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Philip Leech and Jamie Gaskarth. "British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring."

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Since 2011, Britain's strategy in the Middle East, in particular its response to the movements of the so-called 'Arab spring,' has been excoriated by voices from across the political and ideological spectrum in Britain, as well as from the region itself. Indeed, amid a push for renewed intervention in Iraq last August, Prime Minister David Cameron received a personal letter from church leaders including the Archbishop of Canterbury expressing their concern about Downing Street's lack of "coherent response" to the myriad crises in Syria and Iraq. As it noted, his government's policy appeared determined chiefly by "the loudest media voice at any particular time."¹ On subject of London's current approach to the region, the leading commentator and Director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding, Chris Doyle, likewise recently told audiences that "one has to question whether the UK supports democracy in the region at all... Let us not pretend for one moment that British Middle-East policy has ever been consistent, or indeed

¹ See Mark Townsend, "Church launches bitter attack on PM's 'incoherent' Middle East policy," *The Guardian*, 17 August 2014 at: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/aug/16/church-of-england-attack-david-cameron-middle-east-policy> [accessed 21 August 2014].

ethical.”² It is in the context of this much-disparaged strategic opacity that Philip Leech and Jamie Gaskarth seek to scrutinise Britain’s response to events since 2010 in “British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring.”

The article proceeds from this emerging consensus around the inconsistency of UK action, adopting as a framework for analysis an early pledge by the former Foreign Secretary William Hague to adopt a “networked foreign policy” (143). As the authors note, Hague’s description on taking office in 2010 of a “networked world” of “states with fluid and dynamic patterns of allegiance, alliance, and connections”³ suggested a paradigm in which inter-state relations were becoming ever more bilateral as well as increasingly multilateral. Accordingly, the Secretary’s claim to a networked approach to British foreign policy has been interpreted as one shaped primarily on the basis of country-to-country interactions: a more fluid approach dictated by changing perceptions of British interests at a given time. Leech and Gaskarth assess this articulation of policy using three network configurations – governmental (namely security), economic, and societal. London’s response to the various organic ‘Arab spring’ campaigns (hitherto referred to as the Arab uprisings) in the one year after December 2010 is thus measured against detailed data relating to Britain’s security, trade, civil-society, and political involvement with the states under question. In doing so, the authors classify each regional government as an “Authoritarian Monarchy,” an “Authoritarian Republic,” or a “Hybrid Regime” (141). The level of upheaval seen in each is meanwhile mapped on a scale ranging from “No significant protest” (for example, Qatar and UAE) to a “Rupture in the Structure of Rule” (Egypt, Libya and Syria among others). Similarly, Britain’s response to events in each state is calibrated as “Substantial Support for the Protesters,” “Substantial Support for the Regime,” and “No Substantial Commitment to Either Side” (142). Examining these outcomes against extant forms of British networks in each country, an effort is thus made to discern any underlying logic to Britain’s Middle East strategy.

Such a pared-back schema for interpreting the many distinct, fraught, and evolving recent campaigns in the region, as well as Britain’s engagement therein, may at first appear reductive. Yet Leech and Gaskarth’s sparse and empirical account affords a refreshingly lucid lens through which to assess a foreign policy that has become mired in ideological and political contestation. Indeed, it is on those more intangible questions of morality, ideology and political baggage in the shadow of the bungled 2003 Iraq War that much of the commentary on Britain’s response to the Arab uprisings has turned. Yet with official allusions to human-rights, morality, and/or humanitarianism having become stock packaging for any form of Western action (or inaction) abroad, efforts to discern any cohesive ethic driving London’s various machinations prove all the more confounding. (Indeed, as Leech and Gaskarth note, British policymakers’ use of human-rights language to condemn violence, for example that by Colonel Gaddafi, came to be seen as a veil for pursuing self-interest rather than a genuine concern for global norms in its foreign policy. (139)) As David Chandler argued in the aftermath of the joint French-British NATO campaign in Libya, the recurrent mobilisation of the language of human rights in international relations has meant that a term such as “humanitarian intervention’ has been

² “Does Britain have a Strategy in its Middle East Relations?” lecture at the MBI Al Jaber Foundation, London, 19 February 2015, video at: <http://www.mbifoundation.com/news/article.asp?ID=175> [accessed 26 February 2015].

³ William Hague, “Britain’s Foreign Policy in a Networked World” (London, 1 July 2010) <http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-s-foreign-policy-in-a-networked-world-2>.

hollowed out. Today we no longer have a conceptually meaningful understanding either of intervention or of sovereignty.”⁴

Hence there is merit of an attempt to decipher the underlying logic behind Britain’s erratic allegiances through a more singular focus on bilateral interests that might explain apparent foreign policy inconsistencies. In doing so, the authors employ six case study states: Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen. Expository data is presented to highlight the relative strength of Britain’s relations with each, in particular through reference to security networks, trade, hydrocarbons and arms exports, elite interactions, diaspora, and civil-society links. This methodical account relies on extensive primary research in the form of official statistics, policy statements, and parliamentary enquiries, as well as on reports by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and journalistic investigations. The findings in each instance are illuminating, if not revelatory. For example, Leech and Gaskarth deduce that there is “no obvious *prima facie* connexion” between the total value of UK trade and policy toward the movements of the Arab Spring (149). The historically most lucrative Anglo-Egyptian relationship is cited as an instance of this, with the insurrection against the regime of Britain’s long-term ally Hosni Mubarak having received only a muted response from London at the time (though David Cameron later opportunely swooped in as the first Western head-of-state to visit the newly liberated Tahrir Square.) Similarly, undermining widespread perceptions of Western foreign policy in the Middle East as being driven by imperatives of oil and gas, the authors deny that there is any strong case for such a motive. Libya is cited here as the largest supplier of hydrocarbons to Europe, yet also the equal recipient of the most punitive Western response in the form of a NATO-backed military intervention (150). With respect to societal networks – gauged through factors like familial and diplomatic ties, media coverage, and NGO activity – the findings are similarly varied, though the authors note some connections between NGO attention to each case, and the magnitude of the British government’s response (for example, on Bahrain and Syria.)

