

By Anthony Etchells, UKDF Research Associate

◆The future is challenging. The Arab Spring has shaken the region, and the UK will have to review and possibly reset its relationships with certain states after new governments have taken power and established ones have made various concessions. Iran seems as determined as ever to realise its nuclear ambitions. Syria's Bashar al-Assad is accused of widespread human rights violations against his citizens, but has shown no willingness to step down; international partners have so far achieved little but rhetoric; al-Assad agreed to a Kofi Annan's peace plan, but it remains to be seen whether he will stick to his word. British troops are still in Afghanistan, with the government aiming to withdraw all combat troops by 2015 to leave behind a strong and stable country. The final US combat troops quit Iraq in December 2012, and since then the country has shown signs of returning to the bombings and sectarianism that marked its darkest days after the 2003 invasion.

In addition to this, the UK is increasingly realigning its foreign policy to address domestic issues. The UK became a net importer of energy in 2004, and both government reports and parliamentary enquiries have stated that it is inevitable that the UK will become increasingly dependent on energy imports. With this dependence in mind, the UK is looking to diversify its foreign energy suppliers, in order to establish a broad and resilient energy supply network which will keep the lights on in Britain if one of its suppliers cannot deliver the goods.

The UK is also looking abroad to address its economic concerns. The government has identified foreign trade and investment as a key factor of rebuilding and strengthening Britain's floundering economy, and has called for a more commercially-minded Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in order to attract and facilitate broader and deeper foreign bilateral commerce between the UK and key states.

The government and parliament have identified a diversified supply as key to the Britain's energy security, and increased bilateral energy agreements with the GCC states could address these issues for the UK. The GCC states are estimated to hold roughly one third of the world's remaining hydrocarbon reserves, and the UK should invest time and effort into increasing its supply from this market. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE are all estimated to be in the top ten countries with the world's proven oil reserves, with Qatar ranking 12th, Oman 25th, and Bahrain 66th. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are in the top ten for proven gas reserves, with Kuwait ranking 20th, Oman ranking 26th, and Bahrain ranking 57th.

The GCC states all have proven oil and gas reserves, and the UK should aggressively pursue bilateral energy agreements with these nations as part of its attempts to, 'give energy a higher priority in UK foreign policy,' and, 'reprioritise bilateral diplomatic relationships, giving key supplier states a stronger focus.' [1] This is not to suggest that the GCC should become the sole provider of UK energy, but increased oil and gas imports from the GCC states could become an important node in the UK's energy supply network and increased energy trading could contribute to improve bilateral trade and investment agreements across the board, encouraging investment in the UK's domestic energy infrastructure. The UK should explore the best ways to secure short-term energy trade agreements and long-term energy sector investment with the GCC in the coming years.

The GCC states are also a prime market for increasing the level of trade and investment necessary for improving Britain's economy. UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) claims that high oil prices, ambitious investment programmes, and diversifying economies have led to a 'period of substantial growth' in the Gulf, where, 'there are more investment opportunities in the region than at any previous time as the countries seek to use the oil boom to diversify, secure their infrastructure development, and provide jobs for the next generation.' The potential for trade and investment created by these cumulative factors has

seen the FCO declare: 'We want the UK to be the Gulf's commercial partner of choice.' This is precisely the right intention, and the UK should endeavour to create an environment as conducive as possible for wide-ranging bilateral commerce. Britain should emphasise its business experience to secure as much trade and investment with the GCC states as possible. The more that UK business is involved in the region, the more likely it is that a strong UK presence will influence Gulf businesses to see British firms as partners of choice and examples of best practice as they attempt to branch out and diversify their economy.

Working towards energy agreements and increased commerce are rather obvious routes to take, and the UK should pursue them energetically. However, perhaps an area where the UK should really rethink and refocus its efforts is on harnessing the GCC states' political clout to achieve British foreign policy. The GCC states share interests in several of the UK's foreign policy arenas in the Middle East, meaning that the UK could work with the GCC states to resolve mutual issues of concern.

