU remains unclear. Before entering into new trade deals, the UK-EU issue has to be resolved at the outset. A second issue is whether the UK conducts negotiations with the GCC as a whole or with individual GCC countries. On this the UK will confront the same difficulties as the EU currently does in its multilateral relations with the GCC. As a supplement to relations at the GCC-EU level, the EU has begun to institute bilateral cooperation agreements with individual GCC states. As of April 2020, bilateral arrangements have been enacted with Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the UAE. With bilateralism the preferred avenue for GCC states, the UK could decide to pursue a similar path and try to conclude agreements quickly with individual GCC states. The third obstacle is that comprehensive trade deals are not easy to conclude. The EU-GCC relationship is often characterized as a failure, given the fact that the two sides have negotiated an FTA without these

13 “Will Brexit boost UK and GCC trade relations,” Euronews, 21 February 2020,
The potential discord over economic competition between the EU and the UK for GCC trade arrangements and business ties should nevertheless not be overvalued. Such competition has always existed, as EU member states have preferred bilateral ties to maximize their commercial advantages vis-à-vis one another. Whether in terms of defence sales, service contracts in the energy sector or gaining lucrative contracts tied to the GCC’s diversification programmes, European companies compete with one another, just as they would with other non-European entities. The GCC states can only benefit from such continued competition as it provides greater choice and better value.

The likelihood of the UK pursuing preferential trade arrangements with the GCC states should move the EU to give its own goal of an EU-GCC FTA new impetus. The two sides came very close to bringing their negotiations successfully to a close in 2007, with only the issue of export duties preventing a final agreement. As a result, active continued negotiations have been interrupted since 2008. The EU must expect that the UK will be actively push for greater economic leverage and trade access in the Gulf and as such it should pick up on signals from the GCC states that indicate a renewed interest in a multilateral trade deal. Similarly, the EU and its member states should maintain and expand their talks with the GCC’s various Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF) when it comes to GCC investment in the EU and vice versa.

“...who would welcome continued UK involvement and be deterred by any signals that the UK is about to pursue a more inward-looking strategy.”

16 Author discussions with GCC officials and others with knowledge of the status of talks.
17 Author discussion with senior GCC official, June 2019.
Security and Defence: The area of security and defence is of central importance to the UK, given that the UK sees security guarantees as the backbone of its policy approach to the region. Equally the GCC states are keen to maintain strong defence and security ties because of the historical ties in this field to the UK and the fact that the UK is a member of both the UN Security Council and NATO. Defence deals are further seen as critical to the UK economy. In 2018 British defence exports to the Middle East amounted to £11.2 billion, with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE in the lead.

As mentioned above, even prior to Brexit the UK expanded its defence relationship and posture in the Gulf. The National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015 specifically stated that the UK would “build a permanent and more substantial UK military presence to reflect our historic relationships, the long-term nature of both challenges and opportunities and to reassure our Gulf allies.” This resulted in the establishment of a new naval base in Bahrain, HMS Jufair, to support Royal Navy deployments in the region, as well as the positioning of new British Defence Staff in the Middle East able to provide a better regional defence focus. Other steps have included a new military training base in Oman, inaugurated in 2019.

The GCC and the UK are also expanding their defence cooperation in other areas. A new joint working group on counter-terrorism and border security has been put into place, while training programmes on issues related to cyber security have been expanded significantly. There is also coordination on humanitarian operations and crisis response planning, underlining the broad defence relationship that is already in place. None of those features will undergo any changes when the UK formally leaves the EU umbrella. As a result, as far as military power projection capabilities are concerned, the UK will remain the preferred European partner for the GCC states, also due to the fact that projects like a European Defence Force remain very much in their initial planning phases.

Much of the trajectory of future UK-GCC defence ties is likely to be related to the direction of US-GCC relations in the larger geo-strategic picture that is emerging in the Gulf region. The main question mark for policy officials in London is the same one that also confronts officials in the EU and the GCC states – what will the nature of the future role of the United States be when it comes to the broader picture of Gulf security?

