



The British General Election 2017: Impacts on the Middle East

Research Department

vote

On the 18th April 2017, during a time of uncertainty in contemporary British history, the Prime Minister Theresa May announced that a snap election would be held on June 8th, 2017. The announcement draped in the shadow of Brexit negotiations, (the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union). Since then, the Conservative Party, led by Theresa May and the Labour Party, led by Jeremy Corbyn, have published manifestos containing their pledges; and, have been campaigning with promises of what Britain would look like under their respective leaderships. This paper examines these manifestos and their foreign policy orientations towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The paper will look at the election itself, providing answers for how Brexit will be impacted; whether the Labour Party has a chance of winning; the prospect of tactical alliances among parties; and, how smaller national parties such as the Liberal Democrat Party and the Eurosceptic United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) may still have a credible impact.

Foreign Policy Positions of British Political Parties

The Conservative Party

Of the three main political parties in the General Election, the manifesto of the Conservative Party is the most domestically-oriented, with a clear focus on the economy, social mobility and domestic security. The Conservatives identify five major challenges facing the United Kingdom: the economy; Brexit and wider global events in a changing world; social divisions and mobility in the UK; demographic challenges faced by an aging UK population; and rapid technological changes that challenge existing norms¹.

Despite the manifesto professing “increasingly little distinction between domestic and international affairs in matters of migration, national security and the economy”², many foreign policy matters discussed in the manifesto are viewed through the lens of domestic policy concerns with particular reference to Brexit. This is particularly evident in the chapter of the manifesto focused on foreign policy affairs and diplomacy, titled “A Strong and United Nation in a Changing World”.

The first half of the chapter is focused entirely on the cohesion of the United Kingdom and Brexit, highlighting the need to retain the unity of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and how local governments have benefited

1. “Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future”, *The Conservative and Unionist Party*, May 2017, <<https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/manifesto2017/Manifesto2017.pdf>>, pp. 6-7 [Accessed 22-May-2017]

2. Ibid, p. 6

under the Conservative government. This section pledges to promote Scottish interests and exports around the world³. Similar pledges are made in relation to Wales and Northern Ireland, who have all expressed interest towards an independence referendum⁴. It subsequently discusses the importance of the UK's unity towards ensuring a successful Brexit. Such linkage is consistent with the deliberate attempts of the Conservative campaign to create a normative link between the General Election, a second Scottish Independence Referendum and a favourable outcome for Brexit, with Prime Minister May herself proclaiming that every vote for Conservatives is a vote for a good Brexit deal⁵. The manifesto refers to a Scottish Independence Referendum as “divisive” and highlights the risks that Scottish Independence could pose towards Brexit negotiations⁶. As a whole, the Brexit pledges of the manifesto focus on stability and continuity, with the goals stated as creating minimal disruption and ensuring that the UK can forge comprehensive free trade and customs agreements with independent countries within and without the EU⁷.

Topics relating to wider defence, security, diplomacy and foreign policy are discussed in the latter half of the chapter. The manifesto pledges to maintain and participate in international organisations⁸ and re-establish ties with “old friends and allies” around the globe, such as the Commonwealth, while building on the UK's “special relationship” with the US⁹. It has a strong defensive mandate, pledging to continue NATO spending amounting to 2% of GDP and investing £178 billion for the research, development and construction of new equipment including an expansion of the Royal Navy¹⁰. The manifesto refrains from pledges or comments on specific crises such as in Syria and Iraq. Where it comments on crises with a non-UK origin such as the on-going refugee crisis and the issue of Islamist extremism, its solutions are still UK centric.

