The Tyranny of Strangers

New perspectives on British foreign policy and democracy in the Arab Middle-East

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines British approaches to democratic change in the Arab Middle East and North Africa more than a decade after Tony Blair’s participation in regime-change in Iraq, as reflected in the discourses and deeds constituting UK foreign policy. Adopting an expanded historical lens to highlight Britain’s seminal imperial interaction with various nation-states, it aims to broaden understandings of the subsequent crises in the region of this century. To this ends, the legacy of Britain’s attempted exogenous liberation of Iraq is examined from fresh standpoints in the shadow of the 2003 war, recognising that its ramifications continue to be felt by both local and Western parties in the campaigns of the so-called ‘Arab Spring.’

Official responses to these regional upheavals since 2011 are considered against the policymaking practices of Blair’s New Labour government in order to assess strategic learning and/or ideological evolution over the intervening years. This analysis is undertaken through reference to four country-specific case studies – Iraq, as well as Bahrain, Libya and Syria – which serve to foreground different facets of British involvement in the realisation of democratic ends and the attendant foreign policy debates.

Alongside and, in many respects, against dominant accounts of UK foreign policy, this thesis employs extensive original research to offer a rejoinder to prevailing official discourses and analyses. Specifically, it refers to accounts from UK-based members of the Iraqi, Bahraini, Libyan and Syrian diasporas who have mobilised around democratic change in the region. The perspectives documented in these interviews provide a conduit to alternate narratives of British practice and principle as applied abroad in foreign policy. This catalogue of views in turn highlights the desultory, and often disingenuous, course of London’s strategy in the region, both past and present. Such significant new accounts, together with other historical documents and archival sources, thereby elucidate the precepts of “ethical foreign policy”, often exposing Britain’s approach as ill-considered, if not ill-intended. By extending debates around London’s role in the Middle East beyond the official arena, this thesis foregrounds the persistent flaws of British attempts to realise its espoused values in foreign policymaking. In their place, it presents a case for a broader moral purview, as well as greater consistency, coherence and plurality of vision, in UK foreign policymaking in the Arab Middle East and North Africa.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

I. the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD except where indicated in the Preface,
II. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
III. the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.
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PROLOGUE

Damascus – May 2003

The young man in the Pepsi t-shirt shifts his weight on a stack of Bedouin carpets and gestures for us to sit, making a tea signal to the skinny boys across the arcade. It is a torpid afternoon in Souq Hamadiyeh and he appears to welcome an opportunity to talk to tourists about something other than kilim weaves and shipping costs. The region’s other longstanding Ba’athist dictatorship has just been overthrown in Baghdad and, as we are restless to discuss, the effects can of course be felt here, several hours drive over the border. Our companion speaks fluently and freely but quietly, as if walls bearing the ubiquitous, framed effigies of a sunglass-clad Assad clan – president, father, brother – might have ears. We sit.

Is it true, my friend asks him, that many Syrians are now going to Iraq to join the campaign against the US-led occupation? “Of course,” he replies, already weary with the inferences of our question. “Why not? I heard of some people I know who went there. This war also involves us. No one thinks George Bush is really going to bring freedom to Iraq.” This is a matter of politics, not religious doctrine, and questions of faith or ideology do not arise. “Maybe I would go too…” he speculates.

The flow of traffic in reverse, however, is far greater. The streets of Damascus are by now laden with the thick accent of Iraqis who have fled the war across an open border, buying-up property, opening restaurants and doing business in the Syrian capital. Arriving by the tens of thousands, they have not waited to see out the Coalition’s promise of a democratic Iraq, espoused only a month ago with such conviction by the architects of regime-change. One war in Iraq has been declared over, but it is clear even now that something else, something different, is beginning. We drink too-sweet tea and talk for an hour.

Reflecting on the nature of beginnings, Edward Said distinguishes between an action or undertaking that one performs – commencing writing, for example – and a beginning
that one *thinks about* – a conceptual instigation, origin, revolution or point of departure.¹

Now, some twelve years later, it is more decisively apparent that circumstances in Iraq and Syria at that time reflected a beginning of sorts: a rupture or a turning point, if not an unleashing. Insofar as any moment or temporal event can be artificially prized from its context and held up for scrutiny as a germinator in a broader schema, Operation Iraqi Freedom may be viewed as such a catalyst.

Yet on a micro level, it now becomes evident that this juncture signaled another beginning. Long prior to any contemplation of or formal embarkation on this project, that time (spring 2003) and place (Syria) represent its beginnings in the *thinking about* sense. It was in that circumstance that a process originated, and later a pursuit, whose physical and intellectual course would double-back multiple times over more than a decade to Damascus. So too, that city, then unexpectedly and perhaps in ways that are yet less clear, would also come to signify its ending.

But now to begin…

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INTRODUCTION

I am charged with absolute and supreme control of all regions in which British troops operate; but our armies do not come into your cities and lands as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators. Since the days of Halaka your city and your lands have been subject to the tyranny of strangers… Since the days of Midhat, the Turks have talked of reforms, yet do not the ruins and wastes of today testify to the vanity of those promises?

Sir Stanley Maude, “The Proclamation of Baghdad”, March 19171

Jabbar Hasan looks out the window over the frost-coated West London suburbs and draws breath. “Our judgement is not built on today only, we are talking about history”, he says. “Since the British came to Baghdad during World War One, they’ve always said they came as liberators, not occupiers. But that is absolutely the opposite way they dealt with people”.2 It is November 2011 and we are sitting in his office in the terraced-house headquarters of the Iraqi Association, the largest Iraqi community centre and charity in the UK, of which Jabbar is president.3 Between the regular rupture of phone-calls and door-knocks – splinters of talk in Arabic, Kurdish, English - he is recounting sentiments of almost ten years ago, when Prime Minister Tony Blair announced Britain’s participation in a campaign to liberate his country of birth. As he explains:

When I was young, I remember people telling me how the British army treated Iraqis; how they used our resources, how they supported the monarchy against the will of the people, and then what they did during my lifetime in the seventies and eighties. So we are talking about the past

3 See the official website of the Iraqi Community Association, the main Iraqi charity in the UK whose services are oriented to communities in Britain and Iraq; at http://www.iraqiassociation.org/about.html [accessed 20 June 2013]. The history and function of the association are discussed further in Chapter Two.
as well. All these incidents left us very sceptical about claims of turning Iraq into a democratic paradise.4

But neither this past, nor the scepticism with which Jabbar and many other Iraqis regarded the 2003 mission, deterred its architects from echoing the pronouncements of their colonial forebears. Within twenty-four hours of the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Firdos Square, Baghdad, in April 2003, Blair and US President George W. Bush delivered a televised address to citizens of Iraq via a new Coalition broadcast service, Towards Freedom TV. The British PM was glad to announce the demise of the enemy regime, as he explained, “the years of brutality, oppression, and fear are coming to an end, a new and better future beckons for the people of Iraq. Our forces are friends and liberators of the Iraqi people, not your conquerors. And they will not stay a day longer in Iraq than is necessary.”5

This was not the first quixotic treatise to be delivered to Iraqis by a British official on the subject of their unshackling from tyranny. Almost a century earlier, as British troops drove out the last of their wartime Ottoman enemies from the provincial Mesopotamian city of Baghdad, commander Sir Frederick Stanley Maude likewise issued a bulletin to locals. His army had expelled the Germans and the Turkish – as he described, those “alien rulers” who had oppressed twenty-six generations of Iraqis – and advanced on Iraqi territory “not … as conquerors or enemies, but as liberators”.6 It was March 1917, and the year marked the beginning of what has been described as “Britain’s moment in the Middle East”: a decades-long project of imperial expansion and reconfiguration of the region's peoples and territories that endured until the US assumed the post of Western superintendent in the aftermath of World War Two (WWII).7 Equally, Baghdad’s capture signaled the inception of policy-making patterns, state-building projects and official caprices that would come to characterise Britain's role in the region over the century to come.

4Interview with Jabbar Hasan, 2011.
6 Maude, “The Proclamation of Baghdad”.
The policy debates that ensued from this colonial engagement – questions of national interest, international allegiance and Arab self-determination, all overlaid with the unfolding discourse of liberalism – resonated anew in London’s fresh designs on Baghdad under the Blair New Labour government. The actions in which these discourses culminated in 2003 have in turn come to signpost another landmark moment for Britain’s future in the Middle East, as well as for that of the region’s people and its despots. More than a decade on, the ramifications of this moment continue to be felt in UK politics and, with greater force, abroad. Since 2011 in particular, as international support has been sought for the local campaigns of the so-called “Arab Spring”, it has become necessary to scrutinise again and from fresh standpoints the legacy of Britain’s attempted exogenous liberation of Iraq.

Amid the proliferating criticism and similarly boundless consequences of the 2003 invasion, subsequent British strategy in the region is therefore examined here through the perspectives of those like Jabbar who have mobilised around questions of political change in their countries of origin: namely, members of the region’s diasporas in Britain. Adopting an expanded historical lens, this thesis seeks to document developments – actual or purported – in the words and actions that have constituted UK

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10 Unless otherwise identified, the phrase “the Iraq war” will be used to refer to the 2003 Coalition campaign, as distinct from previous UK military campaigns in that country outlined in Chapter One.
11 Noting the breadth of semantic and disciplinary interpretations of the term “diaspora”, this thesis adopts the broad definition as advanced by Gabriel Sheffer, that: “historical and modern ethno-national diasporas are cultural-social-political entities, created as a result of either voluntary or forced migration from a homeland, whose members are and regard themselves as of the same ethno-national origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host-countries. Based on individual or group decisions to settle permanently in host-countries, but to maintain a common identity, most core members of diasporas identify as such, show solidarity with their group in their host land and their entire nation, organize and are active in the cultural, social, economic, and political spheres.” See Gabriel Sheffer, ed., Modern Diasporas in International Politics (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 1-15. As applied in this thesis, such a conception may extend to, but is not qualified by, descriptive definitions of diasporas linked by an “imagined homeland” (see Rogers Brubaker, “The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora”, Ethnic and Racial Studies 28 (2005): 1-19); that is, diasporas characterised by “a history of dispersal, myths and memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity defined by this relationship” (see James Clifford, “Diasporas”, Cultural Anthropology, 9(3) (1994): 302-338).
foreign policy in the Arab Middle East and North Africa (MENA) over the decade following Britain’s twenty-first century foray into Iraq. By interrogating responses to select cases of political upheaval in the region beyond Iraq’s borders, it addresses the question of whether official approaches to democratic governance in the region have evolved since 2003, or indeed since Britain’s seminal imperial interactions of the past century. The amalgam of strategic failings behind Britain’s 2003 engagement in Iraq has been widely and effectively documented across a variety of platforms and range of academic disciplines (as is increasingly the case of more recent campaigns in Libya and elsewhere), in particular International Relations (IR) and political science. As distinct from these approaches, it is not within the aims (or abilities) of this thesis to catalogue...
fully that campaign’s flawed development or implementation. However, a critical appreciation of the relationship between diasporas, foreign policymakers and democratic demands emerging from across MENA has been a neglected element in the story of British interventions in the region, and is therefore a gap this thesis intends to address.

**A much-abused instrument: British policy in the Middle East**

Discussing the subject of the bungled 2003 war, the late Eric Hobsbawm disparaged the suggestion that either the British PM or American President had consulted any history books on the region prior to invading. Yet more important than this, he posited, was the question of whether either had sought to “consult people in the areas in which they decided to go”. Hobsbawm believed “almost certainly not”, and asked: “would it have been better if they had? Almost certainly yes.”

It is with this maxim in mind that this thesis documents perspectives from the region as a foundation upon which to appraise, retrospectively and contemporaneously, more recent UK engagement in the politics of MENA nation-states. Equally, it proceeds from the premise that British actions this millennium are intrinsically bound up with those of preceding centuries. Consistent with Hobsbawm’s observation, contemporary events are here linked (both explicitly and by imputation) with key historical moments in which they find resonance. A comprehensive account of Britain’s role in the region cannot be contemplated here, and select past episodes and experiences are drawn on with an awareness of the obvious risks of seeking any direct historical causality or analogy for contemporary developments. Historical references are therefore made here in order to augment or contextualize narratives of the more recent events that form the focus of this thesis.

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15 As outlined above, the application of the term “Arab” refers only to the nation-states under consideration from which the perspectives in this thesis derive. By distinction, the views documented here include those of many non-Arabs, most notably Kurds, from the region.

16 As Toby Dodge recently observed with respect to damaging reductive and/or deterministic outcomes of recent theorising around the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), “the misleading use of the Sykes–Picot agreement to explain the rise of ISIS highlights the inherent dangers of employing historical analogies in analyses of contemporary events”. See Toby Dodge, “Can Iraq be Saved?” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 56(5) (2014): 8.
Among these salient historical bellwethers, academic and media interest have since 2011 been evermore compelled toward that aforementioned “moment” when deposition of the Ottoman empire in World War One (WWI) afforded conquering allied parties an opportunity to reify their ever-accruing interests in the region. The consummation of these interests was reified by the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, a treaty which has in turn come to emblematise Britain’s conquest of the Middle East in Arab political discourse, as well as its perfidious attempts to retain influence over these lands since. With Iraq as staging-ground, events from this juncture are thus briefly revisited here, both to adumbrate later developments in that country and as a prelude to the arguments of the thesis as a whole.

