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Post Brexit Opportunities for the UK in the Middle East



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As UK Government settles down, relationships in the Middle East and North Africa will remain key.

As a recently released Parliamentarian, I have taken a keen interest in the fortunes of the new UK Government since its definitive victory in December's General Election. Unexpectedly decisive, the election puts the UK on track for a period of domestic political stability, even if the challenges which it faces will be daunting. The consolidation of power at the heart of the Prime Minister's office, as demonstrated through the recent Government shuffle of ministers, is evidence of a determination to deliver on the priorities set out by the Conservative Government to its voters. It is particularly keen to meet the aspirations of those it characterises as 'new', whose 'lending' of their votes to Boris Johnson won the larger than expected majority, particularly in the North and Midlands.

If this is to be successful, it will be crucial to ensure economic progress, which must be accomplished against a backdrop of negotiations with the EU, the US and others to achieve the best and most free trade deals. Hopes are high, though edged with much reality, bearing in mind the history of such negotiations and relative strengths, as we go into discussions with potential partners not necessarily pledged to 'Make Great Britain Great Again'.

Whilst the US and EU are naturally spoken of as being of primary interest, the UK's long standing political and economic relationship with the Middle East and North African region (MENA) should ensure that this vital region also receives the attention it deserves through 2020. Whether or not it does so will be a test of 'Global Britain'. What exactly does this phrase, a key element of the lexicon of leaving the EU, actually mean? The UK has always had a global reach, historically and currently through the UN Security Council, NATO and the Commonwealth. If Global Britain is only a vision of an advanced mercantilist UK, focussing solely on trade, there will be disappointment.

I doubt this will be the case, and have every confidence that having been underrepresented at last weekend's Munich Security Conference, next year will see either or preferably both the Prime

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Minister and Foreign Secretary present on what is now one of the world's best opportunities for the formal and informal meetings of international political and NGO leaders which make the world go round.

The UK remains diplomatically heavily engaged in the major conflicts of the area. The ongoing tragedies of Syria, Libya and Yemen are examples of conflicts impervious to modern UN resolution, despite formidable efforts, not least by the UK at the UNSC. I expect those efforts to intensify as the external powers involved in each of the conflicts count the increasing humanitarian, economic and political cost of the years of engagement.

But beyond the areas of physical conflict, there is much more to a region facing up to more familiar challenges, and here the UK has ample opportunity to make a mark.

This is a growing, young, region. Whereas ageing may be an issue in some countries, not here. Sixty five per cent of the population of the Middle East is under thirty, and thirty per cent of its 18-24 year olds are unemployed, and, frankly, they aren't going to take it anymore. In the unrest of 2011 and beyond, we saw rather inchoate demands for something different in a number of states, as anger was directed at governance, education and economics. Whilst the stirrings then appeared to fade for a number of reasons, including exploitation by those with a very different political agenda, or ruthless repression by regimes with flimsy legitimacy, the echoes remained, and have come alive again in recent months, in varying degrees in states such as Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. And whilst each has its own unique political background, the common features are striking- people wanting a greater say in their state, better education fitting them for the new jobs requiring problem solving and critical analysis, and an end to the chronic corruption which is holding back their economies, and ruining their chances of jobs and a better life.

The UK has a role to play. Firstly the English language is seen by many as the common second tongue for the future, and language and UK education is much in demand. So too is support for institution building, UN Sustainable Development Goal 16, which is seen as one of the keys to developing the framework in states to advance a variety of goals vital to their beneficial functioning. The UK, in concert with other partners, has a rich heritage here, not to deliver Westminster models everywhere, but to work with local requirements and existing governance structures to modify and change where needed.

In commerce and jobs the UK can be ambitious. Virtually every MENA country has some form of joint task force with the UK, at Ministerial level, at which targets for delivering increased bi-lateral trade form a key part. For example the joint UK/UAE target of £12bn set in 2010 was reached early, and the 2020 target became £25bn. This determination is replicated across the region. The UK should be looking to deliver more in key areas such as health, education, defence and security, financial and other services, and with the MENA economy set to grow modestly in 2020, this will be a good year to test relative ambitions.

The Middle East and North Africa deserve better than the conflicts which have been too much a part of their recent experience. It would be naïve to expect centuries old rivalries to disappear overnight, nor current suspicions which have formed the backdrop to too much violence directed towards the innocent. But a new generation is looking for something different, and should not be denied. If the UK can get engaged in all aspects of this new future for the region, diplomatically, commercially, artistically and institutionally then it will not only be fulfilling its Global Britain mandate for its own purposes, growing its economy to deliver on those domestic promises to voters at home, but making a profound contribution to a century still young itself.

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