3. Ibid, p. 32

4. Batchelor, Tom. “Nicola Sturgeon's referendum call prompts demands for Welsh and Northern Irish independence votes”, *The Independent*, 13-March-2017, <www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/wales-northern-ireland-independence-campaign-nicola-sturgeon-scottish-independence-demand-speech-a7627861.html>, [Accessed 22-May-2017]

5. Gilchrist, Karen. «UK's Theresa May pledges to fight for every vote to secure best Brexit deal», *CNBC*, 19-April-2017, <<http://www.cnbc.com/2017/04/19/theresa-may-pledges-to-fight-for-every-vote-to-secure-best-brexite-deal.html>>, [Accessed 22-May-2017]

6. “Forward, Together: Our Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future”, *The Conservative and Unionist Party*, May 2017, <<https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/manifesto2017/Manifesto2017.pdf>>, p. 30 [Accessed 22-May-2017]

7. Ibid, pp. 35-36

8. Ibid, p. 38

9. Ibid, p. 38

10. Ibid, pp. 41-42

Regarding the Middle East, the UK will continue to favour economic and political ties with established partners in the Gulf such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain. Many Gulf States and companies hold stakes in US companies and infrastructure. This continuity and stability will make the Gulf a desirable partner for Britain post-Brexit. Unlike Labour, Conservatives offer no criticisms or pledges against Gulf States.

However, in less-predictable regions such as Iraq and Syria, the UK will seek to reduce its footprint. In the aftermath of Brexit, a number of figures that favoured deeper economic ties with Iraq, such as Andrea Leadsom, have lost their positions and their policies have not been replicated. In Syria, although Labour accused that the Conservatives would stage an intervention¹¹, May has so far refrained from declaring support for an intervention; this is despite other prominent Conservative figures, including Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, pushing for one¹². As a whole, it is unlikely that the UK under a Conservative government will take a pro-active role in crises surrounding the MENA region, preferring to concentrate foreign policy efforts on established partners. Where the UK does involve itself in crises, it will likely do so in partnership with the United States and NATO while avoiding a large footprint.

The Labour Party

Like the Conservative Party, the Labour Party's manifesto has been focused on domestic policies, including low pay, rising inequality and the failure of services despite rising costs to ordinary people. Labour acknowledged the importance of Brexit for the General Election and stated that their goal was to find a conciliatory outcome with the UK's largest trading partner (the EU) that protects the economy and living standards while providing certainty for EU nationals and international companies¹³. The conciliatory stance can potentially reduce the risks of Brexit and lead to a more positive negotiating environment between the UK and the EU. If successful, such policies would take some of the pressure off the UK in establishing new economic links that compensate for the loss of trade

11. Mason, Rowena; MacAskill, Ewen. «Vote for Tories is vote to escalate Syria war, Labour says», *The Guardian*, 04-May-2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/04/theresa-may-urged-not-rush-attack-syria-election>>, [Accessed 23-May-2017]

12. Staunton, Denis. «May Refuses to Endorse Johnson's stance on British Intervention in Syria», *The Irish Times*, 27-April-2017, <<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/uk/may-refuses-to-endorse-johnson-s-stance-on-british-intervention-in-syria-1.3063799>>, [Accessed 23-May-2017]

13. "For the Many, not the Few: The Labour Party Manifesto 2017", *The Labour Party*, May 2017, p. 24 <<http://www.labour.org.uk/page/-/Images/manifesto-2017/labour-manifesto-2017.pdf>>, [Accessed 22-May-2017]

with the EU. However, the fact that there will be significant policy realignment as a result of Labour's policies means that much of the UK's political resources will be stretched. The urgency of a steady policy position is vital given that the UK has invoked Article 50 and is now within the two-year period during which negotiations are due to take place with the EU. Like a Conservative victory, a Labour victory would therefore put limits on the UK's capacity to involve itself in crises around the world.

Indeed, a commitment to non-intervention is the main takeaway from Labour's manifesto on foreign policy. The manifesto states that Labour's values for foreign policy will be guided by values of peace, universal rights and international law¹⁴. The manifesto cites that the UK faces its most complex and interwoven security and development challenges including the conflicts in the Middle East, the refugee crisis, terrorism, climate change, famines in Africa, a more "combative" Russia and an "erratic" US administration. The manifesto, specifically citing the Chilcot Inquiry, states that the UK's response to these challenges needs to change and that diplomatic solutions are required, implemented alongside international, regional and local partners within the framework of international law¹⁵. A pledge to bolster defence and retain the defence spending on 2% of the GDP is present but overall details on defence are less detailed compared to the Conservatives. A draft version suggested a stronger non-intervention policy. Although this has since been removed in the final version¹⁶, sentiments reflecting the policy continue to come up in the campaign. Following the May 22nd bombing in Manchester, Corbyn had noted that British foreign policy surrounding terrorism has failed and new solutions are needed¹⁷.

