



**Statement before the UK Parliament**  
**Joint Select Committee on the National Security Strategy**

***“The UK's National Security Strategy  
in the Middle East”***

A Testimony by:

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**October 20, 2025**

## **The Middle East and UK security**

The UK's National Security Strategy (NSS) states that the Middle East is a secondary priority area for the United Kingdom, after the Euro-Atlantic theater. Yet, the UK faces serious threats from the Middle East:

First, the Israel-Gaza war and its spillover effects continue to threaten UK interests. Israel has conducted strikes on at least six countries across the region, which have shifted the regional balance of power. Some of the implications of this shift are positive for the UK. The attacks decimated Hezbollah in Lebanon, which also contributed to the ouster of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Israeli and U.S. strikes left Iran severely weakened and degraded its nuclear program. However, Israeli strikes on Doha led some key UK allies in the Gulf to view an unrestrained Israel as their primary threat in the region, which is jeopardizing efforts to integrate the region economically and politically. To help stabilize the broader region and secure UK trade and investments, the UK will need to support efforts to re-establish guardrails and contribute to initiatives that advance the integration of the region. The consequences of failing to give Palestinians a positive vision to buy-into for their future would be far reaching. Without a lasting solution in Gaza, we will see a resumption of violence, generations of individuals in Palestine and beyond radicalized, and an increased risk of new waves of irregular migration to Europe.

Second, maritime security is a critical concern for the UK, as the Middle East is one of the key arteries of global trade. Houthi attacks on commercial and naval shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have increased shipping costs, added supply chain delays, and disrupted energy supplies, jeopardizing the UK's economic and energy security. The Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea continue to see large-scale drug smuggling activities and sporadic piracy.

Third, cyber and hybrid threats will continue. Despite Iran's historic weakening, it is increasingly using cyber tools for espionage, disinformation, and to attack key infrastructure. After the E3 activated the sanctions snap-back mechanism, the UK's relations with Iran are at a low. Failing to resolve tensions with Iran will increase the threat of asymmetric attacks on the UK.

Fourth, actors in the Middle East are exacerbating threats to the UK in other regional theaters. The NSS notes that UK adversaries and competitors are working more closely together. CSIS has gathered data to assess the growing [security](#), [economic](#), and [diplomatic](#) ties between the so-called CRINK axis of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. We assert that this grouping fails to represent a true axis but deepening bilateral ties between CRINK states still challenge UK interests. Just as Iran has supplied missiles and drones to support Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Chinese manufacturers have delivered critical missile fuels to Iran. The United States' direct involvement in the Iran war likely deterred China and Russia from increasing their military support to Iran after the war. Yet, as conditions evolve, they could choose to deepen their security cooperation, which would exacerbate threats to the UK.

Despite the security challenges emanating from the Middle East, the UK government is currently reducing its presence in the region. The Royal Navy plans to decommission the HMS Lancaster, which is the last British warship in the Gulf. With no warships to replace her, the UK will be less able to advance maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Middle East.

The UK has also dramatically cut its international aid to the region. Aid cuts undermine its ability to capitalize on positive developments in the region, including the sidelining of Hezbollah in Lebanon and bolstering Syria's fragile transition. Aid cuts will also reduce the UK's ability to shape a more positive future for Palestinians.

The NSS lists the different tools the UK has in the Middle East – diplomatic, humanitarian, military, and prosperity footprint – but does not say which tools are most effective and should be prioritized with limited resources. Now is a promising moment to invest in diplomacy to cement Israel's military gains across the region. The UK is well-placed to capitalize on its strategic connectivity – it can talk to almost everyone, has gained the trust of the United States, European states, and most regional actors, and can serve as an agile mediator. An injection of stabilization support for Lebanon and Syria now—in partnership with Gulf actors—could also help ensure that instability in the Levant does not create the conditions for the rise of new radical groups and renewed outflows of mass migration.

### **The Iran challenge**

The 12-day war between Israel and Iran in June 2025 left Iran devastated. U.S. and Israeli strikes degraded Iran's nuclear facilities, killed many of its most senior military officials and nuclear scientists, and left it exposed to future Israeli attacks. However, for some members of the Iranian elite, the attacks may have proved the necessity of rushing towards nuclear capabilities and have entrenched their nuclear ambitions.

The only way to contain Iran's ambitions is to resume negotiations on the future of its nuclear program and its integration into the Middle East. The UK was reportedly the driving force behind the E3's implementation of the snapback mechanism for sanctions in late September. Renewed sanctions have increased Western leverage over Iran but further entrenched the trust deficit. It will be difficult to restart negotiations in these conditions, but it is critical to try. Although the UK did not play a major role in the previous rounds of U.S.-Iran negotiations in Oman and Rome, an opportunity exists after the Israel-Hamas ceasefire deal for the UK to deepen its diplomatic engagement on this file.

