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# AN OVERDUE RECKONING

*British foreign policy in the Middle East has shifted decisively from a long period of consensus to one of sharp contestation between an empire-2.0 right and a transformative left*

*By David Wearing*

**I**n 2015, a senior-serving general in the British military told the *Sunday Times* that there could be “a mutiny” if the Labour Party were to win power under its newly chosen leader, Jeremy Corbyn. “The general staff would not allow a prime minister to jeopardize the security of this country and I think people would use whatever means possible, fair or foul, to prevent that. You can’t put a maverick in charge of a country’s security,” said the general.

At the time, few envisaged that Corbyn—a veteran socialist, anti-militarist, and supporter of Global South liberation struggles like that of the Palestinians—had any serious chance of moving into 10 Downing Street, and the general’s remarks were quickly forgotten. But in 2017, when Prime Minister Theresa May called an election fully expecting to crush Corbyn’s Labour and secure herself an unassailable mandate, the opposition confounded expert predictions. Labour surged from the mid-20s to poll 40 percent in the final vote, winning more individual votes than former Prime Minister Tony Blair had in two of his three election wins, and leaving May clinging to power by her fingertips, a permanently diminished figure. One year on, Labour and the Conservatives are polling neck and neck, the government is deeply divided over Brexit, and Corbyn becoming prime minister—the general’s nightmare scenario—is an entirely realistic prospect.

The coming departure from the European Union, in other words, is not the only major change on the horizon for British foreign relations. British politics have shifted decisively from a long period of consensus to one of sharp contestation, with two very different visions of the country and Britain’s foreign policy poised on a knife edge. Whichever one of these visions prevails over the short or long term will take the United Kingdom’s (UK) place in the world into uncharted territory, a development which should be understood in the historical context of Britain’s long-term decline as a global power and its struggles to adapt to that reality.

◀ People protest the war in Syria outside Westminster’s parliamentary buildings, London, Dec. 2, 2015. *Guy Corbishley/Alamy Live News*

This matters for international relations with the Middle East. The fact that Britain has lost its empire and does not have the sheer stature and structural power of the United States does not mean that it is an insignificant player. Far from it. The UK has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, is one of a tiny elite of nuclear armed states, and one of an even smaller elite capable of projecting military power on an intercontinental basis. It also ranks as a major international arms dealer, especially to the Middle East, where it trains and supports many of the region's security forces. It is difficult to think of a single armed conflict in the region's recent history where the UK was not either involved itself or a major material supporter of one of the belligerents.

Additionally, Britain has the world's fifth-largest economy, is home to the world's leading financial center, and is a leading source of, and destination for, capital investment to and from the Middle East. Two of Britain's (and the world's) largest corporations, British Petroleum (BP) and Shell, have a long history of involvement in the region's hydrocarbon industry. Diplomatically, militarily, and economically, the UK is deeply involved in the Middle East, where the outcome of its current political impasse, and resulting choice of future direction, is bound to have important knock-on effects.

Britain's relations with the Middle East are best understood (primarily if not exclusively) as an outgrowth of its former role in the region as an imperial power

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for a century and a half, and with particular reference to the Gulf Arab monarchies. The UK has a strategic and commercial interest in Gulf hydrocarbons, an economic interest in various forms of petrodollar recycling (from financial inflows to arms sales), and a consequent diplomatic and military commitment to upholding the wider conservative regional order. Given the domestic political situation in Britain,

UK–Middle East relations now sit at a crossroads, making this a particularly interesting juncture from which to survey the situation.

### **Empire's Long Decline**

Britain's involvement in the Middle East substantively began in the early nineteenth century as it attempted to establish a buffer zone protecting its empire in India from rival powers. A network of protectorates was established in the Gulf, which developed into the subregional state system that we know today. Once oil was discovered, quickly becoming the lifeblood of the industrialized world economy, the value of the region—both as an economic prize and as a source of geostrategic power—was impossible to miss. Winston Churchill's decision in 1914 to take a controlling stake for the British government in the

Anglo-Persian Oil Company (the firm which later became BP) was the earliest expression of this new reality.

Victory in World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire allowed Britain, alongside France, to extend its reach deeper into the region, acting as imperial godfather in the formative years of the Iraqi and Jordanian states, while maintaining its grip on Egypt and the strategically vital Suez Canal, which now linked the UK not only to the Indian subcontinent but also to the oil reserves of Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf. The exertions of World War II, however, served final notice on the UK's status as a global empire, with the United States now dominating as the clear leader of the capitalist bloc. By the 1950s, with India lost, and a worldwide anti-colonial movement in the ascendency, the long process of imperial decline had begun.

