

Alan Duncan's Diaries: An Insider's Account of Boris Johnson, Brexit and Britain's Middle East Secrets

The former Conservative minister's newly published diaries heap scathing criticism on Brexit and Boris Johnson

By [Chris Mullin](#)

Global Research, May 04, 2021

[Middle East Eye](#) 3 May 2021

Region: [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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Every British government has its diarist; a secret scribbler, usually one who dwells in the foothills of power, quietly observing the comings and goings of the big beasts and the events that preoccupy them.

It was [Alan Clark](#), a middle-ranking defence minister, whose bestselling diaries sensationally illuminated the Thatcher decade. In the mid-1990s, [Gyles Brandreth](#), a lowly whip, provided the best inside account of John Major's disintegrating government. Then, as now, the Tories were tearing themselves apart over Europe.

My own three volumes of [diaries](#) (two of which scraped into the bestseller lists) charted the rise and fall of New Labour under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. More recently, [Sasha Swire](#), the wife of Hugo Swire, who served as a minister in David Cameron's government, provided glimpses of life inside the tiny elite who governed us between 2010 and 2016.

Now Alan Duncan, a middle-ranking Foreign Office minister, delivers a behind-the-scenes account of these last five turbulent years of political life in Britain, titled [In the Thick of It](#). The stakes are high. Brexit, the rise of Boris Johnson and Britain's diminishing role in the world are the big themes.

In passing, he also sheds light on a little-known area: Britain's close relationship with the strategically vital Gulf state of Oman. It is no secret that Britain has long been heavily involved in Oman, one of the UK's last remaining outposts in the Middle East. British officers [staff](#) the Omani armed forces, and the communications monitoring agency, GCHQ has a [base](#) there. In addition, the sultanate, like many of its neighbours, is an important market for [British weapons](#).

Omani sultan's 'privy council'

Duncan's interest in the region dates back to his days as an [oil trader](#). In 2014, Cameron appointed him a [special envoy to Oman](#), a job he took very seriously. He was a member of what he refers to as the sultan's "privy council", a group of six prominent members of the British establishment who meet annually with the sultan to offer advice.

Duncan says he has attended 14 such meetings since 2001, and one has only to run an eye down the cast list to gauge the importance the UK attaches to the relationship. Fellow members of the so-called privy council have included serving and former heads of the Secret Intelligence Service, a former private secretary to the Queen, several former chiefs of the armed forces, and Mervyn King, the former governor of the Bank of England.

The entertainment is lavish. Duncan writes of the sultan's New Year's dinner in 2019:

"I was in the same seat I've occupied for the last 20 years ... it was not so much a buffet as a sumptuous feast with two lines of tables, each perhaps 15 yards long groaning with massive platters of lobster, prawns, chicken etc. That's just for starters. We come back again beneath domed silver lids. Then puddings and the New Year cake which is eight feet high ... Dinner finished about 2am and then we had a concert until 4.30am."

Oman's [Sultan Qaboos](#), who reigned for almost 50 years, died in January 2020 and was succeeded by his cousin. A [high-level delegation](#) had to be scrambled at short notice to pay respects to the new ruler: Prince Charles, the prime minister, the defence secretary and the chief of defence staff. Be in no doubt: Oman matters to the UK.

Given his longstanding interest in the region, the author might reasonably have expected that his Foreign Office responsibilities would include the Middle East. But the Conservative Friends of Israel, noting his pro-Palestinian sympathies, had other ideas.

Duncan's entry for 16 July 2016 notes:

"At 5.30pm I go to the Foreign Office. All seems clear and agreed that I will be minister for the Middle East, as expected ... But when I see Boris [Johnson] at 6pm it seems a massive problem has arisen ... Boris says the Conservative Friends of Israel are going ballistic ... As I see it, it is for no other reason than that I believe in the rights of Palestinians and whereas they pretend to believe in two parallel states, it is quite clear that they don't and so they set out to destroy genuine advocates for Palestine."

