

Liz Truss Premiership and the Middle East: Set to Put Money Over Human Rights and Democracy

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The British Conservative Party selected Liz Truss as its new leader, and the [United Kingdom](#)’s next prime minister, on Monday.

Truss, who is currently foreign secretary, will formally be confirmed as prime minister on Tuesday following her success in the contest to succeed Boris Johnson as leader of the governing party.

She has been called a political “[shapeshifter](#)” and someone whose views are “[very black and white](#)”. As prime minister she inherits a political agenda dominated by a domestic cost of living crisis fuelled by spiralling inflation and energy prices.

But her record as foreign secretary and previously as a minister for international trade also offers clues as to the likely direction the Truss-led government will take in the key policy areas involving the UK and the Middle East.

Israel-Palestine

As [Israeli](#) air strikes pummelled the besieged Gaza strip in early August, killing at least [45 Palestinian civilians, including 15 children](#), Truss issued a statement of support for Israel, saying: “The UK stands by Israel, and its right to defend itself.”

Closer to home, Truss will be taking over a government that is seeking to [outlaw](#) the

Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement by preventing public bodies, councils and their pension funds from boycotting investments in Israel.

Despite [criticism](#) from civil society organisations that the move would represent a “threat to freedom of expression, and the ability of public bodies and democratic institutions to spend, invest and trade ethically in line with international law and human rights”, Truss has offered no indication that she would reverse course.

The prime minister’s staunch support for Israel has even led to her [stating](#) that she had overruled long-serving bureaucrats at the Foreign Office by backing Israel at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), and suggesting that the UN body had been “used to peddle a particular agenda which frankly have strong elements of antisemitism”.

In June, UNHRC members passed [two resolutions](#) affirming the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and condemning illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, and the occupied Golan Heights.

The UK voted against the resolutions, putting it largely out of step with the rest of the international community.

More recently, in a move that would [reverse](#) decades of British policy on Israel-Palestine, Truss said she would “review” the relocation of the country’s [Israel](#) embassy to Jerusalem.

“I’ve had many conversations with my good friend [Israeli] Prime Minister [Yair] Lapid on this topic. Acknowledging that, I will review a move to ensure we are operating on the strongest footing within Israel,” she wrote in a letter to the Conservative Friends of Israel advocacy group.

Under Truss, the British foreign office has also opened [free trade negotiations](#) with Israel, hoping to boost the more than \$5bn worth of trade between the two countries.

UK and Gulf ties

When a committee of members of parliament asked Truss to name a time that she had raised human rights concerns with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries – a political and economic bloc made up of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman – she failed to do so.

Despite her past promises to hold countries engaged with human rights abuses “to account”, Truss believes it’s more important “to do business” with Gulf countries.

As foreign secretary, she oversaw the start of the UK’s efforts to secure a free trade agreement with the GCC countries. The British government has “identified the region as crucial to London’s interest for commercial and strategic reasons,” said Umberto Profazio, associate fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

“For the post-Brexit UK, it’s evidently important to diversify as much as possible its trade partners, and the Gulf is certainly an important region where London is nonetheless facing several competitors that have been able to make significant inroads in recent years,” Profazio told Middle East Eye.

“Facing China and Russia’s growing influence in the region, the UK is certainly losing ground like many other western powers, which are suffering from a lack of credibility in the eyes of their Arab partners,” added Profazio.

As Britain seeks to diversify its trading relationship, Saudi Arabia’s war in [Yemen](#), which has left thousands dead and millions on the brink of starvation, will likely take a back seat.

The humanitarian crises in Yemen hasn’t prevented the UK government from approving continuing [weapons sales](#) to the Saudis either, with the Department of International Trade dragging its feet when MEE asked to see documents which could offer insights into how decisions about policy regarding arms sales to Saudi Arabia has been shaped by the conflict.

Egypt’s human rights record

Liz Truss’s focus on doing business with Middle East countries and prioritising her leadership race to become the prime minister has meant the plight of the British-[Egyptian](#) activist [Alaa Abd el-Fattah](#) has been largely ignored.

The Egyptian state has hounded the Egyptian writer and political activist since 2014. He was arrested and imprisoned in 2019 and, in December 2021, was sentenced to five years for spreading “false news”. The evidence used against him was a retweet.

Since May, Alaa has been on hunger strike, with prison authorities denying him consular assistance, reading materials, a bed, and even a clock.

Alaa’s family recently slammed Truss for her failure to assist him, expressing their exasperation at her lack of help. “Honestly, it just feels like she is intentionally dismissing our plight and her responsibility towards us,” his sister Mona Seif wrote on [Twitter](#).

Business as usual on Iran

While Truss was credited for helping Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the UK-Iranian charity worker who spent more than five years in jail in [Iran](#) on accusations of spying, back to Britain, her husband accused her of not doing enough to hold to account those responsible for his wife’s incarceration.

Richard Ratcliffe said Truss had not followed through on a promise to impose sanctions on individuals in Iran who had been involved in the affair.

On the pressing matter of the Iranian nuclear deal, Truss has taken a more [hardline position](#).

“I have been clear that progress on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is not moving fast enough, and I assure you that if the JCPOA collapses, all options are on the table,” she said recently.

There is every sign that Truss would follow a “business as usual” approach on the Middle East, said Profazio from ISS.

“While much of her attention would be inevitably devoted to the difficult economic situation and domestic policies, a Truss government would be managing the different crises according to its interests and privileging security and stability over any other issue,” added Profazio.

“I would expect much closer ties with Gulf partners, in consideration of the importance of the FTA negotiations for the UK, and further efforts to accommodate the interests of main partners such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including in the main conflict theatres where these countries are actively engaging,” Profazio told MEE.

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