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New circumstances dictated a new set of priorities. From here on, London would support U.S. global leadership, and attempt to hold on to as much of its political and economic power and status as possible, under that umbrella. These principles applied particularly to the Middle East, now a key site of geopolitical competition where Britain also had its own specific interests to attend to. Its control over Gulf oil made a significant, positive contribution to its precarious postwar balance of payments, in turn upholding the value and prestige of the pound sterling. It is these concerns that primarily explain the panic in Whitehall that led to the tripartite aggression of 1956 over the Suez Canal, through which so much of Britain's oil imports flowed at the time.

Independent nationalism, whether of the Nasserite variety or that found elsewhere in Iran, Iraq, Oman, and Yemen, was now the principal threat to Britain's standing in the region, as it successively lost military footholds in Egypt, Iraq, and Aden. Further currency crises in the 1960s led the then-Labour government of Harold Wilson to conclude that the issue of imperial overstretch would have to be confronted. The permanent military presence "east of Suez" would be relinquished as of January 1971, to the dismay of both the United States, which was too preoccupied with Vietnam to take on any additional geostrategic responsibilities on behalf of the capitalist West, and the Gulf states who were driven into a state of near-panic at the prospect of losing their protector from the nationalist tide.

The subsequent oil shocks of the 1970s transformed the standing of the Gulf oil producers, who now controlled their own oil industries and revenues, and set the scene for the establishment of the modern relationship between those

monarchies and the UK. Britain would continue to arm and train the military and security forces that kept these regimes in place, and stand ready to intervene directly against larger threats, as it did under U.S. leadership when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. Britain's capacity to play this role was supported in part by massive arms contracts with the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, which helped to sustain its domestic military industry. Petrodollars also flowed freely into the UK banking system as the neoliberal turn under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her successors tipped the balance of the British economy toward financial services and away from industrial exports.

This then is where Britain's relationship with the Middle East has stood in recent decades: focused primarily on the Gulf Arab monarchies, prioritizing the recycling of petrodollars into the British economy and military industry, and providing the arms, training, and support necessary to help preserve a conservative regional order both within the Gulf and in the wider regional state system, under U.S. leadership.

### **Britain and the Middle East in an Age of Crisis**

With the Soviet Union gone, Saddam Hussein's regime crippled, and Iran forced into isolation, the start of the twenty-first century looked promising for Anglo-American power in the Middle East. The last forces of independent nationalism were as weak as they had ever been, and the field was clear of any serious geopolitical rival. Now, looking back with almost two decades of hindsight, it is evident that the current state of uncertainty in British foreign relations owes a great deal to the way in which Washington and London spectacularly botched the unipolar moment in the Middle East at the turn of the millennium, starting with the invasion of Iraq.

The prize was clear: a client government and a permanent military presence at the heart of the world's energy-producing region, Iraq's oil reserves back into circulation on terms favorable to the United States and the UK (rather than

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Russia, China, and France), and perhaps above all, a demonstration of Washington's geopolitical omnipotence heralding the start of a "new American century." In the end, however, what was demonstrated was not the extent of Anglo-American power but its limits, and this was particularly true in the British case. Tasked with securing Basra province, the British singularly failed to impose themselves on the situation, just as they failed to discharge their allotted duties in

Afghanistan's Helmand province. Britain was trusted with delivering a part of the American strategy in both cases, and in both cases proved to be a military disappointment to its American allies.

The subsequent failure to secure a stable post-Gaddafi order in Libya after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention of 2011 meant that Washington and London had been unsuccessful in securing their objectives in three consecutive foreign interventions. The instability and violence left in the wake of these interventions—particularly in Iraq where the group that became the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) gestated in the post-Saddam state of chaos—only accentuated the loss of prestige and credibility for Anglo-American military power, generating public disquiet at home and thus raising the political cost of, and resistance to, any future interventions.

The impact on domestic politics was not only due to the experience of defeat, but the loss of moral authority suffered by Washington and London as a result of the way these interventions had been undertaken. From the palpable dishonesty over Iraq’s supposed “weapons of mass destruction” to the gruesome revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib, the image of Western power as a benign force for good in the world was coming under serious strain. In London, well over a million people had protested the invasion of Iraq in February 2003, and subsequent events proved devastating to Blair’s reputation. In 2015, Corbyn was able to win and secure the Labour leadership in part due to the credibility he had gained among party members for his prominent opposition to the conduct of the entire “War on Terror,” in contrast to the record of a party establishment now discredited in members’ eyes.