As has been documented, Britain had by the outbreak of war in 1914 already begun to formalise its ambitions in the vast, newly-liberated territories of the region. Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had sewn investments in the Suez Canal of some £4 million by the 1870s, followed by stakes in Anglo-Persian’s oil prospecting activities negotiated by then First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Winston Churchill. Where the previous century had seen Britain court alliance with Turkish authorities as a buttress against Russian expansion, the demise of the Ottoman Empire – that “sick man” of Europe as it was reportedly described – enabled Britain to take charge of the territories towards its own imperial ends. Britain’s empire was by 1914 the largest in the world and, with overseas investment as its primary source of revenue (chiefly through India), stood to gain most from consolidating a hold over this key trade and communication route to the exclusion of rival powers. Pre-empting Ottoman collapse during the war, a number of documents were developed to define British interests in the region and effective means through which to secure them. The protocols outlined across this miscellany of official reports, correspondences and covert treaties henceforth provided a framework for

19 This descriptor is commonly attributed to Russia’s Tsar Nicholas I as documented in 1853 letters between the British ambassador to St. Petersburg, Sir George Hamilton Seymour and Lord John Russell, although the precise terminology is disputed. See Christopher de Bellaigue, “The Sick Man of Europe”, The New York Review of Books 48(11) (2001).
British governance in the region – albeit a source of ongoing ambiguity and contestation.20

The first document of its kind, the De Bunsen Report of 1915, was assembled by an interdepartmental committee in London with the aim of articulating British objectives in the Middle East in light of a pending division of Turkish spoils. Among the key aims identified were: the protection of trade and communications routes, as well as other oil and water projects; security and control of the Suez canal; recognition and consolidation of British influence in the Gulf; fulfilment of assurances made to Arab rulers in Kuwait, the Najd and elsewhere; the protection of freedom of religious worship in local shrines; and a satisfactory and profitable solution to the question of Palestine.21 The report, like other pronouncements of the time, reflected the cornerstones of British expansionism - trades routes, oil-wealth and rival power (in this case, Russia).22 However, a number of other more novel political and strategic imperatives were beginning to emerge which complicated significantly the realisation of these tenets. Among the new features of the imperial landscape was a growing hostility to empire from local populations in Asia and the Middle East, as well as an increasing intolerance on the part of the British electorate to the costly economic burdens of imperial projects.23 Compounding these pressures, the future states taking shape under British and French designs were distinctly Arab in character – a trait that signified a potential unified challenge to European attempts at direct imperial rule in the region. Much to the disapproval of some officials, the authors of the De Bunsen Report had argued against the simple division of former Ottoman lands between the Allied victors. The question of the intersection between these Arab interests and the colonial impulse to swiftly secure territory henceforth became one of the most divisive in Britain's imperial calculation.

20 As would later be noted by Sykes of Britain’s nascent strategy in the region: “with the exception of the ancient constitution of Poland it would be difficult to find a precedent for so complex or unworkable a political arrangement as the British system which has evolved itself in Arabia since the war broke out in August 1914. Attention is drawn to this mess because instead of getting better it gets worse, more and more people get a right of deprecation.” Cited in Bruce Westrate, The Arab Bureau: British Policy in the Middle East, 1916-1920 (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 27.
21 As outlined in Hollis, Britain and the Middle East in a Post 9/11 Era, 11.
23 Fitzsimons, Empire by Treaty, 4.
While many officials endorsed the minimalist creation of an “Arab façade” for British authority in the region, others advocated a grander project: seeding revolt among local Arab forces to expedite Britain’s military ends and thus bolster the legitimacy of its influence. The outcome of the latter course, as envisaged by officials such as Lord Kitchener in Cairo, would be the establishment of broad Arab unity under British guidance, satisfying demands for both British preponderance and the appearance of local autonomy. Concurrent and growing Arab discontent at Ottoman rule likewise signified an occasion for Britain to undermine Turkish authority in support of its wartime goals. With awareness of popular aspirations for self-government, officials thus set about exploiting these hostilities. Alongside negotiations with French authorities, some began to entertain the aspirations of local Arab rulers – as was soon reflected in a 1915 correspondence between Hussein, Sherif of Mecca and representatives of Kitchener’s office. The exchange – known as “the MacMahon correspondence” – amounted to a guarantee of support for the Sherif’s vague ambition to lead an independent Arab state, and was extracted after the leader cast doubt on Britain’s commitment to the proposed revolt. Despite official reservations, it was finally made explicit that Britain was “prepared to recognize and support the independence of the Arabs”.

Yet anxieties in the Foreign Office around the pact’s possible conflict with simultaneous commitments to French allies was signified by the conditionality of this guarantee. In order to allay suspicions about a British-backed Arab independence that might deprive France of its desired Levantine assets, another clandestine treaty was dispatched between the diplomatic adviser Mark Sykes and French official, M. George Picot. The subsequent 1916 Anglo-French treaty (“Sykes-Picot”) indicated a more decisive, if no less contentious, partition of territories, with Britain given dominion over Mesopotamia, and France control of Syria and the Lebanon. Despite its more concrete terms, the document indicated the tangle of disputed aims and mercenary allegiances that formed British policy at the time. Accordingly, Sykes-Picot – “that much-abused instrument” as it was soon after described in an official memorandum – quickly

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24 Munroe, Britain’s Moment in the Middle East, 30.
25 Correspondence of 24 October 1914, as cited in Munroe, Britain’s Moment in the Middle East, 32.
became the object of resentment for proponents of both British expansion and of Arab self-rule. Among the latter, Colonel T.E. Lawrence, who was at the time charged with orchestrating the Arab revolt, described with scepticism the grand-strategising of Britain’s proposed action in Mesopotamia, noting that: “we called ourselves ‘Intrusive’ as a band; for we meant to break into the accepted halls of English foreign policy, and build a new people in the East, despite the rails laid down for us by our ancestors.”

While Lawrence then perceived conditions to be ideal for revolt, he denounced the “geographical absurdities” promulgated by the Sykes-Picot agreement, which undermined the notion of a unified, region-wide Arab campaign. So too, its stipulations were lamented by more traditional adherents of British imperialism, among them War Cabinet Minister, Lord Curzon who described the agreement as “a millstone round our necks”. By 1918, so contested were its terms and so disaggregated Britain’s policy in the region, that Sykes himself declared the treaty “dead”.

It was therefore with some inflated optimism that Curzon sought to promulgate Britain’s future in the newly claimed lands of Mesopotamia following its 1918 victory. With British influence consolidated in its troops triumphal march on Jerusalem alongside the Sherif's nationalists, Curzon exalted in this new role in his November 1918 Armistice speech. Addressing the House of Lords, he explained that the occasion represented:

not only precursor, but a sure guarantee of peace. The British flag has never flown over a more powerful or a more united empire. Never did our voice count for more in the council of nations or in determining the future destinies of mankind.

Such a vision signified implacable faith in Britain’s imperial prerogative of elevating the deprived and oppressed peoples of the world – ambitions which defied the reality of

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27 As Munroe notes: “All through 1916 and 17 the ‘Western Arabians’ in London and Cairo were enraged with the Government of India men for being surly and unco-operative about the Sharif's revolt, while the people at the Government of India end were aghast at the free rein being given to nationalism by the Arbophiles in Cairo”. See Munroe, Britain’s Moment in the Middle East, 36.
28 T.E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom (London: Methuen, 1940), 10.
29 EC 2207, CAB 27/36; cited in Fisher, Curzon and British Imperialism in the Middle East, 39.
30 EC 39, 27 November 1918, CAB 27/24; cited in Fisher, Curzon and British Imperialism in the Middle East, 37.
31 Memorandum of Interview with Mr Balfour’s Department, 24 June 1919, FO 800/217, cited in Fisher, Curzon and British Imperialism in the Middle East, 40.
32 Lord Curzon, The Armistice Address to His Majesty, House of Lords Debates, 18 November 1918. [source?]
a porous Middle East strategy, economic retrenchment at home and simmering Arab resentment in the region. Nonetheless, this aspiration had also formed the subtext of an Anglo-French declaration issued after the Allied capture of Jerusalem and Damascus a year earlier: a joint pledge to bestow on local populations self-government, free will and democratic mandate. Likewise, the founding League of Nations mandate of 1920 later appeared to formalise British responsibility for Mesopotamia in this vein, breaking from traditional imperial mechanisms of direct rule to set out a nascent state in which political power would be devolved to Iraqi-run institutions and leaders. Unpalatable to many in the British administration, this novel configuration of indirect rule signified a concession by foreign policymakers to the increasing weight of international opinion, with its post-imperial inclination to support self-government. An earlier 1901 speech by US President Woodrow Wilson had encapsulated this new democratic ethos, emerging in parallel with American influence, as he speculated on the question of annexing Asian territory:

The East is to be opened and transformed whether we will or no.... It is our particular duty, as it is also England’s, to moderate the process in the interests of liberty; to impart to the peoples thus driven out upon the road of change…the habit of law… and secure for them, when we may, the free intercourse and the natural development which shall make them at last equal members of the family of nations.

Curzon, like others charged with Britain's administration of the region, was more cynical. Disparaging the US President’s idealism, he lamented the “very dangerous places” into which “the world-worship of so-called democracy is leading us”. Nonetheless, those suspicious of local self-rule were eventually convinced of the need for a veneer of Arab independence behind which British interests could be secured.

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34 As was noted in the Anglo-French Declaration of 7 November 1918: “The goal envisaged by France and Great Britain in prosecuting in the East the War let loose by German ambition is the complete and final liberation of the peoples who have for so long been oppressed by the Turks, and the setting up of national governments and administrations deriving their authority from the free exercise of the initiative and choice of the indigenous populations”. For the full text of the Declaration, see *The Balfour Project* at http://www.balfourproject.org/anglo-french-declaration/ [accessed 10 January 2015].
Governing arrangements in Iraq were devised accordingly, satisfying the minimum requirements of America’s demand for democratic governance. More broadly, the resulting structures signified a continuing effort to reconcile Britain's three post-war objectives in a fragile new Middle East strategy: protecting routes to India and intercepting demands for self-government via British-sponsored client states, while minimising the economic and political burden of annexation or occupation.38

Iraq was subsequently established with all the formal trimmings of modern statehood: borders, a constitution, monarchy and bicameral legislature. Yet the country’s elite new rulers, divided from their subjects and continually tarnished by dependence on Britain, had little social base among the wider Iraqi population.39 Moreover, where British attempts at state formation had no regional precedent and little insight into local socio-cultural dynamics, policymakers most often resorted to prototypes from their own political institutions.40 Forging allegiances with tribal sheiks whose aspirations to power were concomitant with British goals, officials effectively restored authority to a traditional ruling class, augmenting local social divisions as well as its own internal conflicts with those advocating a more grass-roots approach to state building41. It thus became ever more difficult to ignore the inchoate, unstable nature of British policy, riddled with disputes over these and other questions of strategy and ideology. Not only were the fissures in British authority apparent to those it made its subjects, so too chaotic governance on the ground generated further divisions among political ranks in London. A 1920 joint letter to then Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George from members of the House of Commons delivered a caustic assessment of this visibly flailing strategy: “the present arrangement...has resulted in a serious conflict of policy which has all the seeds of permanence. None of the three existing departments has the qualification, the special organisation and personnel to cope successfully with the new situation.”42

British policy was henceforth motivated for many decades by domestic concerns over the economic fallout of Britain's informal empire in the Middle East, as well as

38Westrate, The Arab Bureau, 17.
40Dodge, Inventing Iraq, 2.
41Kingston, Britain and the Politics of Modernization in the Middle East, 44.
governing dynamics in Iraq itself where unruly nationalist inclinations persisted.\textsuperscript{43} Formal independence, in the form of a 1932 concession to replace the Mandate with a new Kingdom of Iraq at the League of Nations, made little difference to Britain’s \textit{de facto} authority in Iraq. Nor did it lessen the political rivalries and popular hostilities this influence bred (as became apparent when Britain was compelled to re-occupy the country and reinstate its former Mandate Prime-Minister Nuri al-Said following a pro-Nazi coup d’etat in 1941). Beyond Iraq, such antagonisms manifested in a growing impulse toward Arab unity – a cause that officials wavered between actively encouraging and consciously scuppering in accordance with calculated efforts to protect their interests, primarily the Suez Canal and commitment to the Zionist cause in Palestine.\textsuperscript{44}

While policymakers did not lose sight of these designs, the emergence of a concurrent and necessary but subordinate partnership with their US ally after WWII saw the imperatives downgraded and/or challenged. By the 1950s, ongoing tension between Britain’s imperial goals, those of its senior transatlantic partner and the impact of the perilous pan-Arab campaign inspired London to reconfigure its Middle East strategy to preserve its waning influence – a revised policy which found expression in the defensive alliance of the 1955 Baghdad Pact. Burgeoning pan-Arabism, as pioneered by the Russian-backed Egyptian President Gamal Abdel-Nasser, had placed British claims in the region in general, and Iraq in particular, in ever-greater jeopardy and the agreement reflected an effort to stopper the Soviet threat through a counter-alliance of forces, among them France, Turkey, Pakistan and Persia. However, the upsurge in popular hostility at Arab involvement in the pact, aggravated by Western support for the Zionist campaign in Israel, revealed the nascent strength of pan-Arabism across the region as a force which policymakers could no longer afford to dismiss.\textsuperscript{45} (As a 1956 \textit{Times} editorial noted: “the misfortune is that this particular pact has thrown other parts of the Middle East into reaction against Britain... But the main reason why Nasser is

\textsuperscript{43} See Dodge, \textit{Inventing Iraq}, 38.


\textsuperscript{45} Munroe, \textit{Britain’s Moment in the Middle East}, 188.
able to use the Baghdad Pact to rally [the Arabs] is... because of the failure to settle the Arab-Israeli dispute.”

While British military intervention in Iraq remained viable under the accord, no regional alliance could offset the popular demands corroding the internal legitimacy of the Iraqi state, where radical leftist-nationalism threatened the conservative ruling elite through whom Britain exercised power. The overall redundancy of the British strategy, as manifest in the failing Baghdad Pact, was unambiguous to many in London. Even as policymakers scrambled to salvage Britain’s position in 1953, an excoriating critique from the Defence Coordination Committee for the Middle East plainly signposted imperial demise. As the memorandum noted, London’s “make-believe” attempts at strategy reinvention could not conceal the deficit of a “real solution” to the crisis:

Even if we feel that we must try to deceive others, we should not deceive ourselves or the Americans. Our bluff may be called one day and British soldiers and armies may again find themselves committed to a hopeless venture. Therefore we should not be content with our bluff but should strive with might and main to convert it into the real thing. The facade must not be so transparent that it fails to deceive. There is already doubt in the Arab world about our ability to defend the Middle East.

Dogged last-ditch efforts to defy the tide of pan-Arabism and American ascendancy henceforth resulted in successive political disasters that made stark the reality of Britain’s standing. The humiliation of Anthony Eden's Conservative government in the Suez confrontation of 1957, appended by the overthrow of Iraq's Hashemite monarchy in a bloody revolution the following year, spelled the end of British ascendancy – in the Middle East generally, and specifically in the Mesopotamian post from which it was first exercised.

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46 Cited in Munroe, Britain’s Moment in the Middle East, 189.
The plight of the Middle East: knowledge production and politics, old and new

Against this setting of an enduring, if embattled, British engagement in the region, and in the light of this thesis’ aims to pluralise perspectives on past events, it is necessary not only to re-examine history but also to appraise the forms of knowledge production to which it has given rise. Reviewing formal scholarship and literature in this field, I henceforth argue that enduring ideological and political trends in the West have often been synthesised in the reproduction of dominant narratives around the Middle East.