While the Conservative manifesto does not refer to prescribing solutions to specific crises, Labour addresses a number of outstanding crises directly. This is unsurprising, given Corbyn's vocal participation on a number of Middle Eastern political advocacy groups and his consistent pro-Palestine stance¹⁸. Regarding Syria, the manifesto pledges to put the diplomatic process back on track, support-

14. Ibid, p. 116

15. Ibid, p. 116

16. «Labour manifesto 2017: What has changed from the draft document?», BBC, 16-May-2017, <www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2017-39937090>, [Accessed 22-May-2017]

17. Mason, Rowena; Stewart, Heather. "Jeremy Corbyn: the war on terror is simply not working", The Guardian, 26-May-2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/26/jeremy-corbyn-the-war-on-terror-is-simply-not-working>>, [Accessed 26-May-2017]

18. «MPs, actors, authors and musicians among 21,000 demanding arms embargo on Israel», Palestine Solidarity Campaign, 25-July-2014, <<https://www.palestinecampaign.org/mps-actors-authors-musicians-among-21000-demanding-arms-embargo-israel/>>, [Accessed 25-May-2017]

ing international efforts to “investigate, prosecute and convict perpetrators of war crimes” while ensuring the reduction of human suffering caused by the war. The manifesto also envisages the setting out of detailed plans for work on conflict prevention and resolution, post-conflict peace-building, and justice for the victims of war crimes¹⁹. This includes taking all lawful means to stop the “indiscriminate barbarism” of the Islamic State and “advocate a long-term multinational political strategy, led by regional actors, to tackle the spread of extremism”²⁰.

The manifesto urges Egypt, the Gulf States and Turkey to respect human rights and the rule of law and pledges to “review all training and equipment contracts with repressive regimes, to ensure that Britain never colludes in the mistreatment of civilians”²¹.

The foreign policy outlined in the manifesto contains a number of positions that can have significant impacts on UK’s outstanding foreign policy. The main policy position is the commitment to non-intervention and peaceful solutions to the crises in the Middle East. In itself, this may not be a significant pledge, given similar pledges in the past. Yet, the manifesto leaves enough room for flexibility in suggesting that the UK would still be committed to supporting national governments against terrorism (specifying Afghanistan and Iraq). However, the outright pledge, in conjunction with Corbyn’s personal convictions, suggests that the UK’s hawkish position towards Iran and Syria will soften somewhat. Conversely, a Labour government will attempt to increase pressure on Gulf States, straining relations somewhat. Corbyn’s pledge to nationalise a number of enterprises can also strain relations with the Gulf States that own stakes in British enterprises, particularly Qatar²². To counter, the Gulf States will likely pressure and incentivise the British Government to retain influence. Given their well-established lobbies and networks, they will succeed. In the interim, however, the situation will intensify the competition between the Gulf States and Iran.

19. Ibid, pp. 116-117

20. Ibid, p. 118

21. Ibid, p. 118

22. Packard, Jim; Parker, George. “Qatar lined up for £10bn UK projects fund”, Financial Times, 13-March-2013, <<https://www.ft.com/content/0f6c15ca-8c07-11e2-8fcf-00144feabdc0>>, [Accessed 21-May-2017]