The bill came due in August 2013, when David Cameron’s government lost a House of Commons vote on taking direct military action against the Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria, a significant event in a chain that led to Barack Obama ultimately rejecting the option to intervene in that case. There had been no prospect of the United States and the UK effecting a regime change in any event, or even of substantively altering the balance of forces in the conflict, and yet the Commons vote prompted an outpouring of existential angst from many within the British political class. The Labour opposition’s vote against the war under the then-leader Ed Miliband, and the rebellion within the ranks of the Cameron government, had been prompted by the new mood of public skepticism over military endeavors in the Middle East. This, it was said, was a rejection of “internationalism” (which is what western imperialism looks like from a liberal point of view) and a turn to “isolationism.”

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This is the context within which we should understand the general’s threat to mutiny against a future Prime Minister Corbyn. The policies which he asserted “the army just wouldn’t stand for” included the scrapping of nuclear weapons,

withdrawal from NATO, and (employing a word choice which will fascinate specialists in gender studies) “any plans to emasculate and shrink the size of the armed forces.” The anxiety, expressed regularly by senior figures in and around the armed forces as well as their ideological bedfellows in Parliament, is that Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya have proven to be not only military but political disasters, turning significant numbers of the public decisively against Britain’s longstanding role of helping to police a global political and economic order conducive to the interests of the British state and British capitalism.

This anxiety is probably justified. The substantive rebooting of the British Labour Party, from the version led by Blair to the different version now contending for power, is in part a product of the military and foreign policy experiences of the past two decades. Yet, the domestic situation is perhaps the major factor behind both this and the polarized state of UK politics today.

### **The Polarization of British Politics**

Four decades after Thatcher oversaw the abandonment of the postwar social democratic economic model and its replacement with the modern neoliberal settlement, the long-term effects of that shift, intensified by a tough period of fiscal austerity after the 2008 financial crash, are driving a transformation in the British political scene. The current left-right polarization of British politics and the deadlock between two sharply opposed visions arises from a combination of this economic legacy, a generational change in social attitudes, and an intense debate about Britain’s place in the world covering—but by no means limited to—Brexit.

In economic terms, Britain is divided between those who own residential property and those with next to no chance of ever doing so; between those with secure employment and those without; and between those more and those less affected by stringent cutbacks in public spending. Because the effects on society of neoliberalism and then austerity deepen over time, the people most negatively affected by those policies tend to be the young, meaning that the economic divide maps on to a generational divide. Property owners in secure employment tend to be older, while those employed precariously and living in expensive, poor-quality rented properties tend to be younger. Furthermore, as social attitudes liberalize over time, we find that the younger and economically more insecure tend toward social liberalism while the older and economically better-off tend to retain more conservative attitudes.

These, speaking very broadly, are the defining features of Britain’s divided political landscape. Both income and age are extremely strong predictors of whether or not one votes Conservative or Labour, and those two parties have both achieved hegemony over their sides of the political spectrum. The seminal miscalculation made by the Liberal Democrats Party to go into coalition with

the Conservative government in 2010 destroyed their credibility among their liberal-left base, while the United Kingdom Independence Party ironically lost its *raison d'être* after the 2016 Brexit referendum.

Corbyn and May have seized the opportunities presented by these developments, and returned British politics to a two-party system, with Labour representing the youth and the younger middle-aged, the socially liberal and the economically insecure, and the Conservatives representing the older middle-aged and the elderly, the socially conservative and the economically comfortable. The current result is electoral deadlock, with the question being who can keep their coalition together and maximize their vote. The long term plainly favors Labour, but the crucial short term is up for grabs.

Foreign affairs and Britain's relationship with the rest of the world raise questions that also map on to these key domestic dividing lines. Conservative attacks on Corbyn essentially calling him an extremist and a traitor play well in the eyes of older and more conservative nationalistic voters, while Corbyn's anti-militarism and left-internationalism play better amongst the younger and more socially liberal. In terms of Brexit, while Labour has been hamstrung in its response by the fact that a substantial minority of its supporters in the country voted "Leave," the Brexit vote was overwhelmingly a vote from the political right. The clear majority of Brexit voters were middle-class property owners, predominantly in the south, and right-wing social attitudes such as opposition to multiculturalism, feminism, environmentalism, and LGBT rights were strongly correlated with the choice to vote Leave.