There is a prevailing view in Washington that the Middle East is becoming less important in terms of the overall strategic landscape and that greater attention must be given to other issues, primarily to implications of a rising China. While Iran and the security of Israel continue to be issues of high relevance and deep concern for the U.S. policy establishment, it is unclear how the unpredictability of the American foreign policy direction, evident in particular under the present Trump administration, impacts UK interests and larger European partnerships with the GCC states. President Trump has alternated between continued forms of engagement and direct references to wider disengagement, for example the US non-response to the attack on the Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in October 2019.

If the U.S.A. does indeed pursue a policy of slow disengagement from the Gulf, the question is how the UK and Europe can step up their engagements to fill any resulting vacuum. This is critical, as the GCC states see themselves confronted by increased concerns about how the future stability of their region can be secured. From a GCC perspective, an uncertain US sense of commitment alongside combined unease about potential roles being played by China, Russia or India are deeply unsettling.

One option in dealing with the question of Gulf security would be for the EU and the UK to continue to work in frameworks such as the E3 architecture of the UK, France and Germany. As stated, there are numerous common positions that the E3 holds when it comes to the Gulf. One particular issue is the nuclear agreement with Iran, the JCPOA. In their statement of 14 January 2020, the E3 foreign ministers expressed their “commitment to the JCPOA and our determination to work with all participants to preserve it,” while underscoring that the JCPOA remains “a key achievement of multilateral diplomacy and the global non-proliferation architecture.”

convinced that the E3 mechanism is still the best way to pursue engagement with Iran, rather than the maximum pressure approach of the U.S.A. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has called on President Trump to come up with the U.S.A.’s own proposal for a new arrangement, given that his administration does not like what is currently on the table.23

Working within the E3 framework does not mean that the U.S.A. is excluded. France and the UK, foremost, and sometimes Germany, are the European states that have the most leverage in terms of deployable hard power in the Gulf, and it is these countries that could lead a debate which reflects US concerns but also promotes a slightly different agenda. The JCPOA is one primary example as there are continuing efforts to promote a working relationship with Iran that at the same time incorporates the security priorities of the GCC states.

The E3 framework is at the same time applicable to other complex issues such as counter-terrorism, in which the UK’s involvement in European networks and access to databases such as Europol continue to be critical.

A tacit agreement between the UK and US – that, as the US starts to retrench militarily, the British step up their engagement in the Gulf – is another option. Overall, closer US-UK arrangements are preferable for the GCC countries. Another option would be for the UK to hold discussions with the US over Washington’s proposal of May 2017 for the establishment of a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), composed of the U.S.A., the GCC states, Egypt and Jordan. Further talks could be held about the future of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) of NATO, which four GCC states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE – are parties to.

What should be avoided are multiple competing initiatives that duplicate efforts or cancel each other out. Such a situation was highlighted by the proposed maritime missions put in place in response to the Iranian attacks on international shipping in the Gulf waters in late 2019. While the UK joined the US’s maritime mission, after its own tankers were attacked, a similar European maritime mission led by France was also initiated. How these two initiatives function in parallel to one another still remains unclear.

It is important to understand that the UK’s strategic objectives, when it comes to the GCC, Iran or the greater Middle East, will not change as a result of Brexit.24 Yet unlike the period prior to 1968, the UK is no longer in a position to secure the Gulf region on its own. In addition to the still predominant role of the United States, external powers such as China and Russia have increased their roles as part of the shift to a more multipolar environment when it comes to Gulf security. In that context, closer UK-EU coordination is required in order to secure European common interests, vis-à-vis their GCC allies and the wider international community.

For its part, the EU will need to work closely with the UK when it comes to implementing its policy of de-escalation in the tense Gulf security environment. In January 2020 the European Council extended a mandate to the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell “to carry out diplomatic efforts with all parties to contribute to de-escalation in the region, support political dialogue and promote a political regional solution.”25 In February 2020, the E3 also activated the disputes resolution mechanism of the JCPOA, in effect charging the EU’s High Representative, as Coordinator of the Joint Commission of the nuclear deal, with resolving the

issue. On both fronts, an active EU role in promoting regional diplomacy and EU ideas about conflict resolution, while keeping all parties engaged in dialogue, is critical in preventing a further escalation of violence in the Gulf region. While close cooperation with the UK is important to gain greater leverage, the EU must also be ready to engage separately as required.