Brexit: The Outcome

The common factor with regards to all these manifestos is Brexit. This is unsurprising given Brexit's continued and polarising impact on British politics. Whichever party is elected in the General Election will have to contend with the outcomes and fallout of the referendum and the process of leaving the EU. As highlighted in the segments for the manifestos, this will render more inward-looking Brexit policies. Much of the rhetoric surrounding the Leave campaign had a protectionist edge, espousing sovereignty and a level of disengagement from political and economic commitments of no benefit to the UK. There is a distinct desire among those who voted to leave the EU to focus on fixing internal issues such as unemployment, infrastructure and the NHS. In addition, although the British Government has re-iterated the desire to remain involved in the world, a number of priorities will preclude a deep global involvement: The negotiations with the EU and the on-going debates surrounding Scottish Independence will occupy much of the attention and resources the British Government has, especially if the Scottish National Party scores a major win. As a result, British policy making will likely take a step back from a number of foreign involvements and attempt to prioritise or revitalise the remaining ones. The calculus regarding which relations are prioritised will be based on a UK-centric cost-benefit analysis in the short-to-medium term rather than long-term or ideologically-motivated policy goals.

Due to an inward-orientated focus, the British Government will have limited capacity to deal with other issues. The relations it does build will be based on whether such relations can provide an alternative to the EU, make a success out of Brexit and bring the maximum political and economic gain with minimal fallout. To this end, prior familiarity and established relations will be a major factor. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson highlighted the need to shift focus to established relationships of the UK such as the Commonwealth²³. A similar process will take place regarding the Middle East where established relations with Gulf States and Israel will take precedence for the UK even in the event of a party critical of these nations being elected.

Yet, predicting the outcome of Brexit is difficult until the election is concluded. A Conservative win with a significant margin will allow Prime Minister May to push her mandate of "no deal is better than a bad deal" and take a hard-line against the EU, escalating tensions and increasing the likelihood of a "hard

23. Campanella, Edoardo; Dassu, Marta. "A Future of the English-Speaking Peoples", Foreign Affairs Magazine, 21-February-2017, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2017-02-21/future-english-speaking-peoples>>, [Accessed 30-March-2017]

Brexit²⁴”. It would also galvanise the push for Scottish Independence, which, in turn, could galvanise similar movements in Northern Ireland. (Although Welsh Independence has been brought up, it is far less likely and the movement is much weaker.) While unlikely, a number of political scientists have suggested that this chain of events has the potential to fracture the UK²⁵.

The likelihood of a “hard Brexit” will be reduced in the event of a win by Labour or a low-margin win by the Conservative Party. This will especially be the case if the Liberal Democrats, who promised a second Brexit Referendum²⁶, score significant gains in the election. Such outcomes will provide increased resistance against the prospect of a “hard Brexit” and lead policy realignment towards “soft Brexit²⁷” or even no Brexit at all. Under such circumstances, Scottish and Northern Irish independence can be averted but the realignment of policy positions will lead to delays in formulating a negotiation position. Given that the EU has agreed on its negotiating guidelines for Brexit²⁸, any repositioning and realignment by the UK will give the EU the initiative.

Regardless of which party is elected, it is evident that negotiations between the UK and the EU over the next two years will be complicated and laced with suspicion. Hostile rhetoric between the EU and the UK has only intensified since the election was announced, culminating in Theresa May accusing the EU of trying to tamper with elections²⁹, nationalist politicians threatening military action against Spain over the Gibraltar dispute³⁰ and pro-Brexit politicians suggesting that the EU would try to punish the UK for voting Brexit³¹.

24. Described as total withdrawal from the EU including the Single Market and the cessation of Free Movement

25. «Brexit’s Potential to Fracture the UK», Stratfor, 02-April-2017, <<https://www.stratfor.com/article/brexit-potential-fracture-uk>>, [Accessed 25-May-2017]

26. “Change Britain’s Future: Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2017”, The Liberal Democrats, May 2017, p. 9, <<http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/themes/5909d4366ad575794c00000/attachments/original/1495020157/Manifesto-Final.pdf?1495020157>>, [Accessed 22-May-2017]

27. Denoting a partial withdrawal from the EU while still participating in its institutions

28. Wishart, Ian; Bodoni, Stephanie, Simenas, Dalius; «European Leaders Back Brexit Negotiating Plan Before Talks», Bloomberg, 28-April-2017, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-04-28/eu-says-it-s-already-europe-1-britain-0-as-brexit-reality-dawns>>, [Accessed 25-May-2017]