I. Historiography and “the Arabs”

This conjunction was readily apparent when, fifty years on from its Suez denouement, the UK government embarked on a fresh state-building mission in the region, once more anchoring itself in Iraq against the bane of oppression that succeeded its empire there. This new project was free of the overtly-imperial designs of the previous century, but was nonetheless attended by many of the same liberal imperatives and moral overtures as Britain’s WWI incursion. Language of strategic interest was here augmented by a New Labour argot emphasising global interconnectedness and ethical responsibility. Likewise, the dilemma incumbent upon foreign policymakers was couched in terms broader than a simple defence of British influence in the region. Characterising this discourse in a speech at the Texas Presidential Library of President Bush Jnr. in April 2002, Blair stated that “the plight of the Middle East would make the hardest heart break. Anyone with an ounce of humanity watching the current horrors unfold on TV screens across the world is willing the international community to help”.

Against this scourge of violence, the PM committed himself to defending the values embodied in the transatlantic alliance – liberty, democracy and justice. As he explained:

The promotion of these values becomes not just right in itself but part of our long-term security and prosperity. We can't intervene in every case. Not all the wrongs of the world can be put right, but where disorder threatens us all, we should act. Like it or not, whether you are a utilitarian or a Utopian, the world is interdependent. One

consequence of this is that foreign and domestic policy are ever more closely interwoven.\textsuperscript{52}

These initial murmurings about a campaign to democratise Iraq coincided with the release of the 2002 United Nations' Arab Human Development Report (AHDR).\textsuperscript{53} The first of such studies, the report noted that the popular “longing for freedom and justice” in the region remained, almost without exception, unfulfilled. It highlighted the “substantial lag” in political progress that separated Arab countries from the rest of the developing world, untouched as they were by the wave of democracy that transformed many of its counterparts in Europe, Latin America and Asia during the 1980s and 1990s.\textsuperscript{54}

This notion of a so-called Arab “freedom deficit” (depicted evermore bleakly in subsequent reports) was abruptly seized by media and political institutions in America as well as Britain, with \textit{Time} magazine hailing the study as a contender for the most important publication of that year.\textsuperscript{55} Authored by a panel of scholars and policymakers, the 2002 ADHR appeared to reify in fact a notion that had become a defining theme in Western scholarship on the region. Indeed, the academic manifestation of this tradition had been emblazed several months earlier on the pages of \textit{The Atlantic} in an article by the renowned British-American historian Bernard Lewis. Referring to the 9/11 attacks, it posited the question of “What went wrong?” with Muslim civilisation.\textsuperscript{56} Lewis’ quandary, and his scholarship more broadly, have come to typify the “Orientalist” praxis that has shaped so many academic accounts of the Middle East since their earliest
production. 57 “Fundamentally a political doctrine”, 58 this trans-disciplinary ethos is reflected to varying extents in prominent histories of the region over the twentieth century (most notably by the British-Iraqi Elie Kedourie and so-called “Neo-Orientalists” such as Daniel Pipes.) Academic production of this type, while seeking to enhance understandings of the region, has typically served the converse function of obscuring complexity and perpetuating apologue. Observing its effect, Fred Halliday recently noted that:

The Arab Middle East is the one with the longest history of contact with the West; yet it is probably the one least understood… Part of the misunderstanding is due to the romantic mythology that has long appeared to shroud the deserts of the peninsula. Where old myths have broken down, new ones have absorbed them or taken their place. 59

As the following interdisciplinary appraisal of scholarship highlights, these apocryphal narratives have recently begun to corrode under the forces of more original and more nuanced accounts. Yet among the “myths” to have endured in discourse across a range of spheres (albeit more guardedly) is a normative conception of Arab societies as inherently hostile to democracy - that is, a view of “Arab exceptionalism”. As Simon Bromley notes, the dominant consensus among transatlantic scholars and policymakers throughout the twentieth century was that: “democracies are strangers to the Middle East. The limited post-independence experiments with democratic politics did not survive the rise of nationalist forces... or were thwarted by monarchical rule and oil wealth.” 60 This proposition is readily supported in formative claims like those by Kedourie that the key precepts of liberal democracy – from popular sovereignty to parliamentary assembly, the judiciary and representation itself – are all “profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition”. 61 (Likewise, Lewis and many of his adherents attributed the region’s apparent dearth of socio-political progress to the essential

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57 As Said explained, Lewis was “a perfect exemplification of the academic whose work purports to be liberal objective scholarship but is in reality very close to being propaganda against his subject material”. See Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Random House, 1978), 316.
58 Said, Orientalism, 204.
60 Simon Bromley, Rethinking Middle-East Politics (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 197.
ideological incompatibility of Islam with democracy.\textsuperscript{62} Echoing the driving sentiments behind Britain’s colonial discourse and practice, scholarly inquiries into the persistence of regional despotism have born similar culturalist arguments within the political sciences – Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilisations” thesis now most iconic among them.\textsuperscript{63} In the aftermath of 9/11, this scholarship has also dovetailed with projections from policymakers sceptical about any imminent, organic democratisation of Arab societies (as was exemplified in Huntington’s own embrace by neo-conservatives in the US State Department).\textsuperscript{64} Accordingly, French-Lebanese political scientist Ghassan Salame observed in 2005 that:

> the idea of an Arab or Islamic exceptionalism has thus re-emerged among both Western proponents of universal democracy and established orientalists. Illusions concerning the rapid fall of some regimes have been reinforced by fear triggered by the undemocratic nature of most opposition groups as well as by the revival of clichés about deeply-rooted cultural obstacles to democratization.\textsuperscript{65}

Simultaneously, for reasons of practical obstructions as well as academic prejudice, there have been few sustained studies of political culture or opinion among populations in the region in recent decades.

Where the aforementioned works have been defined by an essentialist, and arguably antagonist, view of Islam,\textsuperscript{66} other contemporaries have consequently sought an alternate lens through which to approach the region. Among them, the renowned British-Lebanese historian Albert Hourani pioneered critiques of a characteristic European bias and generality.\textsuperscript{67} Indeed the historiographical dilemma that trend reflected led Hourani himself, at the apogee of his career in 1991, to pose the question “how should we write

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\textsuperscript{64} See Lewis, “Islam and Liberal Democracy”, 52-63.
the history of the Middle East?” A response to this quandary has over years since come in the form of a burgeoning academic contest to Orientalist values and practices. Examining the region from various new popular, social, cultural and political perspectives, prominent scholars such as Asef Bayat, Juan Cole, Stephanie Cronin and Ilan Pappe and have laid foundations from which Arab and other populations in the region might define their own histories. So too, authors have explicitly refuted “neo-orientalist” claims by arguing for the synchronicity of Islamic thought with principles of liberal democracy. Challenging the rooted opposition of these two ideologies, historians such as John Esposito have noted the fluidity of political meanings across time and culture and speculated on the potential of a unique brand of Muslim democracy. More recently, constructivist writers such as Larbi Sadiki have argued against imposing definitions of democracy imported wholesale from a Western milieu.

Critical and post-colonial scholarship has thereby advanced discussion of the origins of repressive Arab government away from singular, culture-based accounts, instead identifying a complex of historical, imperial and institutional causes. Among these, patterns of despotic state-formation, strategic Western interest and nationalist ideology have been recognised as ongoing factors that have militated against the sudden advent of democratic government and/or large-scale civil society in the region. As Dietrich Jung has argued: “the smooth and sudden shift from deeply entrenched authoritarian rule to liberal democracy has no historical precedence. Rather, this assumption is the result of a particular kind of Western wishful thinking with respect to the political mess in which post-colonial state-building and international relations have led to in the Middle

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68 See Albert Hourani, “How Should We Write the History of the Middle East?” International Journal of Middle East Studies 23 (1991): 127. Hourani here also questioned the notion of the “Middle East” as unitary field of study.


East.” Claims about arrested political development in the Arab region have thus been offset by more sustained attention to various local and geopolitical impediments to democratisation, as well as accounts of extant democratic cultures in the region through grass-roots and social histories. Combining the latter documentary methodology with the aforementioned critical-historical practices, this thesis likewise seeks an account of Western involvement in the Middle East that reflects greater plurality, connectivity and contestation.

The most powerful challenge to deterministic narratives of politics in the region, however, has come outside of scholarship in the form of events themselves. The surge of popular protest and revolt witnessed across MENA from January 2011, which will here be referred to as the “Arab uprisings”, vividly ruptured the mystique of immovable, authoritarian state power. Often referred to as the “Arab Spring” or “Arab Awakening”, this mass articulation of democratic demands has also given rise to a new body of scholarship seeking to document the attendant unfolding histories of these movements’ and their myriad sub-cultures. Many chronicles have thus taken the form of eye-witness accounts by journalists or activists and participants themselves. Other scholars however have sought to synthesise these personalised or subjective accounts with broader analyses of socio-political dynamics through reference to the historical and geopolitical frameworks within which campaigns have arisen. Gilbert Achcar refutes portrayals of an abrupt, liberal-democratic awakening among Arabs, instead arguing for the uprisings as protracted, long-term revolutionary processes, whose various demands for “bread, freedom and justice” can be fully realised only through socio-economic transformation. Similarly, Fawaz Gerges et al. seek to link the particular to the systemic, addressing demographic, economic, technological and social factors at the national, regional and international levels. Reasserting the agency of “those who were not mere subjects of hegemonic forms of power, but who thought against the grain”, Charles Tripp depicts these protest movements as vital popular responses to oppressive

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force, be it local or foreign.\textsuperscript{76} Marc Lynch has more specifically addressed the relationship between such international forces, namely American foreign policy, and the course of local campaigns.\textsuperscript{77} As Lynch notes, protest movements overwhelmingly reflected “newly-empowered regional publics embittered by decades of experience with heavy-handed US interference and support for dictatorships”.\textsuperscript{78}

Such observations highlight a general inattention (in scholarship as well as official discourse) to the role of geopolitics, in particular Western policy, in antidemocratic governance in the region. Where Victor LeVine has critiqued an “avoidance of crucial issues of money and power” in analyses of political development in the Middle East,\textsuperscript{79} others have noted the characteristic elision of “the role of Western governments in perpetuating authoritarianism and repression in the region through military, financial or diplomatic support”.\textsuperscript{80} Similarly, Halliday has argued for an account which does not posit the Middle East as outside of global processes of political and economic change, but rather, recognises its very position within an historically-unequal international system – that is, a position of “differential integration”.\textsuperscript{81} It is therefore, as is likewise argued here, as a direct outcome of and not anomaly to broader patterns of globalization and connectivity that socio-political circumstances in the region should be interpreted. Concurring with observations such as these – namely, that Western governments have been “no friend of democratization”\textsuperscript{82} in the Middle East - this thesis identifies as fundamental the scholarly neglect of foreign policy as a device for sustaining malign government. It therefore seeks to populate the field with new and critical accounts of the impact of policy on local democratic developments, perspectives rarely discernable in

\textsuperscript{79} See Mark LeVine, \textit{Why They Don’t Hate Us: Lifting the Veil on the Axis of Evil} (Hoboken, N.J: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).
\textsuperscript{80} Harrigan and El Said, \textit{Globalisation, Democratisation and Radicalisation}, 7.
stock official narratives of fostering “hope, prosperity and freedom” in the Middle East.83

II. Democracy and globalisation

Indeed, this inattention to the arguably antidemocratic implications of Western foreign policy contrasts starkly with the glut in academic production on methods (chiefly American) to sponsor democracy in the developing world. This burgeoning industry of so-called “democracy promotion” has seen not only academics, but also politicians, technocrats and corporations in recent decades adopt the civic language of human rights, justice and liberalisation.84 With the transatlantic spread of strategies aimed (in name if not in nature) at these outcomes following the end of the Cold War, international trade agreements and foreign policy charters have become imbued as standard practice with clauses addressing democratization and human rights targets abroad. Scholars, primarily from IR disciplines, in turn heralded a shift away from realpolitik toward a tempered idealism – a move that appeared to be confirmed by the liberal-internationalist discourse of Blair and his ally President Bill Clinton in the mid-1990s. Plagued by a so-called “freedom deficit” and littered with a dubious record of Western allegiance to authoritarianism, the Middle East thus became prime ground for enacting reclaimed idealist rhetoric in foreign policy. As Olivier Roy notes, the ensuing revised approach to international relations “pushed to the extreme the idea that Western values were universal and must be promoted, through direct intervention if need be”.85

The 2003 Coalition war to remove Saddam Hussein reflected a most radical interpretation of this mandate.86 Nevertheless, aspects of its ideological packaging were prefigured in early years in the Blair government’s quest to pioneer a more diluted, values-based or “ethical” charter for foreign policy. Studies of New Labour’s approach to international relations, such as those by Joel Kampfner, Oliver Daddow and Rhiannon Vickers, have noted the reconfigured paradigm in which Britain’s actions

were projected – a model which married realism with idealism, endorsed military intervention and advocated multilateralism. The academic foundations of these political tenets are likewise reflected in extensive literature addressing concepts of political change and state-formation in the developing world, rooted in the liberalism of seminal political philosophers from Max Weber to Robert Dahl. More recently, Michael Walzer has addressed the ethics and logistics of interventionism in foreign policy through this liberal prism. Other dissenting theorists have been more explicitly critical of democratisation parlance among Western policymakers, instead seeking to magnify themes of geopolitical power and inequality. Indeed, radical historians such as Mark Curtis and William Blum, alongside veteran critics like Noam Chomsky, specifically challenged the ideological apparel of transatlantic foreign policy in the years prior to the Iraq war. A central premise of this thesis is drawn accordingly from the aggregate contention of these more interrogatory studies of foreign policy – that is, that “democracy and human rights, once weapons for the critique of power, have now become part of the arsenal of power itself”.

The ensuing recognition by scholars and other commentators of a growing obfuscation of substantial democratic values with their simulation in official discourse has engendered calls to reappraise the contents of this much-exploited political vocabulary. As David Held noted of this problematic in 1992, “nearly everyone today professes to be a democrat. Democracy bestows an aura of legitimacy on modern political life: laws, rules and policies appear justified when they are ‘democratic’”.

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88 Further reference to the key tenets of these philosophers can be found in, for example, Robert A. Dahl, On Democracy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Richard Wellen, Dilemmas in Liberal Democratic Thought Since Max Weber (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); as well as other contemporary treatments on liberalism such as John Gray, Liberalism (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986).