Cowards in the face of Israel

It seems that pro-Israel groups were also lobbying the prime minister's office: "Now Number 10 are telling Boris I cannot have the Middle East ... In any other country [this] ... would in my view be seen as entrenched espionage." In fairness, there were other objections, with Duncan's former business connections in the Middle East were also seen as a problem. He was ultimately allocated responsibility for Europe and the Americas, with the exception of Oman, which he was allowed to keep.

There was a curious sequel to this little episode. Shai Masot, an Israeli diplomat, was [caught on camera](#) talking of "taking down" Duncan. The Israeli ambassador called to apologise, asserting that the individual concerned had been hired locally and did not have diplomatic status.

"All total bollocks," writes Duncan. "Masot is a first or second secretary, a member of military intelligence, employed specifically as a parliamentary and

undercover propagandist.”

The incident was quickly brushed under the carpet. Masot, who also had Labour Party contacts, was sent home. The British government, anxious to avoid a row with the Israelis, did not pursue the matter. Neither did the Labour Party, which has been cowed by [allegations of antisemitism](#).

Duncan, despite being a model of discretion in public, was privately scathing about the UK’s attitude towards Israel.

“We are supine, lickspittle, insignificant cowards,” he remarks after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was feted at Downing Street.

“Where is the British reaction?” he asks after a pro-settlement Israeli politician [asserted](#) that all of the occupied West Bank belonged to Israel.

“It is not just the end of the two-state solution. It is the end of any principled stand on the issue by the UK, given that this has always been a red-line for us and we intend to do nothing,” he writes of an Israeli plan to evict 500 Bedouin from land on the edge of Jerusalem to make way for settlers.

Haunted by Brexit

But it is [Brexit](#), not Israel, that haunts this volume. Indeed, it haunts the entire Conservative Party.

In February 2016, Duncan, a long-time Eurosceptic, briefly flirted with the Leave campaign, but one visit to the Vote Leave headquarters was enough to bring home to him the company he would be keeping and, thereafter, he was solidly behind the Remain campaign.

He explains his conversion thus:

“Somewhere along the line from the early 1990s the cause of honest and thoughtful Euro-scepticism mutated into a form of simplistic nationalism which strikes me as ugly and demeaning. Instead of campaigning for the reform of outdated EU institutions and seeking a better deal for the UK, too many Euro-sceptics retreated instead into crude sloganeering. There was a rational and pragmatic case to be made for leaving the EU, but few bothered to make it. Instead we faced a wave of populist nonsense, emotive platitudes and downright lies.”

Although sympathetic to the impossible task she faced and publicly loyal throughout to the then-prime minister, Theresa May, Duncan, like others, despaired at her lack of empathy: “No poise or presence. Charisma by-pass. No personality.”

In July 2016, Boris Johnson was [appointed](#) foreign secretary and Duncan, his deputy in all but name, was well-placed to observe. His opinion of Johnson was low. Six days before May was due to make a major speech on Europe, Johnson [published](#) a lengthy essay setting out what were described as his “red lines” on the subject, thereby entirely undermining her.

Once again, Duncan was scathing:

"[He] thinks he is the next Churchill. He has a self-deluding, mock-romantic passion which is not rooted in realism. He is disloyal. A decade of press attention has gone to his head and he doesn't appreciate that the gloss has gone. His comedy routine has gone stale; his lack of seriousness in a serious job rankles ... He is a clown, a self-centred ego, an embarrassing buffoon, with an untidy mind and sub-zero diplomatic judgement. He is an international stain on our reputation ... a lonely, selfish, shambolic, ill-disciplined, shameless clot."

Maybe. But it is a measure of Britain's decline in the world that this man is now our prime minister. Somewhere in the bowels of government, another secret scribbler will be at work continuing to chart the UK's remorseless slide into insularity and irrelevance. Oh yes, and I have it on good authority that the Queen keeps a diary, too. I wonder what she makes of it all.

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Chris Mullin is a former Labour minister. He was a member of the House of Commons from 1987-2010. His latest novel, The Friends of Harry Perkins, is now available in paperback.

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