**Culture and Society:** Outside the political, economic and defence fields, the UK is likely to continue to enjoy an advantage as far as societal ties and cultural relationships are concerned. This includes a wide range of people-to-people networks, particularly elite ties that revolve around the UK’s Royal Family, as well as extensive relations in the areas of education, media and culture. Many of the GCC’s ruling elite are graduates of the UK education system, including the military academies. King Hamad of Bahrain, Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed and Emir Tamim of Qatar are all graduates of the Sandhurst military academy, as was the late Sultan Qaboos of Oman. Prince Charles and the Duke of Cambridge on the UK side consistently speak out strongly in favour of strengthening engagements with the GCC countries.

Currently there are 175,000 UK nationals living in the GCC states, while 20,000 GCC students come to the UK in pursuit of their education. In the important field of tourism, the UK also ranks above visitor flows from other European countries. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the expectation was that UK visits to the GCC states would increase by 22% by 2024, reaching 2.8 million visitors. As the GCC states will be keen to revive their tourism sector once the post-COVID-19 situation stabilises, the UK will be seen as a major contributor to that effort. While the UAE’s EXPO is now expected to take place one year later, from October 2021 to the spring of 2022, the UK has continually stressed its commitment to the success of this showcase event. Finally there is the extensive GCC investment in UK sporting leagues, primarily the Premier League of football clubs. Saudi Arabia’s recent announcement of wanting to buy into Newcastle United football club is just the latest example on this front.

Taken together these create a platform on which a whole host of engagements have been built. Through these networks, the UK is continually able to reassure Gulf elites not only of the relevance of its hard power guarantees but also to engage effectively and constantly along multiple lines of education, people and business relationships. Already 32 percent of GCC imports from the UK are

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in services, largely dominated by the health and education sectors.

Similar to the wider economic front, the UK will be keen to expand its existing cultural and social ties with the GCC states. With its historical networks in place, the direct impact of Brexit is unlikely to change the equation significantly. Yet, as creating and expanding various people-to-people networks is also an established aim of the EU, this area is bound to be one of parallel expansion rather than outright competition. In line with UK initiatives in this area, the EU should also continue its efforts on focusing on education and capacity-building, to enable societal and state actors in the GCC to deliver the building blocks for better regional integration and cooperation. For example greater emphasis must be given to heighten the visibility of the GCC’s eligibility to the EU’s Erasmus Mundus Scholarship Programme for higher education study in the EU. Similarly the EU can engage with civil actors and organisations in the region to support wider people-to-people networks and cultural exchanges. Taken as a whole, the field of culture of society benefits from having more rather than fewer initiatives.

**Conclusion**

Politics, economics, defence and culture are core areas around which the UK’s future relationship with the GCC states will be structured in the immediate post-Brexit years. An important component over the coming period is the level of conversation that the UK will have with its Gulf allies about what the current and future engagement of the UK in the Gulf could look like. Here the UK is very much in the driving seat as far as the direction of its near-term ties are concerned. Equally the UK’s role in the Gulf region will also be determined by the degree to which the UK and the EU can coordinate their policies when it comes to key issues of concern in Gulf affairs. For the EU, it should be clear that it will not be able to supplant the more established relationship that the UK has with the Gulf states. At the same time the EU also has its own initiatives that it should continue to put forward and activate as needed. And while the competition between the EU and the UK, especially when it comes to economic ties to the GCC, could intensify in the coming years, maintaining a level of coordination between the EU and the UK will allow both sides to play a more effective role in the region. From that perspective, Brexit does not have to result in a lessening of Europe’s influence in the Gulf and could fact portend a more positive future.