Take Afghanistan, for example. A huge priority of the FCO's Business Plan is to contribute to the success of Britain's effort in Afghanistan. Several of the GCC states already have stakes in Afghanistan, and the UK should give real consideration to closer cooperation with these states to achieve its Afghanistan objectives.

The Business Plan names Saudi Arabia as a key regional partner in the Afghanistan situation, given its Sunni credentials and regional clout, but other Gulf states could play a key role too. The UAE is already a major humanitarian contributor in Afghanistan, and the UK could use its improving relationships to further direct UAE investment. By combining the UAE's development aid and troops on the ground with the UK's experience in the country over the past ten years, Britain could conceivably present itself as directing support into Afghanistan through respected local allies as it gradually withdraws troops from a combat role by the target date of 2015. The UK would be working with an already established and trusted contributor to Afghanistan and strengthening its own strategic relationship with the UAE, whilst ultimately working to achieve its goal of working with regional partners to address the Afghanistan problems.

Qatar could also prove helpful on a political level. It recently agreed to open a Taliban diplomatic office in-country, and welcomed negotiations between the Taliban, the Afghan government, and the United States. Negotiations stumbled in March 2012 when the Taliban walked away from the negotiating table, but this demonstrates an ability for certain GCC states to act as interlocutors or mediators, offering neutral and trusted ground for opposing parties to meet and talk. Though the Taliban has walked away from this round of talks, the UK would do well to encourage Qatar to continue on this path and be seen to publicly endorse Qatar's mediation in Afghanistan.

Working with Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to lay the groundwork for a safe UK withdrawal from Afghanistan would send a clear message that the UK is interested in working with regional partners, and would offer a ground for constructive talks during the troop pull-out. If done properly this would all be in the UK's benefit, as it would continually strengthen Britain's relationships with key regional partners who are trusted by the opposing parties, offering opportunities for the UK to address its regional foreign policy imperatives through cooperative partnerships sensitive to regional needs.

Afghanistan is just one example, but one can see how effective this model of cooperation with regional states could be. The Business Plan, for instance, also highlights building a stable and prosperous Pakistan as key to resolving the Afghanistan issue. Again, the GCC states could play an integral role: the UAE and Saudi Arabia already send aid to Pakistan, and Bahrain has close relations to the country. Pursing a similar agenda whereby the UK enlists Gulf states' help to tie their financial assistance and political recognition to Pakistan's progress in dealing with its internal security issues and stability

