

The Russo – UK Crisis and Implications for the Arabian Gulf

Relations between Russia and the UK hit a new low earlier this month with the attempted assassination of double-agent Sergei Skripal - and his daughter - in Salisbury, UK. At the time of this writing, diplomats are being expelled by the UK and its NATO allies while Russia contemplates its next move. While the UK argued that the assassination attempt using an outlawed chemical weapon was a direct attack on British sovereignty, Russia continues to dismiss such claims and is seeking to sow doubt among the international community by denouncing the UK's actions as anti-Russian propaganda.

In a joint statement at the the European Leaders' Summit on 22 March, EU Heads of State strongly condemned Russia's actions as a threat to European security and supported the UK's claim of Russian responsibility for the attack, noting that it was "highly likely, with no other plausible explanation." The declaration included the decision to recall the EU Ambassador to Moscow for consultations on further actions to be taken.

The UK has played an essential security provider role for over 200 years in the Arab Gulf. While such arrangements were interrupted by the UK's withdrawal from "East of Suez" in 1968, Britain has, nonetheless, continued to be a close ally of the Gulf states, engaging in trade and political cooperation. Recent years have seen the British return to East of Suez, with the first permanent military base since 1967, the HMS Juffair, a naval support facility (NSF), opening in Mina Salman Port in Bahrain in 2016. The Royal Navy is also stationed in Oman and British Armed forces are increasingly engaged in training operations with their Gulf counterparts to jointly tackle the common security threats posed by extremist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda while keeping tabs on some of the other dangerous actors in the region (re: Iran).

Theresa May has pledged that her government would invest an additional £3bn in defence spending in the Arab Gulf over the next decade and London is deeply interested in signing a Free Trade Agreement with the Gulf after Brexit—as a way to reinforce the positive trade numbers that grow year on year. In 2015, trade between the UK and the Gulf had an annual worth of some £28.73bn, with bilateral trade having increased by 185% over the past 20 years.

In contrast to the well-rounded and historical relations between the UK and the Arab Gulf, Russia's engagement lacks both the historic depth and shared strategic purpose. However, bilateral cooperation has grown increasingly important. The Saudi Public Investment Fund signed, for example, some \$10bn in general investments with the Russian Direct Investment Fund in 2015—the largest foreign investment in Russia at that time. In 2017, Russian and Saudi companies signed deals worth a total of \$3bn with major investments in the energy sector. Additionally, the arms trade between Riyadh and Moscow surged, with the Russian sale of an

advanced missile-defence system to Saudi Arabia, inked last month. At the same time however, Russia maintains iron-clad relations with the Arab Gulf's most acute adversary, Iran and has fought alongside the Islamic Republic and the Assad regime in Syria, against groups supported by the Arab Gulf states.

All in all, the Gulf states have interests with both parties in the UK-Russia crisis. Yet, there is little doubt that the Gulf states are more aligned to the interests of the UK, after all Russia's action was a violation of the UK's national sovereignty and the Gulf states are very keen to maintain non-intervention of external actors in their domestic affairs.

What this means for long-term UK-Gulf and/or Russia-Gulf relations remains unclear. However, given the depth of UK-Gulf relations, it is likely that the Arab Gulf states will continue to reinforce their strategic alliance with the UK as the UK has remained a loyal ally for two centuries of regional turbulence. While it is certainly hoped that this crisis is deescalated in a timely manner, the Gulf states remain committed to their European and British partners. Now is not the time for strategic lethargy, but for international solidarity.

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