

Post-Brexit British Foreign Policy Toward the Israel-Palestine Conflict

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Abstract

This research paper seeks to understand British foreign policy toward the Israel-Palestine conflict in the post-Brexit era. Through analysing Britain's relationship with Israel and the Palestinians, respectively, the paper finds that Brexit has generated three important new factors—a tilt toward American leadership, legislative autonomy, and increased UK-Israel trade relations—that have impacted, and are likely to continue to impact, British foreign policy-making toward the conflict in the post-Brexit epoch. These forces, it is argued, increase the likelihood of policy differences arising between Britain and the European Union on Israel-Palestine to a greater extent than was possible prior to Brexit.

Introduction

From the 1917 Balfour Declaration to the withdrawal of British soldiers from Mandatory Palestine in 1948 to the present, the United Kingdom has been a significant foreign actor in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Israelis and Palestinians both feel that Britain was deeply significant to their respective foundational narratives—the former believing Britain secured their country's rebirth, and the latter feeling it created the conditions for the annulment of their homeland. While Britain's role today in regard to the conflict is greatly diminished to what it once was, London continues to be an important voice on the world stage for both parties.

In 1967, Britain voted in favour of United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 which called on Israel to withdraw from territories occupied during the 1967 Six Day War. To this day, Resolution 242 underpins Britain's advocacy for a two-state solution, and Westminster

maintains that peace negotiations ought be based on the June 4, 1967 lines, with equal land transfers to reflect the security, religious and national interests of both Israelis and Palestinians. The Palestinian refugee issue should be settled with a just and realistic understanding of the demographic concerns of both sides, and Jerusalem should be the shared capital of the Israeli and Palestinian states.

In ‘taking back control’ of British foreign policy, Brexit has provided the UK the opportunity to chart a new path on the Israel-Palestine conflict distinct from that of its tenure as a member of the European Union. Whether London has even developed a coherent post-Brexit foreign policy, however, continues to concern some scholars (Oppermann et al. 2020). As Jane Kinninmont (2016) observed in the days leading up to the Brexit referendum, British policy toward the Middle East was already largely independent of the EU and therefore was unlikely to markedly change in the event of Britain leaving the EU. British policy has, to date, broadly reflected this contention, as London has displayed a high degree of policy continuity. There have, however, been some significant deviations in established policy that give cause to consider London’s tilt toward an altered foreign policy outlook.

In exploring Britain’s post-Brexit foreign policy toward the Israel-Palestine conflict, this research paper posits that Brexit has generated three new forces in British foreign policymaking—a tilt toward American leadership, legislative autonomy, and increased trade relations between Britain and Israel—which have influenced, and are likely to continue to influence, British policymaking toward the conflict in the post-Brexit era. These forces, as a result, increase the likelihood of policy differences arising between Britain and the EU to a greater extent than was possible prior to Brexit.

Tilt toward American leadership

The most significant post-Brexit change in British foreign policy toward the Israel-Palestine conflict is Britain's tilt toward American leadership. As an EU member, Britain begrudged French attempts to advance diplomatic efforts on its behalf, and historically resisted French efforts to insert the EU into the peace process (BICOM 2017). The EU response to the stagnation of peace talks in the late 1990s, for instance, "remained extremely modest" due to Britain's reluctance to allow France to take charge (Wood, 1998: 569). With Brexit breaking legislative ties between Britain and the EU, however, London's newfound autonomy to pursue its own foreign policy and desire to bandwagon with the United States to gain 'power by proxy' (Opperman et al. 2020) has animated Anglo-American cooperation.

This was chiefly evident in the UK Government's support for President Donald Trump's *Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People*, which proposed a controversial plan for a two-state solution that included Israeli annexation of territory in the West Bank. In contrast to EU policy that a two-state solution ought arise with respect to "all relevant U.N. resolutions and internationally agreed parameters" (UN 2020), Prime Minister Boris Johnson supported the Plan, which stands in violation of these conditions and his own party's previous condemnations of settlement annexation in the West Bank. Addressing the House of Commons on 29 January 2020, Johnson said "no plan is perfect", but that Trump's plan "has the merits of a two-state solution", and encouraged the Palestinian leadership to engage with Washington. London also welcomed the normalisation accords signed between Israel and several Arab countries, which the Palestine Mission to the UK called "a retrograde step for the Palestinian cause" (PMLUK 2020).

Notably, Johnson's support of the plan appeared to emanate more from a plea to find a solution to the conflict than from ideological conviction. While he touted some of the plan's cross-partisan positives, Johnson remained relatively abstract in affirmation, suggesting his government's opportunistic pragmatism rather than political transformation. One EU diplomat accused the UK of "changing a 20-year policy on the Middle East and settlements for the sake of a good trade deal with Donald Trump" (Mance et al., 2017). Johnson's support for the plan appears to indicate London's willingness to compromise its long-held positions on the Israel-Palestine conflict—primarily its over-fifty-year-advocacy for a peace agreement based on the June 4, 1967 lines and refusal to recognise Israeli settlements in the West Bank—to gain favour with the United States in the post-Brexit era.