Overall, the analysis infers that it is British security networks, including the UK arms trade, which have the most substantial influence on government policy in the region. Evidence of this can be found in the case Bahrain, where an extensive historic and explicitly-valourised relationship exists, buttressed by the Anglo-Saudi alliance, on which the Bahraini regime’s ongoing human-rights violations have had little bearing. Despite this and other more minor correlations, the data overall suggests more exceptions than rules and the authors posit an *ad hoc* foreign policy which characteristically failed to either recognise or realise a coherent set of interests within British networks in the region. As they conclude, Hague’s brandished “networked” foreign policy may well amount to “no foreign policy at all” (156).

Such a result is somewhat circular, pointing back to an established lack of cohesion in Britain’s response to the Arab uprisings, as well as to the need for further research with new prisms of analysis. While the final destination of this investigation is not new, the journey is nonetheless worthwhile and the article affords a valuable set of data and a clear, constructive methodology. There are, however, significant limitations to attempts to apply such an exacting formula and curtailed timeframe to infinitely complex, intertwined, and long-standing inter-state dynamics. Many of these are acknowledged by the authors themselves – for example,

⁴ David Chandler, “Why the Bombing of Libya Cannot Herald a Return to the 1990s Era of Humanitarian Intervention,” *e-International Relations*, 4 April 2011, available at: <http://www.e-ir.info/2011/04/04/why-the-bombing-of-libya-cannot-herald-a-return-to-the-1990s-era-of-humanitarian-intervention> [accessed 12 October 2011].

the mutually-permeating nature of networks and state policies in the region which undermine efforts to generalise from isolated state-based case studies.

Yet further pitfalls arise in an analysis which elevates the notion of bilateral relations and treats rhetorical opposition from London as wholesale. The most notable example of this is the treatment of Britain's most strident response against the regime of Gaddafi, which the authors suggest is in theory inimical to the substantial existing UK trade and energy interests in Libya. Such a narrative fails to account for the longer-term aims of Britain's strategy in intervening in Libya - namely, its proven interest in and efforts toward bringing about a post-Gaddafi government in which it would retain influence in the form of productive bilateral ties, and thereby continue to profit from those very same established networks. Similarly, the loose classification of Britain's policy toward events in Syria (alongside Libya) as "Substantial Support for Protestors" is questionable. Notwithstanding Cameron's late and thwarted push for intervention following the chemical atrocities committed by the Syrian regime in August 2013, his government's stance over the preceding two and half-years of brutality has been seen by many as little more than impotent rhetorical support. More typically, the UK has been characterised by Syrian opposition representatives as "throwing breadcrumbs" to anti-regime protestors while equivocating over a longer game of British interests in what quickly became a regional (and international) conflict.⁵ So too, the framework of analysis tends to divorce events from their chronological and thus political context. This thereby diminishes the effect of the domestic climate which, for example, compelled Cameron to flex British military muscle in Libya, and in turn, the effects of that campaign on his relative inclination to intervene in Syria.

Such omissions point not to a lack of insight on the part of the authors, but more to the limitations of a model which assumes policies to be static, bilateral relations atomised, or national interest quantifiable. Conversely, London's stance on Syria (if indeed it can be said to have had one) as a case in point has been in flux throughout the period in question, just as its articulations of support for Arab democracy have become distinctly more muted since February 2011, let alone 2010. Defining British 'national interest' in foreign policy remains a similarly fraught enterprise where governmental, economic, and societal networks are taken as distinct. Rather, as David Wearing notes, foreign policy may be more productively understood as serving the interests of the state alongside the socio-economic forces which yield the greatest power to exercise influence therein.⁶ As well as highlighting these complexities, Leech and Gaskarth's research points to a wider problematic, one of which the authors were doubtless aware on its undertaking: that is, of political catch-phrases and vesting credibility in any official articulation of policy, networked or otherwise.

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⁵ "Syria: Who should help and when?," panel at the Frontline Club, London, 7 March 2013.

⁶ D. Wearing, "Critical Perspectives on the Concept of the 'National Interest': American Imperialism, British Foreign Policy and the Middle East" in T. Edmunds, J. Gaskarth, J. and R. Porter, R., (eds), *British Foreign Policy and the National Interest: Identity, Strategy and Security* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), Ch.6, 102-119.

2003 Iraq War, with a focus on civil-society actors from Iraq, Syria, Libya and Bahrain. Related research has been contributed to publications such as The International Organisation for Migration & League of Arab States, “Study on the Dynamics of the Arab Expatriates: Strengthening Development Linkages” (2012) and *Bahrain’s Uprising – Resistance and Repression in the Gulf* (forthcoming edited volume, Zed Books, November, 2015).

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