Membership of the European Union was always resented by the more chauvinistic nationalists of the right, representing as it did the loss of empire and a reorientation toward dealing with neighbors as peers, rather than acting as a dominant power. The urge to break from Europe and somehow reassert Britain's status as a freewheeling economic power—privately scorned by civil servants as "Empire 2.0"—is symptomatic of the British right's inability to cope with the UK's loss of status in the late twentieth century, just as "Make America Great Again" speaks to a domestic and nationalistic chauvinist backlash on the other side of the Atlantic. Corbyn's Labour, in contrast, represents another side of Britain—unencumbered by post-imperial status anxiety and happy to reject the military adventurism of the Blair years.

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### **Alternative Trajectories**

Where then might this all lead? No expert would make any predictions

confidently after the experiences of the past few years. That being said, in the short term at least—and depending on which way the deadlock breaks between now and the next election—two possible trajectories present themselves.

The first possible trajectory entails a Conservative government effecting a relatively “hard” Brexit in economic and diplomatic terms. This would in turn prompt a deepening of ties with the United States. Demands from Washington that Britain increase military spending (above already high levels) would be difficult to resist, as would the temptation to join any military actions in the Middle East or elsewhere so as to prove the enduring worth of the Anglo-American alliance. The ongoing and profound instability in the region—with the intense political-economic pressures that led to the uprisings in 2011 still very much present—means that opportunities to undertake such interventions are likely to be in ready supply. And if recent history is anything to go by, further failures will only intensify the drive to get it right next time and restore credibility (likely leading to further failure and further destabilization).

Meanwhile, any impediment to trade with the European Union is likely to have a severely detrimental impact on Britain’s balance of payments. Also, the

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Conservative government’s energetic efforts to deepen ties with the Gulf Arab monarchies reflects the fact that, in the Global South, serious foreign investment opportunities are not abundant beyond the BRICS states (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Gulf. Although Britain’s relationship with Gulf monarchies can be described as unbalanced interdependence, with the majority of power sitting rather more on the British side, Brexit would tie Britain closer to its Gulf allies which

in turn would strengthen the hand of those monarchies, leading to a deepening of British support over issues such as the Yemen conflict.

That being said, if the world gets serious about climate change and makes moves to ensure that a sizeable chunk of global hydrocarbon reserves are left in the ground, the well of petrodollars will soon dry up, and Brexit Britain will find itself running out of options. Similarly, if Donald Trump wins a second term and the hard-right turn in U.S. politics solidifies, close relations with Washington will become even more politically toxic for May and her successors than they were for Blair. The Tory “hard Brexit” path is likely to be both more interventionist militarily and more unstable.

Under an alternative scenario, a Labour government—taking power either in a few months’ time if the May administration falls, or in a few years—undertakes

a “softer” Brexit, formally leaving the European Union but staying closely linked with it in economic and diplomatic terms. This would give a Corbyn government space to maintain distance with any Republican administration in Washington and to wean itself off the need for Gulf petrodollar inflows to finance the trade deficit. The catastrophic war in Yemen has horrified many on the left, strengthening Corbyn’s hand in terms of his clear preference to cut arms exports to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchs. He would have to move carefully here since those regimes have the means to retaliate, not least by pulling their investments from the UK.

Military interventions in the region, needless to say, will be off the table entirely in a Corbyn government, though certain situations, such as those pertaining to Syria, could place Corbyn under severe political pressure to act militarily in defense of human rights. Notwithstanding this, and if Britain’s long-term socioeconomic trends continue to favor Labour, we might see the beginning here of a rather different relationship with the world. This new British relationship would be shorn of much of the familiar post-imperial baggage. The replacement of President Trump with a President Sanders or Warren would certainly make that process much easier.

These then are the broad contours of the present moment in British politics and foreign relations, with clear implications for its role in the Middle East over the coming years. Any writer even slightly resistant to cliché must strive, when writing about Britain’s place in the world, to avoid reaching for that famous quote from Dean Acheson, in which Harry Truman’s secretary of state said the UK has “lost an Empire and has not yet found a role.”

And yet, almost seven decades on from Acheson’s pithy observation, his quip continues to be prescient. We will learn in the coming years whether Britain is ready to move on from its post-imperial crisis of status anxiety and find a new way to relate to the global community, or whether that long and undignified process has some ways yet to run. (R)