The election of President Joe Biden, however, has already shifted American policy on the conflict, as Washington has restored several policies abandoned by the former administration including economic aid to the Palestinians and the reopening of the Palestine Liberation Organisation mission in Washington (BBC, 2021). Thus, if Britain continues to follow America's lead post-Brexit, British policy toward the conflict is likely to return to a more normative approach, as the Biden Administration looks to steer American policy back in accordance with internationally accepted positions. London's statement on 19 February 2021 that Iran must return to compliance with the terms of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is one such indication of this shift (Reuters, 2021).

With that said, one issue that is of consequence to the conflict which may elude a more normative foreign policy shift is a reviewal of Britain's foreign aid to the Palestinian Territories. In August 2018, the United States withdrew its annual contribution to UNRWA and all USAID projects in the Palestinian Territories valued at approximately \$300m

(USD)—around one-third of the agency’s annual budget (Amr, 2018). Similarly, concerns of aid going to terrorist salaries prompted Australia to redirect its \$8m contribution away from the Palestinian Authority toward other Palestinian bodies in July 2018, while the Netherlands (\$14.5m), Belgium (\$6.9m) and Switzerland (\$22.5m) suspended their funding to UNRWA on similar grounds in August 2019 (Al Jazeera, 2019), and Norway (\$3.4m) in December 2020 (Edmunds, 2020). The Netherlands has since resumed its funding, but these conversations have prompted like debate in the UK (Dysch, 2018).

Several newspapers and at least one British government-friendly think tank have called on London to reconsider its foreign aid contribution. The London Times claimed Britain “gives £20m for schools glorifying martyrs and jihad” (Shipman, 2018), while the Henry Jackson Society, which has close links to the Conservative Party, released a report in February 2020 arguing that London ought to “make any future donation conditional on significant and verifiable reform” (Waldman, 2020). In early March the Government met with the Israeli-based research institute IMPACT-se to discuss its report into UNRWA curriculums, which it claims promote radicalisation (Shalev, 2021). Following this, the proposition ‘Radicalisation in the Palestinian school curriculum’ was debated in the House of Commons on 10 March 2020.

On 1 April 2018, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) stated it is “planning to conduct a thorough assessment of the Palestinian curriculum... and if we find evidence of material which incites violence, we will take action” (DFID, 2018). Thereafter, the UK and the EU commissioned the Georg Eckert Institute (GEI) to compile an independent report into Palestinian Authority textbooks, but due to flaws in the investigation process, the final report is yet to be published. While a burst of new funding to Palestinian

organisations was announced by the Government in July 2020 (UK GOV, 2020), London appears to be waiting on the final GEI report to make a judgment on Palestinian aid. If the report does provide evidence of incitement to violence, however, a complete funding moratorium is unlikely, as London aims to appear a relatively balanced broker in the conflict. Although reform by way of rechanneling aid from education to other initiatives, similar to the Australian and Dutch strategies, may be more conceivable.

Legislative autonomy

One domain where Britain has arguably exercised its new legislative autonomy since the Brexit referendum is on the issue of Israel-Palestine at the United Nations. As a member of the EU, the UK rarely dissented from voting unity on UN resolutions, but Israeli-Palestinian relations were one of the few issues where unity was often difficult to achieve (Dee & Smith, 2017). The UK has long been a vocal critic of what it perceives to be the Human Rights Council's disproportionate focus on Israel (UK GOV, 2019), and while Britain's dissent in the EU has traditionally taken the form of abstention rather than opposition to resolutions, its voting behaviour in recent years provides cause to consider whether it seeks to take a more oppositional tone in the post-Brexit era.

In 2020, the UK broke from EU protocol for the third year straight and voted 'No' to the resolution 'the UN demands that Israel withdraw from the Golan' (UN, 2020). In doing so, London signalled its approval of Washington's 2019 decision to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and joined eight other countries, including the United States, Australia, Canada and Brazil, in the 'pro-Israel bloc'. With that said, Britain did not join Germany, the Netherlands and 11 other countries to surprisingly vote against a 'pro-Palestine resolution' in protest of what they considered to be the "disproportionally high number of

resolutions that are critical of Israel” in 2019 (Ahren, 2019). The 76th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2021 will help to determine whether Britain continues to take distinct positions regarding Israel-Palestine or whether its atypical votes in recent years were merely designed to curry favour with the Trump administration. Nevertheless, in keeping with Britain’s post-Brexit tilt toward America, the election of President Biden is now likely to increase London’s preference for a more conformist posture.

