Minister for the Middle East speech at the Driving International Trade Conference

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In a keynote speech at the British Chambers of Commerce’s annual conference, Minister Falconer highlighted how the Foreign Office is supporting businesses to navigate an increasingly uncertain world.

Good morning, I’m Hamish Falconer, I’m the Middle East Minister. No relation of Sir Crawford. I thought unusual to have someone with the same surname speak before me.

Thanks very much for having us, thanks to the Chambers for bringing us together. Thank you to everybody here, I know we’ve got business leaders, exporters and partners.

It’s so important that we’re here together this morning for what you bring to the table. Your insight and experience really matters to the Foreign Office, especially when the world feels less predictable.

At last year’s conference, the former Foreign Secretary spoke about the need to bring trade and diplomacy closer together to help businesses navigate uncertainty. And over the past twelve months, that need has only grown.

We have seen unpredictable tariffs, growing fragmentation in global trade, and an escalation in the Middle East that is affecting decisions in real time.

Trade remains a vital part of this government’s mission to boost growth, so we are keen to do all we can to support you to seize opportunities and manage risks in this environment.

That is why, over the past year, the Foreign Office and British Chambers of Commerce have built a new Diplomatic Advisory Hub.

It brings insight directly from Foreign Office experts into UK boardrooms to support commercial decisions.

It is led by the excellent Richard Oppenheim, our former Ambassador to Yemen, who has nearly 25 years of experience in the Foreign Office. Before he took on this role, he was in my office the whole time providing advice on the Middle East. He can reach right across the Foreign Office to get you the advice that you need.

Our Ambassadors and High Commissioners around the world already facilitate these vital links every day. Many of them also serve as Honorary President of the British Chamber in their host country, helping to open doors, spot opportunities and support British businesses overseas.

Our new Hub builds on that work, making the insights and experience that our world-class diplomatic network has to offer easier to access here.

It is open to all UK businesses, and benefits from the Chambers’ impressive reach. The Hub is focused on providing geopolitical insight, working alongside the rest of the government’s support, from the Department for Business and Trade, DBT, and others.

The Hub has already proved its worth. We launched it just as the situation in the Middle East

intensified.

This month we have hosted two webinars on the Middle East situation for more than a thousand businesses, offered one-to-one support to 70 firms, and held in-person sessions including in the greatest city in the UK, Lincoln, which I am proud to call my constituency, as well as Glasgow, which is also nice.

The insight that businesses provide, whether in Lincoln, Glasgow, or across the country, is fed directly back into government, helping to shape both our thinking and our approach.

I've touched on the Middle East, but let me reflect in a little bit more detail, because I appreciate that many of you will still be weighing up what that conflict means for your operations.

I and my colleagues across the Government are working closely with our partners around the world both to protect our people, to develop plans to safeguard shipping and also, of course, to reduce tensions. We are monitoring energy markets closely and working every day to ensure that British people, including British businesses, are supported through this crisis until it is resolved.

Until then, the Diplomatic Advisory Hub will continue to provide clear, timely insight from right across our network, supporting businesses through this difficult period.

I have shared some examples of the kind of timely, practical support the Diplomatic Advisory Hub is intending to provide in crisis situations. But the Hub is about more than just crisis support. It will provide advice on the full range of geopolitical issues which can impact businesses – as well as gathering feedback from businesses on how the government can better support them to trade and expand overseas.

Geopolitical issues present opportunities as well as challenges for companies.

The United States remains our largest trading partner, and while tariff uncertainty is real, the advantages in our Economic Prosperity Deal remain, and we of course continue to engage closely with the United States.

We know that businesses want a stable, constructive partnership with the European Union, our closest market, and so do we. That is why the government is negotiating agreements that will bring down the costs of food and energy and further reduce barriers to trade.

The Middle East remains a vital region for UK services, energy links and investment partnerships, and a UK-GCC trade agreement remains a shared ambition.

That vital work continues to deepen trade ties following our Free Trade Agreement with India, and the Hub can help firms understand what it means in practice.

With China, businesses see opportunities alongside risk, and the Prime Minister's recent visit led to four agreements strengthening commercial links.

Across these issues and markets, the Hub is helping firms weigh up opportunities against geopolitical realities, translating diplomatic insights into practical advice.

This first year is a pilot, and we very much look forward to your feedback on what works and how the offer can be scaled up and improved.

We will measure its success by one test: Is it useful to you? Are we answering your questions

quickly? Is the advice helping to explain risks and opportunities clearly? Is it saving you time by directing you to the right place?

Tell us what you need, whether it’s briefings, crisis support, or introductions. And tell us what you are noticing, because your insight is crucial, helping us to act more effectively.

The world faces real uncertainty, but you are not facing it alone.

You have the insight of our diplomatic network behind you, the support of the Hub, and a government that is working with you every step of the way.

This is a demanding moment, but by staying close to businesses and our partners overseas we can draw on our shared expertise and keep moving forward with confidence.

Thank you.

https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/minister-for-the-middle-east-speech-at-the-driving-international-trade-conference