91 Guilhot, The Democracy Makers, 8.

as Daniele Archibugi, Ulrich Beck and Maria Kaldor, have thus scrutinised anew the associated terms, speculating on the role of precepts of justice in a revised paradigm of international relations – what has been envisaged as “cosmopolitan democracy”.93 Simultaneously, theorists of globalisation have seized on the notion of a new democratic potential born from interconnectedness with tangible effect on political and international relations discourse. Characterised in the work of Blair’s close associate, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens, this liberal optimism was readily apparent in New Labour’s emphasis on international cooperation and global justice. Of particular salience to Blair’s emerging foreign policy was Giddens’ belief that:

The expansion of democracy is bound up with structural changes in world society. Nothing comes without struggle. But the furthering of democracy at all levels is worth fighting for and it can be achieved. Our runaway world doesn't need less, but more government - and this, only democratic institutions can provide.94

Precepts of democratic struggle, global networks and civic progress thus became motifs of New Labour foreign policy and, following 9/11, of public discussion of its campaigns in the Middle East. Coupled with the quasi-religious connotations of American presidential rhetoric around the “War on Terror”, and amplified with the Iraq campaign, this democratic argot suggested a shared, if more utopian, investment in the values articulated a century earlier by Bush’s forebear. As Toby Dodge notes, “the decision to invade and remove Saddam Hussein was meant to signal a new approach to international relations. By justifying the invasion in terms of democratising the Middle East, President Bush evoked a renewed, if supercharged, spirit of Wilsonian idealism”.95

Within a decade of that campaign, however, such spirit was no longer apparent. The scale of the bloodshed and chaos in Iraq in the immediate post-war years quickly

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elicited verdicts that Britain’s policy had failed alongside the ideals espoused by the PM – as one former diplomat opined, UK strategy in Iraq was “a rank disaster”.96 In the years since, sustained economic and political losses from Britain’s campaigns in Iraq, as well as Afghanistan (a military and political catastrophe, which as has been noted, is hard to overstate)97 have thus seen Blair’s successors reticent to employ the same high promises of an ideologically assertive, ethical foreign policy, or to engage in open-ended military expeditions in its name. Simultaneously, events of the so-called “Arab Spring” appeared at first to indicate that months of peaceful protest might outdo a decade of hard Western power as tools for toppling authoritarianism in the region, in striking testament to the fallacy of “Arab exceptionalism”.98 The security and humanitarian exigencies that soon ensued from these powerful organic demands thereby compelled unsuspecting policymakers to hastily assemble a strategy of response. As Marwan Bishara described of circumstances in mid-2011, “the Arab revolution has taken on regimes, bypassed the traditional opposition, marginalized extremist movements, and put foreign powers on notice. And, in the process, it has begun to reverse decades of colonial myths and authoritarian thinking”.99 Elements of this assessment have by now been undermined by events. But Bishara’s observation reflects a critique of outmoded international relations dynamics, the same paradigm which informed the 2003 campaign to liberate Iraq, which has expanded since 2011. As Tarak Barkawi also noted at that time of the obsolescence of Western patterns of engagement with the region:

the narrative of intervention offers two positions: a West which bears the burden of civilisation, and a native society in need of tutelage. Centuries of imperialism and

96 Carne Ross further told the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee in 2006 that intelligence presented to the public about weapons of mass destruction was “manipulated” and that “proper legal advice from the Foreign office on the legality of the war was ignored”. See House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, “Active Diplomacy for a Changing World: Written Evidence”, 6 November 2006, HC 167 2006-07, submitted by Carne Ross, paragraph 11; available at: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselecm/cmselect/cmfaff/167/6110801.htm [accessed 5 February 2015].
98 As observed by Simon Tisdall, “Lessons from Libya”, Guardian, 13 October 2011.
decades of “development” have failed to follow through on the promise of this myth for either party.\textsuperscript{100}

Overhauling this foreign policy narrative in the “long shadow” of Iraq has thus emerged as an imperative for scholars as well as more recently (and urgently) a challenge to policymakers.\textsuperscript{101} The persisting incoherence of dominant Western approaches to political change in the region post-2003, as magnified by developments around the Arab uprisings, remains a key theme of foreign policy studies and forms a central argument of this thesis. As David Chandler argued of the joint French-British NATO campaign in Libya, “the meaning of humanitarian intervention has been hollowed out. Today we no longer have a conceptually meaningful understanding either of intervention or of sovereignty”.\textsuperscript{102} Towards reconstituting these terms, scholars have sought to address the possibility of a more constructive mode of Western intervention in aid of human rights and/or democratic ideals. Among them, some have affirmed the continuing value of such a precept.\textsuperscript{103} However, such endorsements have been qualified by an equal emphasis on the need for any action to proceed from a more modest basis and toward more practical goals. Reflecting on the philosophical underpinnings of interventions, from neoconservative to liberal imperialist, Rory Stewart and Gerald Knaus argue that grand ideological schema must be eschewed in favour of recognising each circumstance as highly idiosyncratic, unpredictable and non-binding in precedent.\textsuperscript{104}

The persistence of ethical elements, or so-called ‘values’, in discourse packaging multifarious foreign-policies over the past decade has nonetheless drawn scholarship to give greater scrutiny to the interests and ideologies driving Britain’s policy-makers. As


\textsuperscript{104} Rory Stewart, “Because We Weren’t There”, \textit{London Review of Books} 33(18) (2011) [page number?].
Dan Bully notes, values are at the core of these interactions and therefore “the question of foreign policy must be how we ought to do this: a question of ethics”. Where some have argued that foreign policy analysis (FPA) should consist in “scientific consciousness without moral debate”, Bully’s claim signals a shift toward morality as a key facet of analysis. (As John Dickie observes in this regard, morality in politics is itself as old as party manifestos.) Similarly, it has been observed by the most prominent analysts of British foreign policy like Jamie Gaskarth, that “ethics are a fundamental part of politics, since many political decisions will be about balancing obligations to different communities and trying to decide how we ought to live”. Accordingly, scholars have interrogated the ethical content of relations embodied in intervention and other modes of foreign policy, drawing on various critical methodologies to question factors such as tradition, agency and dilemma as determinants of perceived ethical thought and action among decision-makers. In particular, those adopting an interpretivist framework have noted the paucity of fresh approaches in mainstream analysis, and in turn sought to engage the complexity of foreign policymaking through a perspective that is both humanist and historicist. As such, key actors have been situated in an “inherited web of beliefs and practices” with their subjective accounts of foreign policy, including its ethical dimensions, analysed accordingly.

Constructivists, by distinction, have gone beyond this practice to call for a more textual approach to British politics. Such an theoretical method advocates not merely “reproducing the narrative of policy actors”, but interrogating how commonly-accepted subjects and meanings in policy are generated and sustained in official

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105 Dan Bulley, *Ethics as Foreign Policy: Britain, the EU and the Other* (London: Routledge, 2009).
Offsetting former analyses of British politics, such readings have concluded that because the meaning of discourse remains beyond the agent’s control, policy can only be characterised by fluidity, instability and uncertainty.

From this premise, yet distinct from these binding theoretical approaches, this thesis will adopt an historical-analytic perspective to examine the significance of recent UK foreign policy in the Middle East outside official fora, among those with closer links to sites of British action. Rather than the subjective views of policy-makers, or questions of their agency, ideological inheritance and political context as actors, this research is concerned with interpretations of British foreign policy from those who have most typically been made its objects. Such an analysis at times employs accounts of British foreign policy as gauged through other theoretical measures, including Neo-Realism, Neo-Liberalism and Post-colonialism. However, as a body of work disciplinarily as well as ideologically distinct from these theoretical approaches, it does not attempt or aspire to apply any such single schema to hypothesise a coherent interpretation of British foreign policy.

At same time, this thesis also proceeds from an acknowledgement of the increasingly false binary between domestic and foreign policy in Britain. The shifting demographics of contemporary multicultural Britain has led to specific reflection on the changing priorities, values and pressures in British politics. In examining these, Christopher Hill investigates the interplay between foreign policymaking and the multicultural project: a relationship which, as he notes, is reciprocal. For, where “there is a natural wish on the part of ethnocultural minorities to shape the policy of their adoptive country to reflect their own partial concerns”, foreign policy has in turn become an arena in which domestic politics are played out. This observation resonates in particular in the British context, deeply interwoven as it is by what Will Kymlicka refers to as

\[111\text{Dan Bulley, (2009) "Textualising British politics: Deconstructing the subject of British foreign policy," }\textit{British Politics}(4); 301.\]


\[113\text{Christopher Hill, }\textit{The National Interest in Question: Foreign Policy in Multicultural Societies}\text{ (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 42.}\]
Consonant with Hill’s analysis, this thesis emphasises that any study of Britain’s foreign policymaking also evokes the role of the many diaspora groups on whose countries of origins, and thereby concerns, UK actions impinge. The following research has thus been undertaken in recognition of the simultaneous value of and scholarly inattention to these concerns as they have emerged in Britain.

Political mobilisations by diaspora groups in the West have been examined from a range of critical and historical perspectives as a prism for culture, geopolitics and society more broadly. As Michel Laguerre notes, “the study of diaspora politics has much to tell us about the democratic process in a host country, the homeland, and the strengths or weaknesses of the political organisations of the diaspora”. Similarly, anthropologists have employed diaspora culture as a lens through which to magnify socio-political dynamics in conflict zones where research is rendered unfeasible, such as in Iraq. Nadje Al Ali and Denise Natali have also devoted specific attention to the role of the Iraqi diaspora in relation to the 2003 invasion, documenting the tangible effects of their activities, as well as problematics around expatriate representation. Such studies point to the centrality of diaspora groups as actors in political and/or armed conflict in their countries of origin – namely, their capacities to assume roles of “peace-makers or peace-wreckers”. This potential has manifest in the West in campaigns which have variously supported armed struggle, hindered peace initiatives or promoted reconstruction, via direct local networks or through formal political channels abroad. Of these, it has also been observed that diaspora activists who are “outside the state but inside the people” have often obtained enhanced standing in the international arena, thereby becoming not mere agents, but engineers and initiators of policy.

116 See, for example, Antonius Robben, ed., Iraq At a Distance: What Anthropologists Can Teach Us About The War (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
118 Smith and Stares, Diasporas in Conflict, 12.
Diaspora mobilisations are thereby coming to challenge established notions of how political life is organized. Simultaneously, this fluid and ever-expanding sphere of transnational politics, accelerated as relevant here by the mass movement of groups fleeing conflict, has given rise to a web of new socio-political identities and affinities, as well as their attendant uncertainties. Attention to the role of diaspora groups as multifarious and transnational political actors with diffuse affiliations, as Fiona Adamson notes, is thus growing in both academic and policy spheres. Robin Cohen has elaborated on the implications of this phenomenon in Western host states, observing that “even within settled liberal democracies, the old assumption that immigrants would identify with their adopted country in terms of political loyalty, culture and language can no longer be taken for granted”. As the nexus of these strands, interactions between diaspora groups and policymakers in countries like Britain are thus bound with cultural, ideological and institutional significance.

Despite the potency of links between immigration, domestic responses to cultural diversity, and states’ international relations, such relations remain under-scrutinised from an academic perspective. As Bhiku Parekh observes, there has been a lack of systematic political theorisation around immigration and its foreign policy implications beyond studies within bounded disciplinary silos. This gap in historical scholarship arguably reflects the elision of ‘other’ cultural actors and voices from political and/or official accounts of Britain more broadly. Such a lapse was previously noted in Hourani’s own characterisation of British diplomatic scholarship on the Arab region, where he observed that “the countries and peoples of the Middle East usually appear as a passive body over which European powers competed, fought, and sometimes agreed”. Similar observations have been expressed since 2011 by those documenting the Arab uprisings from alternate popular or social-history perspectives. As Malu Halasa recently noted, “we have a problem with the way the West is dealing with the

120 Latha Varadarajan, The Domestic Abroad Diasporas in International Relations (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.
125 Hourani, “How Should We Write the History of the Middle East?” 130.
region and this is partly due to the fact that the Middle Eastern voices are rarely heard…once you are looking at the region on a geopolitical level, the people disappear".126

More recent histories of twenty-first century British policy in the Middle East have cast accounts with greater critical attention to its reception among populations in the region. Among this minority of scholars, Rosemary Hollis notes the limitations of prevailing attitudes around Britain’s role, both colonial and contemporary, in the region. As she observed in the first months of the Arab uprisings, the attitude in Britain has often been that, “the Middle East can take it or leave it, we only intervene when it is absolutely necessary and we stand democracy when we intervene’. But this is to ride over and deny the impact of years of involvement – economically, as much as politically and military.”127 Despite such acknowledgements, more syncretic, multifaceted narratives of British policy in the region remain exceptional. Fewer still have focused specifically on diaspora perspectives as a framework for analysis that both draws in actors and agents typically cast as marginal and affords alternative, and often dissenting, accounts of policy. It is with this dual intention that I embarked on the research for this thesis. Recognising the need for more dialectic, far-sighted histories of British involvement in the region alongside a thorough reappraisal of the ideology and practice of policymakers themselves, I document here perspectives on Britain’s responses to democratic change in the Middle East, both past and present.

Friends and liberators: new accounts of British foreign policy

Tumult in the Middle East this century, perhaps consummately symbolised in the rise of the so-called “Islamic State” (IS), has confirmed that the implications of domestic politics are no longer limited to nation-state boundaries.128 Where British governmental imperatives have long configured the lives of those in the globe’s farthest reaches,
events in distant countries have also found their way back into British national politics, and onto British soil. Beyond sensational geopolitical developments around the transnational mobilisation of campaigns for and against extremism in the region, this exchange has manifested in longer-standing and more prosaic interactions. Tides of war and political conflict since the 1950s have combined with economic incentives to compel waves of immigration from the Middle East to Britain, establishing the UK as one of the centres of the Arab diaspora.\(^{129}\) Despite this, until 2011 no official category for “Arab British” (unlike the standard “Black British” or “Asian British”) existed in UK censuses.\(^{130}\) Since its addition, a population of around 240,000 has been recorded, though anecdotal and community data suggests a greater figure.\(^{131}\) These statistics have emerged more vividly in the growth of satellite cities around the country – in the waft of sheesha from ‘Little Beirut’ in West London, or the soundscape of Arabic dialects that has become a fixture of the Harrod’s tearoom. Developments in the Middle East over recent decades have thus also been reflected in Britain – from the files of Kuwaitis queuing to withdraw savings from the Edgeware Road cashpoint on the eve of the 1991 Gulf War, to record-breaking protests around the 2003 Iraq invasion and more recent, regular demonstrations at London’s Libyan, Egyptian and Bahraini embassies. So too, those commentators wishing to test the political mood on the so-called “Arab Street” have often ventured little farther than Knightsbridge or various community and cultural centres around the British capital.\(^{132}\)

Already prominent in UK business, media and education, British-Arab identities have in recent decades emerged more powerfully in politics and civil-society, from grassroots activism to official lobby-groups and electoral institutions.\(^{133}\) The concerns that have produced these mobilisations on the part of the diaspora, while voiced by diverse groups and targeting a range of institutions and audiences, have frequently centred on Britain’s


response to events in the region. As evidenced in the decades prior to regime-change in Iraq (discussed further in Chapters One and Two), a range of expatriate groups in Western countries attempted at that time to sway the course of local politics under Saddam by goading or forestalling specific action by foreign governments. As the miscellany of political claims, demands and agendas now proliferates from established migrants as well as newer arrivals from sites of upheaval in the Middle East, the response of host governments like Britain has been magnified. So too, the decade or more since regime-change in Iraq has brought the outcomes of that campaign into sharper relief.

