

From Arab headdresses to the aerospace industry, the thread of history links us to the Middle East

Covid-19 has forced many of us to be furloughed or to work from home for months. While for some it has been a pleasant experience to reconnect to our families and communities it has also, for many, been an anxious time. Wondering whether our jobs will be safe, or our high streets will return to normal. The UK has got used to thinking we are a service-based economy. It is true to say that it is that part of the economy that is on the front line of lockdown. But, all the while, another part of the economy has been sustaining British jobs and helping our forces stay safe from our adversaries.

The British aerospace industry has been at the forefront of our resilience. BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Babcock International and hundreds of innovative small and medium-sized enterprises up and down the country have been working throughout lockdown. We should be proud of what they have been doing and proud of the fact we have this world-class aerospace industry – an industry I'll be championing as I head to the Middle East this week. The defence and security sector is a breeding ground for science, invention and world-beating technology, as the bedrock of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the UK. In the northwest alone more than 16,000 jobs are directly part of aerospace manufacture, which in turn supports around 120,000 in the supply chain across the UK. That is an awful lot of bricks in the northern "red wall."

But our aerospace industry isn't just a domestic concern – its exports amount to £34bn. In pure defence products we are the world's second-biggest defence exporter and our security manufacturers are breaking records in the field of cyber-technology and sensors. Their exports enable us to afford the best for the men and women of the services. No country that wants to keep ahead of our enemies, not even America, can afford to not export. That's why we will soon be publishing a Defence Industrial Strategy alongside the Integrated Review.

The review, which we are currently in the middle of, will be the deepest and most far-reaching foreign policy and defence review for decades. As defence secretary, I recognise we desperately need to reform and modernise our armed forces if we are to meet emerging threats. For too long we have had a sentimental attachment to a static, armoured centric force structure anchored in Europe, while our competition has spread out across the globe. If we are to truly play our role as "Global Britain," we must be more capable in new domains, enabling us to be active in more theatres. But the review will focus not just on foreign policy and defence operations, it will also recognise the importance of research, skills and the aerospace industry. Without them, our forces could risk losing the battle-winning advantage we will need in this ever more insecure and anxious world.

So this week, I'll be visiting Oman and Qatar. It isn't a sales exercise, but an affirmation of our friendship and shared interests. Unlike some "fly by

night” partners, the UK has stood alongside the great peoples and nations of the region for more than 100 years. We recognised, as a trading nation, that the Gulf’s stability and our stability are linked. Before oil, before aerospace, we were there. We haven’t always got it right, but the UK has always had an inherent love of the region. More than a century ago we understood the delicate but vital importance of keeping in balance the strategic and sometimes competing interests of great empires, such as the Ottoman. And we also were there when the empires retreated and the new powers emerged – Saudi Arabia, Israel, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Iraq, joining longstanding friends such as Oman.

In my own constituency I have a traditional cotton mill that to this day makes top-quality shemaghs (Arab headdresses). It started as a partnership between a Lancashire mill owner and a Saudi businessman in the 1920s. Today the Saudi’s family own the mill and the partnership still endures.

It used to be said that “Britain’s bread hangs from Lancashire thread.” Just like the mill, the partnership between the Middle East and the aerospace industry endures for the mutual benefit of us all.