

Can Boris Johnson really deal with Brexit complexities?

Regardless of who ends up in 10 Downing Street, the UK's departure from the European Union is the only issue that matters

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On Friday, the would-be Conservative leader and prospective UK prime minister Boris Johnson hit the headlines once again. Mr Johnson, who is known for his chaotic, clownish persona, is no stranger to the front pages.

This time, however, the press attention came after police were called by neighbours, in the early hours of Friday morning, to “a loud argument” at the south London flat he shares with his partner Carrie Symonds.

Police have since disclosed that although they visited the scene, they found no cause for action.

Mr Johnson's opponent in the Tory leadership race, Jeremy Hunt, could not be more different. He is a former head boy and still carries himself with a calm and sensible earnestness.

Irreverence is unlikely to cure Britain's problems but Mr Johnson is almost certain to triumph in the leadership battle.

One recent anecdote of Mr Johnson's is telling.

As Foreign Secretary, he repeatedly asserted that the UK was leaving the EU but not leaving Europe. The country would, he said, “be outside the cathedral, but support it like a flying buttress”.

He then revealed that interpreters had mistranslated his words as “flying bucket”.

Mr Johnson is formidably educated and has, over the years, carved out a lucrative writing career. However, when it comes to matters of diplomacy, he is as likely to offend as he is to flatter.

Confronted with difficult questions, he seeks refuge in non-sequiturs. Asked for his global vision, he has commented about his family's cosmopolitan background.



A poster of prime ministerial hopeful Boris Johnson on a fence opposite his house in London.

“I've managed to strategically litter the world with my ancestors,” he told Chatham House in 2016. Interesting, but not a real answer.

The words Mr Johnson uses are colourful, but deployed at high risk. There is no filter on either his discourse or his actions.

During his tenure at the Foreign Office, he seized on the idea that he and “T-Rex” (the former US secretary of state, Rex Tillerson) would seal a breakthrough in the Yemen conflict.

While Mr Johnson's plan caused

no rancour, there was no prospect of it gaining traction.

It is hard to imagine he can provide real answers on how to restore British prestige, do business with US President Donald Trump, handle relations with China or reconcile foreign policy with domestic pressures.

Mr Johnson has risen to the top as a direct result of Brexit, the issue that will make or break his prospective tenure in 10 Downing Street. His supporters can only hope that, by sheer force of will, he

will be able to smash through the obstacles that ended Theresa May's premiership.

When the Conservative leadership race is over, in the week of July 22, the same walls she faced will begin to close in on whoever becomes prime minister.

Donald Tusk, president of the EU Council, said last week that the UK was wasting the time, leading up to the October 31 Brexit deadline. The Irish leader Leo Varadkar has said there is now “enormous hostility” in the rest of the EU to a further

The briefest of ceasefires highlights p

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It was one of the Syrian conflict's shorter-lived ceasefires. Within hours of an announcement by Turkey and Russia that they had brokered a deal to halt in the fighting in Idlib, Syrian government forces had resumed shelling rebel areas and a Turkish observation post. The tentative hopes of long-suffering civilians were dashed once again.

The fighting in Idlib, which resumed over the last two months, threatens a massive humanitarian catastrophe. Around 3 million people, many of them displaced from other parts of the country, live in Syria's last rebel-held province, which is ruled primarily by militants once affiliated with Al Qaeda. Bombarded by the brutal regime of Bashar Al Assad from the outside and tormented by religious extremists from within, tens of thousands have fled to the Turkish border, and hundreds have already been killed.

Moscow, the Assad regime's main backer, and Ankara, which enjoys widespread influence among the opposition, had apparently hoped to buy some time ahead of a destructive regime campaign to reclaim Idlib.

The failure of the ceasefire, and the ensuing tit-for-tat shell-

ing between Turkish forces and Syrian government troops, have highlighted the intractability and sensitivity of the Syrian war's endgame. It also underscores the fact that even the vaguest contours of a solution remain elusive, despite the regime's military victories.

First, the Assad regime exists in a bizarre dichotomy, where it enjoys impunity in the way it chooses to prosecute this long and grinding war, but also lacks the basic trappings of a sovereign nation state. Russia, which has acted as the regime's enforcer and sole purveyor of legitimacy on the international stage, negotiated a ceasefire deal without even involving Syria, as it has done in other parts of the country. The regime, which picks and chooses whether to adhere to the agreements of its patron, decided simply that it was not bound by this particular deal. It is an arrangement that gives the Russians plausible deniability when it comes to Assad's war crimes, and allows his regime to do what it wants.

The reality is that the Assad regime cannot be trusted to enforce any deal to halt the fighting, let alone a broader political solution that actually grapples with the roots of the Syrian conflict. Its behaviour in Idlib has parallels to its routine detention and torture



A man sits among the debris near the town of Saraqeb in Syria's rebel-held northwestern province of Idlib.

of refugees who decided to return to the country, despite assurances that they would not be persecuted.

It is clear that those who want to negotiate with the regime and ex-

tract some nebulous concessions in exchange for peace are deluding themselves that it intends on any level to adhere to agreements that diminish its power over Syrians.

The second element that the fighting highlighted is the international dimension, which complicates any attempt at finding ever short-term solutions. Even if Tur-

While foreign powers act in their own interests, the lives of ordinary Syrians are being forgotten