From this vantage point, this thesis seeks to address the question of how Britain’s approach to Arab democracy, both past and present, has been interpreted by arbiters whose analyses figure least in mainstream scholarship on foreign policy, yet for whom its stakes are arguable among the highest. This appraisal of UK policy development, implementation and effect is undertaken through comparative studies of Britain’s response to regime change in Iraq and to recent popular campaigns against authoritarian rule in Libya, Bahrain and Syria. The four distinct cases have been selected for the idiosyncrasy of circumstances in each country, including the unique dynamics of national relations with Britain, as well as the universal themes each evokes around British engagement in the region. Where two of these examine anew responses to the question of intervention in the aftermath of the Iraq war, these debates are set against an instantiation of a different kind of British engagement – one of purported non-interference – and its rhetorical rationale. Employing diaspora perspectives to illuminate historical and contemporary UK policy in these countries, this thesis asks what interests have defined policy-makers’ choices and whether these calculations have been altered by the course of events since 2003. It queries which values and whose voices have been prioritised in forging official responses to democratic demands, and how the ensuing actions have been promulgated or packaged for public consumption outside of Whitehall and Downing Street. In in this task, it adopts as principle the view that genuine cosmopolitanism is not merely a perspective or “mode of managing meaning”,

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as replicated in political discourse, but also a practise that entails “greater involvement with a plurality of contrasting cultures, to some degree on their own terms.”

I. Structure

As the backdrop to these discussions, Chapter One reviews British foreign policy in the Middle East in the decades prior to the Iraq War and establishes the ideological and political milieu in which the Blair's New Labour government came to power. References to political discourse; relations between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), intelligence apparatus and Downing Street; and the transatlantic ‘special relationship’ trace the shifting dynamics of British foreign policy over this period. The inception of discourse around democracy and human rights and their promotion through policy are likewise examined through specific attention to Blair’s lively record of foreign intervention. Analysis of political parlance and other official documentation is employed to suggest that the 2003 campaign signified a break from the existing mechanics and morals of British foreign policy, informed as much by geopolitical conditions as the ideological composition of Downing Street at the time. Moreover, it is argued that this shift - later described by Blair as a breach with “doctrine of benign inactivity… to keep all as settled as it can be and cause no tectonic plates to move” – has since come to connote some of the worst incarnations of UK foreign policy, both within Britain and internationally. The genesis of these outcomes is discussed in greater detail through British-Iraqi perspectives in Chapter Two. Official discourse and documentation in the immediate pre- and post-war years is set against accounts from members of the diaspora who campaigned around democratic change in Iraq, seeking the attention and often aid of their elected representatives. These perspectives serve as a countermeasure to Coalition claims and through such references, I argue that for diaspora Iraqis who sought more enlightened modes of intervention on the part of their host nation (and more hopeful outcomes for their country of origin), the 2003 campaign re-animated insidious historical patterns of Western policy in the Arab world.

135 Also referred to in this thesis as the “Foreign Office”.
The interventionism of the Iraq war has since been widely discredited publically and its failures tacitly acknowledged by Westminster’s new incumbents. (Indeed, the decade anniversary of the invasion saw cabinet members privately instructed by the Conservative Foreign Secretary William Hague not to discuss controversial or unpalatable aspects of the divisive war). After ten years of calamity in Iraq, burn-out in Afghanistan, a bill of almost £37 billion and toll of more than British 600 lives, 2011 found the nation “poorer, wearier and warier” in its foreign policy. Nonetheless, relics of the 2003 campaign and its ideological garb could be detected in the new Coalition government’s response to fresh challenges in the region. Suggestions of a “moral principle” quickly made their way into prime-ministerial discourse on the developments unravelling in North Africa. So too, Hague soon identified the emergence of a “networked world” where relations between countries were pivotal, and where British foreign policy would “[use] diplomacy to secure our prosperity” and “[harness] the appeal of our culture and heritage to promote our values”. The increasing urgency of the situation in Libya saw the Coalition government compelled to refine and concretise these ideals into strategic action.

As the first major test case of learning from Iraq in the region, Britain’s response to the uprising against Colonel Gaddafi thus forms the focus of Chapter Three. UK relations with the Libyan regime are contextualised through attention to prior policies and in particular, the language of human rights and democratisation that accompanied Blair’s courtship of the veteran dictator. As in the preceding chapter, the activities and influences of the Libyan diaspora provide a critical framework through which to assess the strategies employed by Cameron’s government in aid of the Libyan rebel campaign. Here, I question the relative agency and influence of the diaspora in procuring foreign assistance, as well as the interplay of strategic interests with legitimate humanitarian

demands. Examining foreign policy-makers’ practices and discourse alongside accounts of diaspora campaigners, I argue that despite arguable learning from Iraq by both parties, the UK effort was still foiled by elements of inattention and strategic self-interest.

In contrast to the bold interventionism evidenced in Libya, Chapter Four highlights a concurrent instance of British acquiescence to authoritarian rule in the region. This case study examines the UK response to ongoing dissent in Bahrain as a litmus test for the relative strength of national interests and human rights among policy-makers: that is, the “stability versus freedom” equation. Britain’s role in the Gulf is illuminated through details of an historical and geopolitical connection to the monarchy of its former island-nation protectorate. So too, the unique conditions of Bahrain’s long-suppressed democratic movement are examined through the dilemmas posed by unrest in the country to British officials at that time. Perspectives and experiences from the Bahraini diaspora in the UK are employed to assess the current trajectory of British policy in an historical context, emphasising questions of democratic reform among Bahrain’s rulers. An exemplar of complicity in repression, British-Bahraini relations here presented as a lens through which to test the customary ethical discourse of foreign policy makers.

Where Cameron’s government has remained wilfully blind to despotism in the Gulf, the simultaneous brutality unfolding under President Bashar al-Assad in Syria has proved impossible to overlook. Chapter Five seizes these developments as the concluding empirical case study of the thesis, locating Britain’s policy on the present-day Levantine conflict in the context of its relations with the Syrian regime and fragmented diaspora over preceding decades. In turn, salient perspectives from diaspora activists and politicians are used to scrutinise the adequacy of Britain’s efforts to protect the Syrian population and fledging democratic movement over the escalation of the conflict. This analysis culminates in the events of August 2013 when the spectre of Iraq was writ-large on Britain’s parliamentary vote on intervention in Syria. With political debate appearing to trace an arc back to events of a decade ago, I address the perceived analogy between the proposed campaigns in Iraq and Syria through diaspora perspectives,

arguing for the causal links between rash interventionism in 2003 and hesitancy in the face of atrocity a decade later.

From this mosaic of official actions and oversights, Chapter Six appraises British strategy in the Middle East as a coherent political device. I employ theoretical and comparative devices to analyse key facets of interactions between policy-makers and populations of the region as well as between their diasporas and UK political institutions. Illuminated by portraits of Britain’s historical relationship with democracy and human rights in the MENA, these perspectives thus become a living measure of the fortitude of Britain’s own democratic architecture. From these findings, this concluding chapter argues for a more consistent, constructive and informed approach to both the region and its representatives in policy-makers’ constituents. Possible avenues for evolution in Britain’s response to democracy in foreign policy are reflected on, while querying the very possibility of more a progressive mode of Western involvement in the Middle East.

II. Sources

In addressing these questions, this thesis draws on a range of primary sources, encompassing official material and original fieldwork research. The former category includes policy speeches and statements, departmental reports, minutes of meetings with diaspora figures and official communiques. In particular, I will refer to discourse employed by policymakers in the Blair Labour and Cameron Conservative-Coalition governments, in particular the use of key political and ethical tropes, to examine the ideological connotations of their leaderships. Key archives and repositories consulted here include FCO and Downing Street records; House of Commons debates; and archival FCO records, for example, diplomatic dispatches from Britain’s colonial administrations. As noted by Gaskarth and Leech, the construction of different Arab-uprising cases in UK policy language provides ready insight into governing attitudes (that is, positive, negative or neutral) to the regimes in question and to their popular

challengers. Analysis of such discourse thus reflects a method instructive for the purposes of this study. Although telling, rhetoric around foreign policy might equally serve to obscure tensions in or conflict between its constituent components (for example, between the substantive values of human rights and the political mechanisms used to realise them). I therefore seek a more integrated account of British policy in each instance by substantiating or appraising political discourse through reference to other more concrete sources, for example, empirical data or official records obtained through formal enquiries and Freedom of Information. Concurrently, it is recognised that the varying restrictions on accessing such material (access which is so often itself reflective of policy), in particular relating to more contemporary events in Libya and Syria, renders a comprehensive picture of official actions or agendas impossible. Nevertheless, I have been able to refer to official documents including: reports from all-parliamentary committees and inquiries, for example by the Foreign Affairs Committee; ministerial correspondences (many obtained through FOI) and meeting transcripts, as well as reflections given by FCO policymakers and representatives in off-the-record forums, for example, Chatham House meetings.

As was noted by Secretary Hague himself in his 2010 foreign policy manifesto, “relations between states are now no longer monopolised by Foreign Secretaries or Prime Ministers”. Rather, he indicated: “There is now a mass of connections between individuals, civil society, businesses, pressure groups and charitable organisations which are also part of the relations between nations.” Accordingly, source material relating to this miscellany of adjunct actors – for example, data from NGOs, commercial organisations or journalistic investigations – will be employed as relevant to exemplify features of British policy beyond increasingly impervious official records. Key among these sources has been material from human rights and activist groups, both local and international; publications and panel discussions by British foreign policy think tanks; and insights afforded by journalistic investigations.

145 Hague, “Britain’s Foreign Policy in a Networked World”.

The principal source in this thesis, however, consists in qualitative data from interviews with UK-based members of the diaspora from each case-study country: a documentary effort which reflects the major original contribution of this thesis. For this research, formal, informal and semi-structured conversations were conducted in Britain with around 10-15 representatives of each national group, the majority of them first-generation immigrants and exiles. Most of these interviews were conducted face-to-face between October 2011 and September 2013 and took place in London, though some conversations were held via telephone or Skype. Interviews varied in length from twenty-minutes to two-hours, and the material presented here in some instances includes content from shorter follow-up discussions which took place after 2013. The content of questions ranged from UK interventions in the Middle East to diaspora coordination and the machinery of Britain’s institutional power itself. Interviewees were sought on the basis of their specific public, political and/or civil-society activities and, methodologically, it is significant that I do not attempt a general survey of community opinion amongst diaspora or communities from the region. Rather, the aim of this study is to document the roles and reflections of those who have evidenced a concern with democratic change in their country of origin according to which they have attempted to influence British policy, whether directly or indirectly. The participating individuals and groups have therefore been chosen according to their broadly-democratic espoused aims and ideals, and with critical attention to their affiliations (I have not, for example, sought detailed perspectives from supporters of the repressive regimes in question).

Source material of this kind has been pursued with an awareness of its narrative fluidity, factual fallibility and contested values, and it is acknowledged that such qualitative interview and oral history techniques have weaknesses as well as strengths. Foremost among these, is the limitation on access to many key sources: for example, significant political representatives from the diaspora milieu who were unavailable for interview.

146 This thesis will used the term “first generation” to refer to those born outside of Britain who migrated as adults or children, consistent with definitions applied in the UK census, and commonly applied by scholars including Lyons and Mandaville. Accordingly, “second generation” will refer to those born in Britain to parents who migrated to the UK.

147 Due to some participants’ preferences for anonymity, many of these interviews have been cited with first names only, or using a pseudonym. Where permitted and/or where the relevant comments have appeared elsewhere in the public domain, the full names of interviewees have been used.

Accordingly, this thesis does not claim to be exhaustive in research or binding in conclusions. As is already evident at the time of writing, the restricted historical timeframe of the study, which is curtailed to focus on debates around intervention occurring in 2002-2003 and between 2011 and 2013, renders its arguments liable to revision through hindsight. So too, the rationale for its case studies excludes other significant and illuminating instances (for example, Egypt or Yemen).

Notwithstanding these limitations, I emphasise the originality and validity of the data presented here as an alternative (albeit transient and bounded) archive of political dynamics in Britain, the Middle East and the world. As seminal oral historian Paul Thomson noted, interview sources can “shift the focus and open new areas of enquiry, by challenging some of the assumptions and accepted judgements of historians, by bringing recognition to … groups of people who have been ignored”. Speaking to these diaspora groups thereby “thrusts life into history itself and widens its scope”. In doing so, thesis aims to provide a wider, if transitory, snapshot of democracy as it stands at a bridge between cultures, geographies and arguably, between epochs.

A comprehensive political scheme: toward coherence in British foreign policy

More than ten years on from the campaign, the spectre of the Iraq war is no less palpable. In Britain, it resonates among a disenchanted electorate who vested greater hope in the ideals of the Blair leadership and policymakers still haunted by their predecessors' liberal utopianism. For Iraq, the war unleashed new and persistent forms of violence, oppression and conflict inside and beyond the country whose very nationhood (let alone democratic structures) now lies in doubt. In the region, the war’s legacy can be felt in sceptical appraisals of Western involvement from those engaged in

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149 It recognises, for example, that the accounts contained here are subject to revision with time, as well as that there have been significant limitations on access such source material – for example, key diaspora figures who were unavailable for interview.