problems - could benefit Pakistan, achieve British foreign policy aims, and strengthen UK-GCC relations. The same applies to the Middle East Peace Process, as the UK could take a pioneering role in using its relationships with the Gulf states to secure renewed investment in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) based on progress in the peace talks. Saudi Arabia is one of the world's largest contributors of foreign development aid, albeit only to Muslims, and is already one of the largest contributors of aid to the OPT. This aid, however, is independent of the peace process, with Riyadh claiming that it does not want ordinary Palestinian citizens to suffer because of the character of the ruling parties. The UK could try to use its strengthened relationship with the Gulf states to bring development aid for the OPT into the peace process. The UK could attempt to work with Saudi Arabia to try to make such aid contingent upon good governance in the OPT, negotiations in good faith, and a ban on terrorist attacks enforced by any Fatah-Hamas unity government, with greater levels of money offered for OPT development as the process develops. The GCC states could also play some role in attempting to influence Israel's adherence to the peace process: the UAE has hosted Israeli ministers before, Bahrain has previously been open to talks with Israel, and Qatar has offered to mediate between Israel and Palestine in the past. The UK could work with these states to encourage their offering regional political benefits to Israel if Tel Aviv sticks to the Middle East Peace Process framework, along the lines of more diplomatic recognition, trade agreements, and investment opportunities between Israel and certain GCC states as landmarks on the roadmap are met. Of course possibly the largest threat looming over the Persian Gulf is the saga of Iran's nuclear endeavours, but this would likely be one area where the UK would look to use improved and stronger relations to reduce the GCC states' involvement rather than encourage it. The prospect of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons terrifies the GCC states, which has led to large scale bilateral security pacts with the US, but there exist persistent concerns that an Iran with nuclear weapons would trigger a domino effect in the region, as the GCC states (amongst others, such as Egypt and Turkey) race to get the bomb. However, stronger and durable relations between the UK and the GCC states could be put to good use to keep the GCC states apprised of developments and to convince them not to pursue potentially region-destabilising nuclear weapons. Instead, the UK could use its relationship with the GCC states to convince them of their continuing security under an 'extended deterrence' offered by the US, which essentially threatens Iran with American retaliation for an attack on the GCC nations, whilst keeping the Gulf states on-side to ensure they don't derail any international discussions and negotiations on the issue. The Arab Spring will also provide foreign policy opportunities for the UK in the coming years, and a foreign policy with the GCC states which shows the UK's willingness to support bilateral trade and investment endeavours, energy agreements, and diplomatic relationships could very well send a clear signal to the rest of the Middle East. The GCC states have also had considerable involvement in the Arab Spring to date, and will no doubt attempt to use their political and economic power to engage their new regional neighbours. If the UK is on strong terms with the GCC states, then the GCC nations could well sing the UK's praises as they establish dialogue and relations with such 'new' and 'renewed' countries. The UK should actively pursue the kind of energy, trade, investment, and political relationships already outlined with the GCC states, in order to demonstrate to the rest of the region that Great Britain is a nation worth listening to and cooperating with. If done properly and publicly, such wide-ranging engagement with the GCC could open trade, investment, and political doors for the UK across the Middle East. The fifth major aim of the FCO's business plan is to use 'soft power' as a tool of UK foreign

policy to prevent conflict, promote British values like human rights, and contribute to the welfare of developing countries. Soft power 'is the ability of a state to influence the actions of another through persuasion or attraction, rather than coercion.' [2] Sustained relationship and cooperation across trade, commerce, and diplomacy will augment a British government effort to implement a cross-governmental approach that uses all national instruments aligned with the British Council and the BBC World Service to elevate links in terms of education, culture, and parliamentary exchanges, which enhances the UK's contribution to conflict prevention, the impact of UK educational scholarships, links with foreign democratic political parties, the promotion of human rights, and projection of UK values. Put simply, as the UK broadens and strengthens its relationships with the GCC states, it could use this closer cooperation as a base for addressing the concerns that surround these states' human rights records. The UK will benefit greatly from increased engagement with the GCC states, but they will also reap huge rewards as they are seen to welcome Western political and economic relationships. As bilateral relationships get stronger, the UK could promise further investment, engagement, and cooperation based upon good governance, adherence to human rights norms, and other traditional values which, if not met, could hinder the GCC states' relationship with the UK, other EU states, and the US.

This is not to say that the GCC states will be perfect partners. All six of these nations are monarchies which are ranked as authoritarian regimes, and severe human rights concerns surround several of these states. Of course the UK should take the strongest line against these concerns, and should insist that cooperation is based on good governance and observing human rights principles. However, it is worth considering that this would be a prime area for the UK to pursue change through its soft power: The more it engages the GCC states, the more they will experience British values and cultural norms. Similarly, once the GCC has become more reliant on its relationships with the UK then Britain could begin to push harder for good governance and human rights adherence but there would need to be greater levels of trade, investment, and political cooperation to exercise such leverage.

The coming years could be vital to the UK's Middle East policy. The Arab Spring has started to alter the dimensions of the region, and the UK will find that its relationships in the region could shift with the sands of change. Iran's nuclear efforts look likely to continue polarising the region. The GCC nations potentially offer opportunities for the UK to pursue a different approach to achieving its regional political, energy, and economic objectives whilst addressing the human rights and governance concerns that surround the region, and Britain should start to seriously improve its efforts to engage the GCC states.

[1] 'Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review', HM Government, October 2010, p.51

[2] McClory, J. 'The New Persuaders: An International Ranking of Soft Power', Institute for Government, December 2010, p.1