29. Kellner, Peter, «Much Ado About Brexit», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 09-May-2017, <carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=69908>, [Accessed 23-May-2017]

30. Parker, George. «Gibraltar Tensions Bubble Over Into British War Talk», The Financial Times, 02-April-2017, <<https://www.ft.com/content/391f0114-17a1-11e7-a53d-df09f373be87>>, [Accessed 23-May-2017]

31. Swinford, Steven. «Revealed: How Jean-Claude Juncker’s «monster» is plotting to punish Britain for Brexit», The Telegraph, 02-May-2017, <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/02/>

The concerns around the Brexit negotiations are further complicated by UKIP. Supporters of the Eurosceptic Party are aware that they will not make any significant gains in the election³². They have lost all their seats in the local elections and many of their voters have drifted back towards the Conservative Party from which they originated from³³. In a bid to retain their relevance and support base, the party positioned itself as the “vanguards of Brexit” instead³⁴. The idea is that should Prime Minister May and the Conservatives lean too much towards a “Soft Brexit”, they can act as a rallying point for the British Eurosceptics, which might ultimately reduce the Conservative votership. Indeed, UKIP has already levelled strong criticisms against the Conservatives following the terrorist attack at Manchester May 22nd³⁵

The Outcome of the Election

The announcement of a snap election by Prime Minister May came as unexpected for much of the electorate. Since then, many analysts have sought to decipher her motivations for calling a snap election at such a sensitive time. May’s stated reason was that doing so would secure her a clear mandate in the negotiations with the EU whereas letting the election cycle run its course would result in elections taking place in 2019, just as negotiations are due to conclude³⁶. The timing is also significant as the announcement for the election took place at a time when Conservatives were scoring consistently high points in the polls whereas Labour Party remained fractured between the supporters and opponents of Jeremy Corbyn³⁷. With a lead of over 21 points in the polls, the Conservatives were expected to win the elections comfortably³⁸. This prediction was backed by

revealed-jean-claude-junkers-monster-plotting-punish-britain/>, [Accessed 24-May-2017]

32. Cooper, Charlie. «No point campaigning for UKIP, says party’s ex-MP», Politico EU, 05-May-2017, <www.politico.eu/article/no-point-campaigning-for-ukip-says-partys-ex-mp/>, [Accessed 23-May-2017]

33. Goodwin, Matthew; Cutts, David. «Why UKIP’s collapse matters», Politico EU, 28-April-2017, <www.politico.eu/article/uk-general-election-ukip-why-collapse-matters-conservative-majority-theresa-may/>, [Accessed 25-May-2017]

34. «General election 2017: UKIP needed to stop Brexit (backsliding)», BBC, 28-April-2017, <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39742407>, [Accessed 25-May-2017]

35. Walker, Peter. «Ukip launches manifesto with pledge to act against Islamic terrorism», The Guardian, 25-May-2017, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/25/ukip-launches-manifesto-with-pledge-to-act-against-islamic-terrorism-manchester-paul-nuttall>>, [Accessed 26-May-2017]

36. Kellner, Peter. «May’s Election Gamble», Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 19-April-2017, <carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=68712>, [Accessed 24-May-2017]

37. «UK: Theresa May’s Election Gambit», Stratfor, 18-April-2017, <<https://www.stratfor.com/article/uk-theresa-may-s-election-gambit>>, [Accessed 25-May-2017]

38. Smith, Matthew. «Voting Intention: Conservatives 44%, Labour 23%», YouGov, 17-April-2017,

the results of the Local Elections in May 2017 when Labour and UKIP recorded massive losses while the Liberal Democrats failed to make any headway³⁹.

Since then, however, a number of signs have emerged that have shaken the strong Conservative position. The reception that the provisions regarding care of elderly and vulnerable patients was particularly harmful to the campaign. Although Prime Minister May turned away from what the media dubbed was a “dementia tax”, the suggestion of such a policy had a palpable impact on the polls, leading to a spike of Labour support⁴⁰. Her U-turn was also criticised, leading to derisive comments that her “strong and stable” platform was in fact “weak and wobbly”⁴¹.