150 A focus on Egypt, for example, might have highlighted the actions of a British government less prepared to respond to a rapid regime-change in the region, while attention to Yemen might have reinforced the primacy of regional dynamics and relations with Saudi Arabia for British foreign policy. For official commentary on Britain’s response to the protests in Egypt, Yemen and elsewhere, see: House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, “British Foreign Policy and the ‘Arab Spring’,” Second Report of Session 2012–13, House of Commons, 3 July 2012. Report, together with formal minutes, oral and written evidence available at: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmfaff/80/80.pdf [accessed 4 November 2013].

more organic campaigns for revolution and democratic change, as documented in this thesis. Historians have nonetheless noted that the ground-breaking moment in the development of liberal interventionism came not with the Coalition of the Willing in 2003, but with Blair’s renowned 1999 Chicago speech on military action in Kosovo. As Dodge has noted, the Labour PM’s bold statements appeared to capture “the zeitgeist, giving form and coherence to a number of disparate issues that had become prominent in the period of time”. But any semblance of an internal logic or consistency informing British actions abroad was shattered by the 2003 campaign - the myriad ideological and strategic components of policy yet to cohere into any unified practice. Dodge’s observation thereby highlights the disaggregation that has defined not just doctrines of liberal interventionism, but British foreign policy more broadly over the past century. For indeed, the reality persists that, as David Vital noted some half-century ago, there is no single “British foreign policy” - no overarching strategy emanating from London, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere. While the roles played by constituent elements in the government machinery of policymaking, including the FCO, continue to shift, so too foreign policy remains inextricable from the many altering domestic and international circumstances which compel decision-makers.

Accordingly, this study is predicated on an assumption of opacity and disjuncture in foreign policy – seeking values and interests where coherence eludes, and agendas where actions arise. In synthesising this analysis with the views of those in the UK who might have been on the receiving end of British foreign policy – those who are “strangers” and “outsiders” as well as citizens – I aim not only to illuminate neglected tracts of history from the region. Rather, I seek also to shed light on and interrogate the principles from which foreign policy engagements have historically been

152 Toby Dodge, “Coming Face to Face with Bloody Reality: Liberal Common Sense and the Ideological Failure of the Bush Doctrine in Iraq”, *International Politics* 46(2-3) (2009): 256. Indeed, credit for this innovation continues to manifest in Blair’s decoration with such titles as GQ “Philanthropist of the Year” as recently as 2014. See “Hall of Fame – Philanthropist: Tony Blair”, *GQ*, 2 September 2014.


forged. By doing so, this thesis aims to shift the optic towards those like Jabbar, who have so often been made the object rather than agents of policy; in the process, I hope also to move beyond a mere study of “others” toward an “anthropology of ourselves”.156

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CHAPTER ONE

All Internationalists Now: Iraq and Britain in the world

Politically too, we rushed into the business with our usual disregard for a comprehensive political scheme. The real difficulty here is that we don't know exactly what we intend to do in this country. Can you persuade people to take your side when you are not sure in the end whether you'll be there to take theirs?

Gertrude Bell, *Diaries, Basra*, 1916.¹

There is…a sense of this country’s destiny: the centuries of history and experience which ensure that, when principles have to be defended, when good has to be upheld and when evil has to be overcome, Britain will take up arms.

Margaret Thatcher, *House of Commons*, 22 November 1990.²

An extended feature in *The Guardian* in mid-2014 documented the stories of a handful of Kosovar Albanian adolescents³ who, as well as age and ethnicity, shared a namesake – Tony Blair. The dozen or so teens, variously “Tonibler”, “Toni” and “Bler”, were all born on the cusp of NATO’s 1999 intervention to protect civilians from brutalisation by the Serbian authorities of the time, and were among the thousands of Kosovan nationals who continued to declare the former statesman their “saviour”.⁴ The mother of one young “Tonibler” recounted her perilous 1999 flight to Pristina, now the capital of the Republic of Kosovo, explaining that she owed her life to the eponymous Blair. As she told journalists, “the good deed of a person should be remembered for a long time. The people who lived through the most chaotic and miserable chapter in our history know

what Tony Blair did… I would have had five girls, or as many as necessary until I could
name a boy Tonibler. Others did a lot. He did the most.”

Front-page headlines in The Guardian, as across international media, were that same
day consumed by the dramatic new crescendo of the crisis in Iraq. The latest twist in an
apparently interminable chapter of chaos and misery in the country had seen the second-
largest city of Mosul fall in a swift offensive by Sunni-jihadist militants, then calling
themselves the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). A mass exodus of residents
was reported from that city and other captured regions – including the former
hometown of Saddam Hussein, Tikrit – as fears mounted of wrath against so-called
‘infidels’ (ISIS militants declared they would make a “living hell” for Shi’ia in the
region). US President Barack Obama announced the dispatch of several hundred
“military advisers” to aid Iraq’s crippled army, while insisting that the US would not be
drawn into another bloody war in the country. Elsewhere in Washington, it was reported
that American officials had met with Iraq’s former deputy PM, the notorious exile
Ahmed Chalabi, who was now being floated as a possible replacement for the divisive
PM Nouri Al Maliki. In London, Britain’s Foreign Secretary William Hague was
likewise keenly reiterating that his government had no intention of military involvement
in the crisis, it being “a very different threat” from that which precipitated prior to the
2003 invasion.

There was little praise for Tony Blair to be found amid this clamour. Any mention of the
former PM was characteristically incriminating, couched in accusations of guilt (or of

5 Borger, “Meet the Kosovan Albanians who named their son after Tony Blair”.
http://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live/2014/jun/20/iraq-crisis-john-kerry-and-military-
advisers-heading-for-baghdad-live-updates [accessed 14 August 2014].
7 Also referred to as ‘ISIL’ internationally, or ‘daesh’ locally, the group the following month shortened
its name to ‘Islamic State’ (IS) after declaring a caliphate in the region. See Patrick Cockburn, “Isis
Caliphate has Baghdad worried because of appeal to angry young Sunnis”, The Independent, 30 June
2014.
[accessed 1 September 2014].
9 Alissa J. Rubin and Rod Nordland, “Challengers emerge to displace divisive Maliki”, The New York
[accessed 14 August 2014].
10 “Iraq: This is different from 2003, says William Hague – video”, The Guardian, 20 June 2014, at
[accessed 12 August 2014].
attempts at its abnegation) for the violence unravelling across Iraq and Syria more than a decade after his campaign in the region. The figure who had so gallantly written himself into the history of creating one nation-state was now being charged by political commentators and parliamentary successors with attempting to airbrush himself out of the destruction of another.11 Beyond Kosovo, fewer devotees have been willing since 2003 to give credence to the merits of Blair’s prior record of intervention abroad, in the Balkans or elsewhere. The ongoing and unmitigated disaster of the Iraq campaign has instead come to dominate accounts of his leadership and policymaking after he took office in 1997. As has been noted, in retrospect, the entire legacy of Blair’s conduct abroad has commonly come to be subsumed under the same ideological banner as that which produced the Coalition of the Willing.12 Tracing foreign policy both prior to and during Blair’s leadership up to 2003, this chapter briefly charts the emergence of a discourse of liberal interventionism and its relationship to UK foreign policymaking more generally. This background serves to highlight the disjuncture, in ideology and practice, that has characterised British conceptions of foreign policy as applied to the Middle East over the late twentieth century, and that this thesis will argue, has persisted into the twenty-first. In outlining the development of Blair’s interventionist sense of moral duty, it will argue that the Labour PM’s attempt to found a more coherent foreign policy doctrine would likewise fail – as now manifested in the chasm between present-day reflections of a foreign policy hero and heretic.

A flexible instrument – foreign policy and foreign crises

It was not only the foreign policy tenets of Blair’s New Labour that would come to crystallise around responses to the inveterate tyranny of rulers in the Balkans and Middle East. For his Conservative forerunners too, provocations by leaders in both regions served to catalyse questions of principle and practice around foreign intervention dilemmas, then emerging with increased urgency. Where the Middle East had proved a


testing-ground for the mettle of a waning empire under Prime Minister Eden, in the thawing post-Cold War climate, the region was again foregrounded as a site for Conservative attempts to recast British influence in the world. Throughout the protracted Iran-Iraq war of 1980–88, the government of Margaret Thatcher espoused official neutrality (a stance later proved duplicitous by the arms-to-Iraq scandal). However, Britain’s position later toughened with Saddam Hussein’s second military adventure into Kuwait in 1990. Allying with US President George Bush, Thatcher pressed for UN endorsement of sanctions and later, military action against the Iraqi regime – a case premised on a view that “dictators must be stopped. They must not be able to march into other peoples’ territory, rule their lives and take away their whole mode of existence.” The claim signified Thatcher’s credentials as a self-declared “conviction politician” whose clear-eyed principles underpinned her government’s robust line on international relations. Wedded to a fervent defence of the national interest, these convictions had produced a Conservative foreign policy that projected Britain as a formidable force for intervention abroad, as emerged in the previous decade in her hawkish Falkland’s campaign. Accordingly, the second Gulf crisis was held up by London as a litmus test for the United Nation's ability to prevent aggression in a post-Cold War world. Thatcher challenged the “collective will” of the international community to enforce resolutions against the Ba'athist regime (as she famously warned President George H. W. Bush in August 1990, “George, this is no time to go wobbly”) and her hardening stance was effective in persuading the US President to toughen his own line against Saddam, culminating in the commission of allied troops to Kuwait. Indeed, Thatcher later went so far as to declare that “we ought to throw him out so

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13 Carlton, Britain and the Suez Crisis, 212.
decisively that he could never think of doing it again”19. The PM was forced to resign before her threat could be realised in the prosecution of the Gulf campaign, but her steely approach to the Gulf conflict was nonetheless emblematised in her departure speech to parliament.20 On the ground in the region, UN-backed allied forces stopped short of deposing Saddam - a strategic decision which was to resurface with lasting repercussions a decade later. Her successor, PM John Major was however quick to emulate the uncompromising tone and transatlantic loyalty of Thatcher’s campaign against Saddam. Although emphasising the desirability of “a peaceful solution in the Gulf”, he made clear that only Iraq's unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait would prevent a military attack, with his government backing proposals for the UN Security Council (UNSC) to authorise a use of force.21 As the PM then claimed, “[we] fully support President Bush when he says that he is prepared to travel the extra mile to achieve such a solution. So are we. But there can be no question of negotiations, concessions, partial solutions or linkage to other issues.”22 In the subsequent 34-nation alliance committed to the US-led combat operation “Desert Storm” in January 1991, British troops represented the biggest European and third-largest (following Saudi Arabia) overall contingent.23

Despite this, Major’s foreign policy was one of lesser zeal than Thatcher’s and the same enthusiasm for “travelling the extra mile” could not be roused in either London or Washington in the aftermath of the war. As Saddam's forces meted out their vengeful retreat from Kuwait, Iraq was gripped by a wave of anti-Ba’athist uprisings which spread from Kurdistan in the north to the far south.24 While Major and Bush never publicly advocated ousting Saddam as had Thatcher, the dictator’s perceptible weakening in the final days of the Kuwait campaign led the US to take an active role in encouraging grassroots rebellion in Iraq. On 15 February 1991, Bush made an

19 Interview with Margaret Thatcher, “Frontline: The Gulf War”.
22 Whitney, “Mideast tensions: British say allies must erase doubts”.
announcement on the official US foreign radio broadcaster, *Voice of America*, in which he told its population that: “there is another way for the bloodshed to stop. And that is, for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside and then comply with the United Nations' resolutions and rejoin the family of peace-loving nations.” Several days later, on the eve of the Gulf War ceasefire, a Saudi-based, CIA-operated Iraqi opposition radio station issued similar calls for a popular overthrow of the despot. Broadcast by a defected Ba’ath party member, the statement urged Iraqis across the country to “start a revolution... and rise to save the homeland from the clutches of dictatorship.” The uprising that ensued engulfed both north and south, with Shi’ia and Kurdish rebellions aided by armed support from military defectors. However, the comparative strength of the Iraqi army, under orders to “take the Kurds under [the] tanks”, left the armed opposition powerless and the crackdown yielded a death toll in excess of 100,000, as well as an exodus of some 1.5 million from Kurdish Northern Iraq.

The apparent disregard of the Major government, in parliamentary recess at the time, for any question of intervention to halt the brutality drew widespread opprobrium from media and opposition ministers. Among them, Liberal-Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown proposed that Saddam’s helicopter gunships should be grounded by allied forces. A number of Conservative backbenchers similarly denounced the PM’s inaction, levelling charges of “Pontius Pilate” in Commons debates. (President Bush was also accused of “fiddling while Kurdistan burned”. Proposals for aid and a UN investigation into genocide from Labour opposition MPs were met with an array of logistical and political rebuttals. Among them, Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd dismissed these options as “unrealistic”, while admitting that Britain was unable to

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29 As he explained: “we should make it clear that we are not neutral about internal events in Iraq. When there is a conflict between dictatorship and democracy, we are on the side of democracy”. Cited in “The Hammer of the Kurds”, *The Economist*, 4 June 1991, 9-10.
31 See comments by MP David Tredinnick in ibid.
make key military decisions on Iraq in the absence of approval from Washington.\(^ {32}\) Official dictate in the latter, meanwhile, maintained that America had no interest in Iraq’s “internal affairs”.\(^ {33}\)

Nevertheless, in the face of mounting public outrage, international pressure and charges of political weakness, it was the British PM who was eventually compelled to act, with Major reporting that he had been “sufficiently moved” by photographs of Kurdish refugees.\(^ {34}\) In April 1991, the PM brought a proposal to the European Community (EC) for a safe haven in Northern Iraq in order to facilitate the return of those who had fled. The initiative, deemed “Operation Provide Comfort”, was endorsed by the EC and after a degree of lobbying from London by Bush himself, who ordered US troops into Kurdistan to implement the humanitarian relief (with the President later appearing keen to claim the operation as his own).\(^ {35}\) The area over the 39th parallel in Northern Iraq was declared a “no fly zone” to be policed by US, British, French and Turkish aircraft, coupled with the threat of reprisal for any Iraqi aircraft in breach of the restriction.

Amid toughening sanctions and mounting hostility toward Baghdad, the dispute became increasingly personalised over the following year. Both Major and Bush stated that sanctions could not be lifted while Saddam remained in power – a policy which exceeded the UN mandate of the time – but the allied claim was later retracted out of apparent reluctance to commit to any such narrow course.\(^ {36}\)

British officials nonetheless began consultations with exiled Iraqi opposition members, expressing their support for the latters’ activities in aid of regime-change. In a 1993 letter to leaders of a transatlantic network of Iraqi politicians, the “Iraqi National Congress” (INC)\(^ {37}\), Major confirmed that Britain “wholeheartedly supports the aim of the [INC] to set up a democratic alternative in Iraq and to set up an opposition

\(^ {32}\) ibid.
\(^ {37}\) The INC will be discussed further in Chapter Two.
He likewise expressed approval for initiatives to develop the infrastructure of the Kurdish-controlled north towards greater economic self-reliance and endorsements which were followed in early 1993 by Whitehall’s reception of a delegation of INC representatives, including the then head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Jalal Talabani.