Arab Gulf states would likely be highly supportive of UK diplomatic efforts on Iran. Their Iran strategy has shifted dramatically over the past decade. Saudi Arabia went from vehemently opposing the 2015 Iran nuclear deal to normalizing with Iran in 2023 and actively encouraging U.S.-Iran talks earlier this year. In general, Arab Gulf states now favor a stable Middle East over attempts to dominate their rivals in the region. As such, even though Iran is at a historic state of

weakness, Arab Gulf states want to see Iran integrated into the region in a peaceful and sustainable way. They feel that that is the only way of avoiding being caught up in future escalations.

### **Deepening partnerships**

The NSS states that the UK intends to increase its cooperation on trade and security with Gulf states. The UK can contribute to new integrated security structures in the Middle East to advance its security and economic interests in tandem. The UK's accession to the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA) between Bahrain and the United States in June 2025 is an important example. It signals ongoing UK commitment to Bahrain's security and prosperity and advances Gulf states' vision for their region. The partnership has already paid dividends. Bahrain was the only Arab state to participate in the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The UK should deepen its engagement through the C-SIPA framework and explore opportunities to expand or replicate it with other international partners and states in the Gulf.

Gulf states seek to become key connectors of the global economy. The advanced state of free trade agreement negotiations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is positive in that regard. Similar talks between the GCC and other major powers, such as the European Union, China, and India, have stalled, and the UK can capitalize on its agility to secure a deal that unlocks a significant growth in trade.

However, the UK government will need to accept that its leverage over the GCC is much reduced in the changing international environment. Gulf states are increasingly confident middle powers on the global stage and are acting with greater strategic autonomy. They have a variety of potential trading partners and investors, and they are unlikely to agree to efforts to insert human rights clauses into trade agreements. Should a UK-GCC trade agreement be reached, UK businesses will be able to access a wide range of new opportunities, but risk becoming complicit in human rights abuses, particularly relating to migrant workers in the Gulf.

Saudi Arabia is a promising partner for the UK. Its foreign policy has transformed over the past decade, as de facto ruler Mohammad bin Salman has grown more risk averse and diversified his international relationships. A decade ago, Saudi Arabia was intervening in Yemen, competing with Gulf states in Syria, blockading Qatar, forcing the Lebanese prime minister to resign, and conducting a brutal crackdown on dissidents. Now, it is normalizing with Iran, engaging in the stabilization of Lebanon and Syria (in partnership with other Gulf states), and contributing to the Gaza ceasefire deal. Today, Saudi Arabia is clearly advancing a mission of stabilizing the broader region. Saudi Arabia is keen to deepen its partnerships with international actors that support its economic diversification efforts and offers great potential for UK investors.

The UK government must be clearheaded that deepening its relationship with states like Saudi Arabia will not make those countries more likely to take the side of the UK in regional or global conflicts. Instead, Saudi Arabia will maintain ties with the UK's strategic competitors, such as

Russia, China, and Iran. Saudi Arabia views China as a strategic partner. China is the largest consumer of Saudi oil, but it is also deeply involved in numerous sectors in Saudi Arabia. China has made deep and multilayered investments in Saudi Arabia's renewables market, for example. China is not seeking to displace the United States and its Western allies in the Middle East or replicate its security role.

However, China's deep economic ties have the effect of weakening Western leverage over Saudi Arabia. China can offer Saudi Arabia economic and technological incentives with no political conditions. This growing partnership may induce Saudi Arabia to side with China more frequently in global institutions, on issues such as Ukraine, technology governance, or human rights.

But China's gains in the Gulf should not deter the UK from putting forward an alternative offer of partnership that highlights its unique value add. The UK serves as a trusted security partner in the Gulf, with a long-standing and institutionalized military presence. British military education and professionalization programs are prestigious and embed long-term relationships. The UK can also serve as a trusted investment partner, with regulatory frameworks that provide predictability and financial integrity. British soft power also has enduring appeal. British universities can capitalize on Middle Eastern students' newfound hesitation to study in the United States to increase the share of international students from the Gulf that study in the UK. If the UK partners effectively with like-minded allies in the West, it can better articulate red lines for Chinese engagement in the Gulf and limit the threats that China poses to UK assets and investments in the region.

## **Recommendations**

As it prioritizes the Euro-Atlantic theater in its national security strategy, the UK should:

1. Articulate more clearly which of its tools it should dedicate limited resources to in the Middle East.
  - a. It should invest in diplomacy to translate Israel's military gains in Iran and Lebanon into sustainable agreements. It should test openings to restart negotiations with Iran on its nuclear file and integration into the Middle East.
  - b. It should surge support to Lebanon and Syria to seize advantage of the rare window of opportunity to stabilize the Levant and avoid the need for much more costly interventions later if these transitions fail. Partnering with Gulf aid actors is an effective way of scaling the impact of these interventions.
2. Rapidly conclude the free trade agreement with the GCC to allow UK companies to capitalize on the advantage it would give them to seize investment opportunities before other major international markets sign similar preferential trade deals.
3. Deepen its engagement with Bahrain through the C-SIPA framework and explore opportunities to expand it to other international partners or replicate it with other states in the Gulf.

4. Accept that China will continue to play a major role in the Gulf, but partner with like-minded allies in the West to articulate red lines for Chinese engagement to limit the threat China poses to UK assets and investments in the region.