If Britain were to favour Israel more often at the UN, however, it could bear some weight in eroding what Israel considers its international ‘pariah’ status (Abrams, 2018). The UK’s permanent seat on the Security Council and its determination to become a “soft power superpower” make it a commanding global voice (Integrated Review, 2021: 49). To this end, Britain’s intermittent pro-Israel voting behaviour could assuage some international pressure on Israel by diminishing its ‘pariah’ status, and implicitly encourage other countries to support Israel at the UN. This could provide tacit diplomatic cover for Israel’s disputed activities in the Palestinian Territories, particularly its construction of settlements in the West Bank.

A further consideration arising from Brexit for British foreign policy vis-à-vis Israel-Palestine is evident in a speech made by former Prime Minister David Cameron to a pro-Israel charity prior to the referendum (Jackman, 2016):

“When Europe is discussing its attitude towards Israel, do you want Britain—Israel’s greatest friend—in there opposing boycotts, opposing the campaign for divestment and sanctions, or do you want us outside the room, powerless to affect the discussion that takes place?”

Rynhold (2016) and Greene (2019) argue Israel may come to miss Britain's influence in the EU because London acted as a bridge between the US and Europe and was the most active member in confronting 'anti-Israel' motions, particularly regarding Iran and the Palestinians. In February 2021, President Biden said he was ready to engage with Iran on nuclear deal negotiations, and the EU has offered an 'informal meeting' to Tehran in an attempt to kickstart talks (Staff, 2021). Moreover, in June 2020, France, Ireland, Belgium and Luxembourg reportedly pressed the EU to apply punitive economic action against Israel following rumours that the Israeli government was planning to extend Israeli sovereignty over approximately 30 per cent of the West Bank. The EU foreign policy High Representative, Josep Borrell, said any attempt to annex Palestinian territory would "not pass unchallenged" (Goldberg, 2020). Boris Johnson similarly warned against annexation, but did not threaten policy action (Beaumont, 2020).

While the EU remains divided on issues related to Israel-Palestine, Rynhold and Greene's contention that Britain's absence in the EU may lead to a rise in policies that are less aligned with Israeli interests is yet to manifest. If such a situation was to arise, however, it could prompt Britain to balance against European action, as London considers itself a strong friend of Israel in Europe. This is additionally possible under the Prime Ministership of Boris Johnson, who in July 2020 called himself a "passionate defender of Israel" (Staff, 2020). EU policy toward Israel-Palestine in the coming years, therefore, may be consequential in shaping the direction of British policy toward the conflict.

Increased trade with Israel

On 18 February 2020, Britain and Israel signed a trade continuity agreement to replace the EU-Israel Association Agreement. One week later, the UK signed an interim political, trade and partnership agreement with the Palestinian Authority, a similar scheme to the EU-Palestinian Authority Interim Agreement. Both deals dictate the terms of trade between the respective parties from 1 January 2021, and are fundamentally identical to their former EU arrangements.

Since London designated Israel a ‘key strategic partner’ in 2011 and pledged to “encourage a stronger partnership between British and Israeli companies”, the UK-Israel economic relationship has grown immensely (BICOM, 2016: 3). Israel was particularly eager to expand its trade relations with the UK following Brexit, signified by the quick establishment of a post-Brexit UK-Israel trade policy working group on 28 March 2017. In 2017, the number of Israeli companies operating in the UK increased by 28 per cent, with a 33.5 per cent rise in the level of investment on the previous year (BICOM, 2017). Annual British exports to Israel grew 16 per cent between 2016 and 2019 (ONS, 2019), while Israeli exports to Britain have increased 286 per cent since 2010 (Halon, 2019). Several UK Government ministers recently said they support “higher ambitions” between the “two tech superpowers” (Lewis, 2020), and the recent burst of activity between the two nations indicates a mutual commitment to continued economic engagement.

The Palestinians, on the other hand, are more restricted in acquiring valuable investment opportunities with Britain, as Israel continues to levy significant constraints on “raw materials, new technologies and mobility of skilled labour/expertise” in the Palestinian Territories (FCO, 2021). While total trade in goods and services between the UK and the

Palestinian Territories doubled from £9m to £18m between 2019 and 2020, comparative flows in foreign direct investment are stark. The latest data (2019) in outward flows in foreign direct investment from Britain to Israel and the Palestinian Territories were £193m and £1m, respectively (ONS, 2021).