This stance against Saddam was cast into doubt later that year, however, with revelations that over the previous decade, the Conservative government had played a significant role in illegally exporting arms production equipment to Iraq. The 1992 trial of machine-tool manufacturers Matrix Churchill, confirmed allegations that the company had breached the arms embargo against Iraq and, moreover, that ministers from the Thatcher and Major governments had been aware of the sales, secretly relaxing Foreign Office guidelines to facilitate trade. As was divulged, in the aftermath of the 1988 Iran-Iraq ceasefire and Saddam’s murderous gas attack on the Kurdish town of Halabja, ministers including Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe had observed “considerable” new opportunities for British defence firms in Iraq. It was accordingly proposed that guidelines prohibiting the sale of defence equipment be revised and, within months, Iraq’s annual allowance for arms purchases had been doubled to enable a fresh round of procurement. (The amendment was kept out of public view lest it cause a “misinterpretation” of trade precepts. As one Foreign Office official noted, it would have looked “very cynical” if the government relaxed its guidelines so soon after the Halabja atrocity. In an effort to restore confidence among the electorate, Major convened a high-level public enquiry, at which he and Thatcher testified against having

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39 Major wrote that he hoped to persuade the UN sanctions committee to look “favourably” on Kurdish requests. See ibid.
41 Guidelines prohibiting the sale of defence equipment to either party in Iran-Iraq war had been imposed during the height of violence in 1985, with the aim of discouraging enhanced bloodshed or prolonging the conflict. See Steven Kettell, Dirty Politics? New Labour, British Democracy and the Invasion of Iraq (London: Zed Books, 2006), 31.
43 Paul Henderson, director at the Matrix Churchill trial later told a British author that as early as January 1988 he was notified by a government minister that “its secret encouragement of the machine tools trade with Iraq was contingent on continuing approval from the White House”. Cited in “Major’s Iraqgate”.
44 Cited in Kettell, Dirty Politics? 46.
any knowledge of the underhand exports. The PM dismissed suggestions that he had been made aware of any alterations on restrictions, claiming to have instead assumed that FCO guidelines “were always intended to be a flexible instrument.”46 Both Conservative governments were cleared of responsibility in the affair, but the ordeal connoted a culture of secrecy and moral duplicity in Whitehall which to many observers, public and political, signified the more distasteful incarnations of foreign policymaking.47 So too, subsequent attempts by the Conservative government to portray Saddam Hussein as a menace and routine violator of international norms were marred by the scandal,48 and the PM resumed his more muted approach to Britain’s foreign involvement.

Indeed, just as his government’s erstwhile enthusiasm for military export was coming to light, Major was himself attempting to stifle debates over injecting arms into another genocidal conflict involving a global pariah. The inter-ethnic violence unleashed by the Serbian leader Slobodan Milošević against Bosnian Muslims and Croats from August 1992 quickly assumed a magnitude unseen in Europe since WWII.49 Reflecting on developments in Bosnia at that time, over which MPs were recalled from their summer recess, Major later recounted that the crisis: “crept up on us…and took us almost unawares…Ugly rumours circulated about ‘ethnic cleansing’… by August the existence of starving thousands in detention camps was revealed to the world. Hell’s kitchen was cooking.”50 Yet to international and domestic observers, the PM’s response appeared more defined by reluctance than urgency. As the conflict mounted over three years, with EU and UN-enforced “Safe Areas” defiantly attacked by Serb militias and peace-keeping and relief efforts scuppered, the PM remained overwhelmingly opposed to any form of military intervention. Offsetting his more assertive stance on Iraq, Major’s government retreated from suggestions of dispatching either ground-troops or airpower

45 Major refuted allegations that “in some way, because I had been foreign secretary, chancellor of the exchequer and Prime Minister, I must have known what was going on”. Cited in “Ignorance is Bliss”, The New Statesman & Society, 21 January 1994, 18.
46 ibid.
48 Cook, The Point of Departure, 191.
49 As the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia later described, the campaign was a “joint criminal enterprise” to create an ethnically pure “Greater Serbia”. See “International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia”, Hague Justice Portal at: http://www.haguejusticeportal.net/index.php?id=5888 [accessed 3 April 2013].
to protect civilians. American proposals that the international arms embargo which ensured a Serbian advantage in heavy-weaponry be lifted in order to enable Bosnians to defend themselves, were similarly refuted by the PM. Rather than seek an impossible military solution, Major in his capacity as EC Chair urged an assembly of international parties in London, toward efforts to “restore equilibrium to a situation that has become dangerously unstable.”

The “special relationship”, apparently so vigorous in the transatlantic confrontation of Saddam, thus began to unravel as Major lobbied against efforts by the new Democrat President Bill Clinton to either lift the arms embargo or garner support for airstrikes against Bosnian Serbs. Rather than any ideological stance against arms-trade or principled objection to the use of force in the Balkans, such objections by the PM reflected a broader stance against intervention in the region, born of a greater amoral conservative quietism. Where in the First Gulf War notions of safeguarding international law had directly intersected with national interest, the Bosnian conflict pertained primarily to questions of justice – those of a more humanitarian-style intervention. Major and his ministers discerned little national interest in weighing-in on such a crisis, and passivity therefore took precedence over foreign policy gestures inspired by idealism or a Thatcher-style military grandeur. Yet this strict adherence to precepts of national interest was concurrently tinged by a sense of pessimist realism: Britain could do nothing of any effect to end the intractable conflict, it was argued, and therefore it should do nothing at all. Indeed, leading voices within the Cabinet were explicitly scornful of the growing humanitarian impulse in London - a so-called “something must be done school”.

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to broker a peace agreement in 1992, described the conflict with utterances of “factional leaders” and “warlords”, the crisis of ethnic violence was cast in similarly fatalistic hue by Foreign Secretary Hurd. As he explained, two years into the bloodshed in 1994: “at the end of the day, as we can see very clearly in Bosnia, the only people who can stop the fighting are the people doing the fighting. You have here at the moment, alas, three parties in Bosnia who each of them believe some military success awaits them.”

Elsewhere, Hurd appealed to the authority of Edmund Burke (an “anchor of Conservative belief”) to explain that “we have no right, power or appetite, to establish protectorates in Eastern Europe in the name of a European order.” Instead, a palliative approach was adopted, provoking an attendant moral outcry from politicians, including a Conservative minority. Major’s government where possible sought to minimise public attention to the atrocities, recasting the crisis as a humanitarian operation beyond whose bounds it had no mandate to escalate Britain’s involvement. Indeed, many at the time continued to question the British sacrifices already made in its smaller-scale Balkans operation – what were cast as futile efforts to halt ethnic-cleansing in “another man’s war”. It was this more guarded, more parochial sentiment that persisted when Hurd was succeeded as Foreign Secretary by Sir Malcolm Rifkind in 1995. With more than 8,000 Bosnians massacred at Srebrenica that year, on taking office, the new secretary Rifkind quoted the dictum of Lord Palmerston in an allusion to a desirable British policy in the Balkans. “The furtherance of British interests ought to be the sole

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58 Simms, “What’s your foreign policy Mr Cameron”.
59 Simms, Unfinest Hour, 40.
60 As the American journalist David Halberstam observed at the time, “what senior Western diplomats were learning from their intelligence organisations and from representatives of NGOs, they were quite content to keep secret because of the enormous disparity between the horrors that were being committed and the impotence of their response.” See Dag Henriksen, NATO's Gamble: Combining Diplomacy and Airpower in the Kosovo Crisis, 1998-1999 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 93.
61 Simms, Unfinest Hour, 246.
object of a British Foreign Secretary”, he explained. As had previously been confirmed by Hurd, Britain would not act as “the world’s policeman”.

**Those that can act, must: New Labour and intervention**

Yet against the prevailing realism of Major’s government, some in Westminster were at the same time arguing fervently in favour of a British role as international protector, if not policeman, in Bosnia. Both deeply divided over the conflict, the major parties realigned in novel configurations on either side of the intervention debate, with several left-wing Labour MPs, suspicious of Western ulterior motives, joining the Conservative majority in opposing the use of force. Debates in the Commons meanwhile saw a handful from Major’s own party echo opposition calls for military involvement, espousing a new Conservative thinking that posited humanitarian intervention and the maintenance of international law within an expanded view of the national interest. Parliamentary support for intervention, however, came overwhelmingly from the backbenches of the Labour (and on a smaller-scale, Liberal-Democrat) opposition. The presiding sentiment among interventionists was articulated in an open letter to *The Guardian* in April 1993 by 17 Labour MPs, who claimed that:

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65 A position expressed by Tony Benn, who noted that “it is a civil war and in a civil war you can only provide a table”. See “Tony Benn on Bosnia: ‘the main enemy is NATO’”, *Workers’ Liberty*, 2 April 2009, at: http://www.workersliberty.org/story/2009/04/02/tony-benn-bosnia-main-enemy-nato [accessed 21 July 2012].

66 Beech and Oliver, “Humanitarian Intervention and Foreign Policy in the Conservative-led Coalition”, 107.
The time has come to use military force to end the systematic assaults upon Srebrenica and other civilian populations in Bosnia … We believe the left has a particular duty to stand up against the kind of pure, racially motivated fascism which the Serbian aggressors embody. We must defend the idea of a pluralist, multi-cultural, multi-denominational society which Bosnia represents. The right may enquire after the economic or electoral interests involved in intervention but for the left, strong and decisive action in Bosnia is now a moral imperative.67

While UN approval for intervention should be strenuously sought, it was argued, a Russian veto should not be allowed to stymie action and thereby prolong the suffering of civilians. Other Labour non-signatories meanwhile inverted an immobilising view of national interest to put forth a case in support of military involvement. Among them, Clare Short argued that “what is morally right in the former Yugoslavia is in our self-interest and those who have pretended that the two are in conflict are profoundly wrong.”68 Labour was therefore divided between interventionists and a more cautious frontbench who continued to uphold public opinion and the primacy of the UN - a position articulated by Shadow Foreign Secretary Jack Cunningham who refuted any “moral duty” to intervene and told the House that “the Labour Party is in its Constitution committed to the UN”.69

Divergence on Bosnia thus reflected a growing tension within the party around interpretations of its founding principles of liberal internationalism, then being conjured by members from all camps. Internal disputes had long existed over the policy implications of this broad internationalist ideology: namely, which of its many doctrines should be prioritised in a given context and their practical viability in real-world conflicts.70 On one hand, dominant Labour thinking on the Balkans gave primacy to the authority of international institutions, resonating (albeit implicitly) with Hurd’s statement that “anger and horror are not enough as a basis for decisions … particularly when those decisions affect human life, and more especially still when the lives are

70Beech and Oliver, “Humanitarian Intervention and Foreign Policy in the Conservative-led Coalition”, 109.
those of British service men or civilians.” By contrast, dissenting calls for intervention reflected a growing demand for a more nuanced approach to humanitarian protection – one which elevated the moral element of liberal values above a strict adherence to the procedural norms of the international community. According to this perspective, one which has been deemed an emerging “neoliberal” strand within Labour, it was the prerogative of a state’s foreign policy to make exceptions in cases where such norms might forestall ethical or humanitarian action, as in the Balkans. (As one Labour MP argued, what was after all the difference between protecting fleeing Kurds and fleeing Bosnians?)

It was this notion of a moral compass, prized by the Labour minority in the case of Bosnia, which henceforth emerged in attempts to reorient party policy over subsequent years. Beyond the Balkan political quagmire, the shadow cabinet had toiled to expose and denounce perceived Conservative failings, ideological and material, throughout its lengthy term in opposition. It was against the backdrop of the arms-to-Iraq scandal and other indiscretions on the part of Conservatives – what amounted to a generalised impression of “Tory sleaze” – that New Labour sought to frame its own manifesto following its landslide electoral victory in 1997. Policy blunders by Major’s ministers over preceding decades provided fertile ground for the incoming government to seed guarantees of a new values-based politics or “Third Way”. Reflected in Blair’s launch of the New Labour brand in 1994, such an approach sought to remake the image of the Labour party in Britain and of Britain in the world: a reinvigorated, strong and principled identity rooted in a coherent set of beliefs. As Blair described in a 1998 Fabian pamphlet:

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74 Kettel, *Dirty Politics*? 31.
The Third Way stands for a modernized social democracy, passionate in its commitment to social justice and the goals of the centre-left, but flexible, innovative and forward-looking in the means to achieve them. It is founded on the values that have guided progressive politics for more than a century - democracy, liberty, justice, mutual obligation and internationalism.76

This new strategy, Blair explained, moved beyond the stale “Old Left” while eschewing a “New Right” that treated “the very notions of ‘society’ and collective endeavour as evils to be undone”.77

In foreign policy terms, this reorientation translated into two key precepts: Labour would be both more internationalist and more ethical in outlook than its Conservative predecessors.78 Blair’s own record of expertise on and interest in foreign policy was, however, limited. The new PM had less experience than any other since WWII,79 and in opposition had declined to sign any single motion on issues relating to the Kurds, the Second Gulf War or conflict in the Balkans.80(Indeed, one of his first actions on assuming party leadership in 1994 was to sack the vocal Anne Clywd as spokesperson for Foreign Affairs on the grounds of her radical campaigns around Kurdish human rights.) Nonetheless, foreign policy was seen as an integral part of a broader “mission of national renewal” and Blair publicly advocated an approach that would both complement and reflect Labour's domestic goals.81 Promoting values abroad signified a new form of “enlightened patriotism” and the project was central to the revamped British identity he wished to project internationally.82 The 1997 Labour Party manifesto, Because Britain Deserves Better, outlined this fresh vision of a nation respected globally for its integrity in foreign relations. As the document stated: “[we] will make the protection and promotion of human rights a central part of our foreign policy. We will work for the creation of a permanent international criminal court to investigate

77 Blair, The Third Way: New Politics for the New Century...
79 Kampfner, Blair's Wars, 39.
80 Indeed, one of Blair’s first actions on assuming party leadership in 1994 was to sack Anne Clywd as opposition spokesperson for Foreign Affairs on the grounds of her radical campaigns around Kurdish human rights. See Alice Thomson, “I hadn't even suffered and yet I was sobbing”, The Telegraph, 6 March 2003.
81 Tony Blair, “Speech by the Prime Minister at the Lord Mayor's Banquet”.
82 ibid.
genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.” Such a focus was to be accompanied by Britain’s commitment to, among others, international leadership including support for NATO, arms-control, environmental protection, social and economic development, transatlanticism and European cooperation.