In addition, a number of parties and political advocates have called for what was referred to as a “progressive alliance” between the Labour, Liberal Democrats and the Green Party while local parties in Northern Ireland and Scotland have proposed similar alliances⁴². Such alliances would encourage tactical voting between supporters of parties with similar policies to bring down Conservative Party controlled by the Conservative Party⁴³.

Similar attempts in England, Scotland and Wales have been fraught with difficulties. Although Labour and the Scottish National Party have common ground, they have failed to reconcile their differences on a second Scottish Independence Referendum⁴⁴. Similarly, Labour and Liberal Democrats have found it difficult to reconcile their own differences on Brexit, a significant factor given

<<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/04/17/voting-intention-conservatives-44-labour-23-12-13-/>>, [Accessed 25-April-2017]

39. «Local and mayoral results: Tories advance amid Labour losses», BBC, 05-May-2017, <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39810488>, [Accessed 24-May-2017]

40. Maidment, Jack. «Conservative poll lead cut in half after «dementia tax» U-turn», The Telegraph, 26-May-2017, <www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/26/conservative-poll-lead-cut-half-dementia-tax-u-turn/>, [Accessed 26-May-2017]

41. Harford, Tim. «Donald Trump and Theresa May give U-turns a bad name», The Financial Times, 26-May-2017, <<https://www.ft.com/content/d65daebe-4076-11e7-82b6-896b95f30f58>>, [Accessed 26-May-2017]

42. Bulman, May. «Progressive alliance: Greens, Labour and Liberal Democrats unite to take down Jeremy Hunt», The Independent, 08-May-2017, <www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-stands-down-to-help-nhs-doctor-win-against-jeremy-hunt-a7723491.html>, [Accessed 23-May-2017]

43. Barnes, Peter. «Tactical voting: The early signs it could really take off in 2017», BBC, 25-April-2017, <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-39693277>, [Accessed 23-May-2017]

44. McMillan, Joyce. «Joyce McMillan: Much unites Labour and SNP, indyref2 remains barrier», The Scotsman, 26-May-2017, <www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/joyce-mcmillan-much-unites-labour-and-snp-indyref2-remains-barrier-1-4457441>, [Accessed 26-May-2017]

that the latter is banking on those who voted against leaving the EU⁴⁵. This was not helped by the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Tim Farron, rejecting the notion of any coalitions with any of the other parties⁴⁶. Thus, although a number of local anti-Conservative alliances have emerged, they have yet to translate into a sustainable nation-wide alliance.

The Conservative Party started the election cycle with a clear projected win. However, the margins between the Labour and Conservative parties have reduced. As of late May, Labour's gains project that the party will be able to take eight seats from the Conservatives, leaving only a two-seat difference between the two parties⁴⁷. At present, polls still project a Conservative victory, albeit one with much smaller margins than originally predicted. Given the current trends, Labour still stands a chance to win. However, given the many political, economic, social and security factors involved and the rapid shifts the demographic has experienced so far, it stands to reason that the outcome of the election remains difficult to predict.

45. Whiting, Chris. «Why The Progressive Alliance Is A Non-Starter For Liberal Democrats», Huffington Post, 03-May-2017, <www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/chris-whiting/progressive-alliance_b_16399782.html>, [Accessed 24-May-2017]

46. «No coalitions» Farron insists after Cable hints at Lib Dem alliances with Labour», ITV News, 08-May-2017, <www.itv.com/news/2017-05-08/no-coalitions-farron-insists-after-cable-hints-at-lib-dem-alliances-with-labour/>, [Accessed 24-May-2017]

47. Adam Bienkov, «Theresa May faces disaster after new poll finds Corbyn slashing her majority to just 2 seats», Business Insider UK, 26-May-2017, <uk.businessinsider.com/yougov-poll-general-election-theresa-may-jeremy-corbyn-labour-conservatives-majority-two-seats-2017-5>, [Accessed 26-May-2017]