Moreover, Israeli industries present greater opportunities for Britain due to their niche expertise, particularly in the areas of R&D and technology. Primary imports from the Palestinian Territories to the UK include vegetables and fruit, olive oil, cereals and sanitary materials—each category constitutes under 1 per cent of the total products sourced to the UK. By contrast, Israel provides 11.3 per cent of Britain’s vegetables and fruit, and, more importantly, exports advanced technologies in the fields of cybersecurity, financial technology and state-of-the-art military hardware (ONS, 2021). The UK Government’s *Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, released 16 March 2021, which presents London’s ambitions for ‘Global Britain’, places particular emphasis on science and technology power to ensure Britain’s competitive edge and security (Niblett, 2021). This makes Israel an eminently more valuable trading partner.

Importantly, discourse concerning post-Brexit trade engagements between Britain and the Palestinian Authority and Britain and Israel is perhaps the greatest indicator of future economic relations between the respective parties. In the years since the referendum, the Palestinian Authority’s principal aim appeared to be to secure its EU-UK transition trade agreement, evidenced by the relevant government documents’ emphasis on *continuing* rather than *developing* or *expanding* UK-Palestinian trade relations (DFIT, 2019). Israel, on the

other hand, sought to capitalise on post-Brexit trade opportunities and grow its import-export portfolio with the UK, as shown in government statements and the preceding data.

With that said, there is no clear evidence, to date, to suggest that Britain's increased trade relations with Israel since the Brexit vote has impacted its broader policy toward the conflict. The development of UK-Israel trade relations, however, does give further cause to consider a British tilt toward America, as the United States is Israel's number one trading partner and the integration of the British and Israeli economies could complicate the policy sphere. With that said, Britain's post-Brexit trading partnerships are young, and whether Britain and Israel continue these economic partnerships will become clearer in the coming years. Nevertheless, London's increased commercial ties with Israel, and relatively expendable economic relations with the Palestinians, may generate consequences for British foreign policy toward the conflict moving forward.

Global Britain and Israel-Palestine

Global Britain refers to the UK Government's post-Brexit foreign policy and signals London's intent to resist becoming inward-looking and engage in a spirit of positive collaboration with partners in Europe and beyond. The *Integrated Review* makes clear that Britain's primary foreign policy focus moving forward is the Indo-Pacific region, as it seeks to strengthen multilateral associations to contest China's increasing assertiveness in the region and address global issues such as climate change. This geopolitical 'tilt to the Indo-Pacific' implies London's tilt toward American leadership to support the Biden administration's strategy to contain China (Niblett, 2021).¹

¹ See Magnus Obermann, 2021, "Shifting the post-Brexit alliances? Britain's China policy between American fervour, European ambiguity, and global British ambition", BRIFPO Paper, London: LSE European Foreign Policy Unit.

On Britain's engagements in the Middle East and North Africa, the Government aims to "enhance collaboration in areas such as life sciences and green technology" and build upon its "close security partnerships" with allies in the region (Integrated Review, 2021: 63, 64). Israel is named as an important partner to achieving these objectives. Continuity with historic strategic partners, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel, is the modus operandi moving forward in the region. While the report does make specific mention of initiatives including a continued effort to combat ISIS, prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and to support female education, it makes no reference to the Israel-Palestine conflict or the Palestinians. This arguably reflects the "new realism in the UK Government" that has arisen due to London's failures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Niblett, 2021), and, more importantly, is further evidence of London's lower-order-priority attitude toward the conflict.

In light of the trends seen since the Brexit referendum and recent post-Brexit developments in British foreign policy toward the Israel-Palestine conflict, this paper finds that Brexit has generated three important new forces—a tilt toward American leadership, legislative autonomy, and increased investment between Israel and the UK—that have influenced, and are likely to continue to influence, British foreign policy toward the conflict. While Britain's fundamental policy positions remain, including its advocacy of a two-state solution, and any significant shifts are now more unlikely under President Biden than were possible under President Trump, the development of these forces increase the likelihood of policy differences arising between Britain and the EU on the Israel-Palestine conflict moving forward.

CHRONOLOGY OF MAIN EVENTS

- December 2019 - UK breaks from EU protocol for the second year straight and votes 'No' to the resolution 'the UN demands that Israel withdraw from the Golan'.
<https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12220.doc.htm>
- January 2020 - Boris Johnson affirms support for President Trump's 'Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People' in the House of Commons.
- February 2020 – UK-Israel continuity trade agreement signed.
- February 2020 – UK-Palestinian Authority continuity trade agreement signed.
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/summary-of-the-uk-palestinian-authority-political-trade-and-partnership-agreement#what-the-agreement-includes>
- January 2021 – Joe Biden takes office as President of the United States of America.
- January 2021 – President Biden reinstates foreign aid to the Palestinians that was cut during his predecessors term.
- March 16 2021 - Global Britain in a competitive age: The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy outlines the UK Government's foreign policy approach.

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