This broadly progressive trajectory was articulated more explicitly in the language of foreign policy when the new Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, launched his FCO mission statement. Though the party’s enthusiastic strategy of policy-packaging was seen by many at the time as an extension of New Labour's penchant for “spin”, its content indicated greater substance. Four key foreign policy goals were projected within the context of a declared new age of internationalism. As Cook’s mission statement noted: “we are instant witness in our sitting rooms to human tragedy in distant lands, and are therefore obliged to accept moral responsibility for our response.” Alongside more customary commitments to national security, prosperity and quality of life, the FCO pledged itself to “keeping the peace and promoting democracy around the world.”

Such a goal was to be realised, Cook explained, through cooperation in international forums and bilateral relationships to spread human rights, civil liberties and democracy: the same values demanded by British citizens themselves. In what would famously, if erroneously, be interpreted as the adoption of an “ethical foreign policy”, the Secretary claimed that: “the Labour Government does not accept that political values can be left behind when we check in our passports to travel on diplomatic business. Our foreign policy must have an ethical dimension and must support the demands of other peoples for democratic rights on which we insist for ourselves.” Although Cook later distanced himself from the glib, media-generated “ethical foreign policy” slogan in favour of a less ambitious interpretation, he was unambiguous at the time that his statement reflected a major realignment of international relations and national interest. This new

84 UK Labour Party, “Because Britain Deserves Better”.
86 Cook, “Mission Statement”.
87 Cook, “Mission Statement”.

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configuration, he claimed, would steer Britain away from the “narrow realpolitik” of its prior Conservative custodians.88

The implementation of the FCO charter in Blair’s first term in office would also highlight the other key tenet of New Labour foreign policy: transatlantic bridge-building. Incumbent in Downing Street, Blair swiftly adopted a project of repairing the “special relationship”, so badly damaged in previous dealings between Major and Clinton.89 (Indeed, condemning Major’s inertia in Bosnia at the time, Clinton had purportedly told a Democrat Congressman “what bastards those Brits are.”90) By contrast to preceding personal and ideological frictions, the Labour PM shared with Clinton a strong rapport on both fronts, consolidated by a perceived mutual investment in progressive politics, social values and internationalism91. The pair were frequently described as “kindred spirits” with respect to their domestic agendas and Clinton quickly confirmed the compatibility of their foreign-policies, noting in their first joint press conference in 1997 that: “over the last fifty years our unbreakable alliance has helped to bring unparalleled peace and prosperity and security. It’s an alliance based on shared values and common aspirations”.92

The ongoing recalcitrance of Saddam Hussein provided a timely case in which to instantiate this joint commitment to peace-building and an assertively values-driven foreign policy. As UN weapons-inspections continued to be frustrated by the then purported non-compliance and political chicanery of Saddam, London’s stance against the dictator toughened. In February 1998, Blair announced that the international community would play no more “elaborate diplomatic games” with Baghdad: if Saddam continued to defy the will of the UN, he would face the most severe consequences. The

89 The alliance was tainted from Clinton’s first taking office when it became known that Blair’s predecessor had backed the Democrat’s Republican opponent, George H W Bush in the 1992 Presidential election. However, the relationship further degenerated following disputes over the crisis in Bosnia in 1995 when Major was said to be contemplating the death of the friendship. See Heidi Blake, “How the ‘special relationship’ between Britain and the US became something to fret over”, The Telegraph, 20 July 2010, at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/7899926/How-the-special-relationship-between-Britain-and-the-US-became-something-to-fret-over.html [accessed 17 September 2012].
91 Kampfner, Blair’s Wars, 12.
92 Kampfner, Blair’s Wars, 12.
riskiest option of all, according to the PM, would be inaction.93 Indeed, Blair privately expressed a view that punitive consequences against Saddam should extend to the possibility of enforced regime-change, but ruled-out adopting any such official policy on the basis of legal, practical and political obstacles. He instead advocated a strategy of containment, coupled with grassroots, popular revolt. As he explained in a speech to the Commons:

We will do what we can to assist opposition groups in Iraq and to look at ways in which we can undermine Saddam Hussein in any shape or form. Most people would be delighted if he were to fall. If we had had to take military action and, as a consequence, he had fallen, we would have been delighted at that, too. The problem with saying that we should have set some sort of military objective to remove Saddam Hussein…was that there was not the authority to do so; nor would it have been possible without a massive commitment of ground as well as air forces.94

Several months later, Clinton confirmed his own official support for Iraq’s opposition forces. The continued rule of Saddam Hussein had over preceding years emerged as a preoccupation for Republican neoconservatives – Washington’s “democratic imperialists”95 – who perceived the Iraqi dictator as an additional threat to the Gulf and Israel, and levelled persistent criticism at Clinton’s limited strategy of containment.96 (As was argued, the President had squandered money on nation-building exercises which could be left to people themselves.) This increasing internal pressure for a toughened stance culminated in Clinton’s signing of the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, with which a policy of regime-change in Iraq was inscribed into US law.97 The document was couched amid rhetorical threats of military force which, after being hampered by Saddam’s obstruction of weapons inspectors and the invidious fallout of the Monica

93 Kettell, Dirty Politics? 36.
96 Herring and Rangwala, Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and its Legacy, 9.
Lewinsky affair, Clinton finally resolved to action in December. The resultant “Operation Desert Fox”, comprised a four-day campaign of joint US-British airstrikes against allegedly sensitive weapons manufacturing sites in Iraq.

Encouraged by “full support” from the Conservative opposition, as well as from Liberal-Democrats, London’s subscription to the initiative likewise consolidated Blair’s desire to see Saddam deposed. As the PM openly told the House within days of launching strikes, “a broad objective of our policy is to remove Saddam Hussein and we will do all that we can to achieve that.” Yet Blair was also scrupulous to emphasise the need for international consensus on action against Iraq, noting that his government would procure “the maximum possible support in the rest of the world” and limit the project to specific, “achievable” military goals. Despite this, strikes proceeded with neither UN authorisation nor support from an EU member state (many of which instead regarded the campaign as Clinton’s cynical attempt to divert attention from his own scandal.) Yet Blair’s rebuttal of domestic and international detractors questioning the legality of Operation Desert Fox in subsequent months was nonetheless confident. The military action, he claimed, had been sanctioned by the conditions of existing UN resolutions, and any potential cracks in the allies’ procedural practices were scaffolded by Blair’s Third Way charter. Not confined to domestic politics, this new ethos afforded a broader, normative architecture to support intervention in foreign crises – one which transcended the confines of international procedure. As Blair explained to an audience in Cape Town in January 1999, “when the international community agrees certain

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98 Kampfner, Blair's Wars, 24.
101 ibid.
102 ibid.
103 This confidence was also undermined by the outcomes of the operation, which as Hollis notes, posed more problems for Britain than it resolved: eliminating the possibility that punitive sanctions might be lifted via a completed UNSC weapons inspection process while heightening resentment to American military intervention through protracted air surveillance. Rosemary Hollis, “The End of Historical Attachments: Britain’s changing policy in the Middle-East”, in Dodge and Higgot, Globalization and the Middle East, 76-77.
objectives and then fails to implement them, those that can act, must.”104 Operation Desert Fox, he insisted, was “the right thing to do”.105

It was through the intractable Balkan conflict, however, that several months later Blair ratified this new foreign policy tenet - namely, that ethical imperatives could legitimise military action. Among Labour’s vocal advocates of intervention in Bosnia, Cook had in opposition argued that Milošević’s ethnic-cleansing campaigns represented a violation of Britain’s core national values106. Thus when similar violence erupted in Kosovo in 1997, the Secretary was resolute that New Labour should not succumb to the same prevaricating failures as had Major’s government.107 Blair had likewise disparaged the Conservative approach from the frontbench, claiming that “mixed messages on the use of force are not helpful”, and a more decisive posture was thus adopted as the Serb leader unleashed his fresh assault on Kosovo.108 Following Cook’s hosting an emergency meeting of the Security Council, a UN resolution was passed condemning violence by Serb and Kosovar forces and calling for an arms embargo.109 Despite London’s initial determination to pursue the diplomatic course, Milošević’s repeated refusal to sign a peace agreement, coupled with mounting public horror at his crimes, compelled Cabinet by March 1999 to endorse a NATO-led military action. British air, land and seas forces were committed to a campaign of airstrikes designed to force a Serb withdrawal. The following month, when NATO convened for a celebratory fiftieth anniversary summit in Washington, Downing Street had emerged as the “hawk” of the alliance. Encumbered by greater domestic resistance to such a deployment, Clinton was more reluctant to deviate from former statements ruling out the use of ground forces against Milošević. It subsequently fell to the British, determined to prosecute the campaign to its end,110 to rouse NATO’s commitment to ground troops,

105 Cited in “The Leaked Foreign Office paper that proves that Blair saw caveats a year before the war”, *The Independent on Sunday*, 1 May 2005.
110 As Blair told the House of Commons in March 1999, “To walk away now would not merely destroy NATO credibility; more importantly, it would be a breach of faith with thousands of innocent civilians.
lest the Serb leader call the organisation’s bluff on a more tepid use of airstrikes. The ensuing diplomatic and media offensive (by the conclusion of the NATO summit, participants were allegedly bemoaning the orations of “King Tony”) saw the PM advocate an escalated threat of force within a more radically reconfigured framework for the terms of global security and cooperation.

The key tenets of London’s apparent new “warlike humanitarianism” were laid out by the PM at the Economic Club of Chicago in an address expressly dedicated to promoting internationalism and a retreat from isolationism. Chartering what he described as a “Doctrine of the International Community”, Blair argued that old principles of state-sovereignty could no longer be regarded as a barrier to foreign intervention where the interests of peace and stability were at stake. A nascent era of interdependence now linked national interests to global interests. This in turn generated an unprecedented impetus to protect human rights and economic stability, through international collaboration and where required, through “just war”. The interplay of these precepts, the PM explained, was manifesting in Kosovo where “our actions are guided by a more subtle blend of mutual self-interest and moral purpose in defending the values we cherish. In the end, values and interests merge… The spread of our values makes us safer.” Nations would be compelled to observe this new accord or risk insecurity and enforced compliance from the international community. As Blair claimed:


111 See Rhiannon Vickers, “Labour’s Search for a Third Way in Foreign Policy”, in Little and Jones, New Labour’s Foreign Policy, 34.
We are all internationalists now, whether we like it or not. We cannot refuse to participate in global markets if we want to prosper. We cannot ignore new political ideas in other counties if we want to innovate. We cannot turn our backs on conflicts and the violation of human rights within other countries if we want still to be secure.\footnote{115}{Blair, “Doctrine of the International Community”.
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Blair’s vision thereby rested on a consequentialist rationale: the principled campaign underway in the Balkans would act as a deterrent to other would-be violators, should they contemplate repeating “the same mistakes in future”.\footnote{116}{Little and Jones, 
New Labour’s Foreign Policy
, 16.
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The rule of law must be retained by the international community as the core of any such doctrine, he argued, but the veto power of recalcitrant members (in this case, Russia and China) should not block the defence of human rights in instances of majority support for military intervention.\footnote{117}{Little and Jones, 
New Labour’s Foreign Policy
, 74.
}

It was therefore in defiance of the UNSC that NATO must commit to the threat of ground invasion of Kosovo.

Unlike later military interventions, however, the campaign was backed by political consensus among Blair’s Labour peers, as well as in Westminster\footnote{118}{“Time ‘running out’ in Kosovo”, 
BBC News
}, and the values compelling British involvement in the Balkans were held to be consistent with those of a traditional left-Labour ideology. In an interview several days after Blair’s Chicago performance, Cook himself described feeling “absolutely robust” in his government’s commitment to fighting a resurgent “fascism” in Europe – that no-one “on the left should have any reservations about fighting this evil.”\footnote{119}{John Lloyd, “Cook declares total war on fascism”, 
The New Statesman
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(Cook later elaborated on the procedural implications of this stance, noting that the UK “would act on the principle that a UN member-state should not be able to plead its sovereign rights to shield conduct which is inconsistent with its obligations as a member of the UN”\footnote{120}{Robin Cook, “Guiding Humanitarian Intervention”, Speech at the American Bar Association Lunch, London, 19 July 2000.
}. Despite New Labour’s apparent readiness to override obstructive international institutions in defence of values, any neoliberal overtures around its Kosovo campaign were mitigated
by an emphasis on the primacy of majority support from the Security Council. Likewise, the goals of its liberal agenda remained limited to those of humanitarian protection and, although the furnished ground campaign was clad in evermore combative rhetoric against Milošević, Blair’s proposed operation never assumed the dimension of regime-change. Instead, the orchestration of the campaign required NATO to publically convey its resolve to implement threats of force, while simultaneously assuaging member states’ fears of being drawn into a lengthy ground war. The PM strenuously reminded publics and NATO leaders that Milošević was the cause of their campaign in the Balkans and that humanitarian imperatives were its ends, namely through the protection of refugees. Assuming the spotlight of the media offensive, Blair posed as the campaign’s “driving force” and tireless humanitarian, often to excess. (Indeed, as has been noted, the impassioned drive for intervention in Kosovo reflected as much the efficiency of Downing Street’s PR machinery as the reign of any hard-nosed foreign policy dogma in London.)

With Milošević’s eventual capitulation to growing threats of force and Kosovo passed over to the control of the UN by late 2000, London’s stance was ostensibly vindicated. The terms of this seminal humanitarian intervention were thus ratified by Cook at a Chatham House meeting the following January, when he charted the specific conditions that might justify such a campaign – among them: that force be a last resort; that circumstances constitute a humanitarian catastrophe where the state was unwilling or unable to act; that action be collective, proportionate and likely to achieve its objective and that it be taken in accordance with international law. Globalisation, Cook told his

121 This was evident in the Security Council’s rejection by a vote of 12 to 3 of the Russian resolution condemning NATO’s action. In this respect, the intervention was characterised by the Independent Commission on Kosovo as being “illegal but legitimate”. See The Responsibility to Protect: Research, Bibliography, Background (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001), at: http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Resources/Publications/openebooks/963-1/index.html [accessed 19 December 2013].
123 Little and Jones, New Labour’s Foreign Policy, 73.
125 To Clinton’s protests, the PM went so far as to appear for a photocall barefoot in a refugee tent. See Andrew Stephen, “Clinton tells Blair to stop squeaking”, The New Statesman, 31 May 1999.
126 Vickers, “Labours search for a Third Way in Foreign Policy”, 43.
audience, heralded both new possibilities and new uncertainties, to which the only rational response was for states to strive for consensus and cooperation to promote security, democracy and human rights. As the only party to all of the G8, European Union, NATO, Commonwealth and UN Security Council, Britain was in a unique position to broker and implement such accords, he noted. UK foreign relations would thus be conducted in the pursuit of a policy of “enlightened self-interest”: a progressive new ethos to counterpoise the realpolitik of previous decades. As Cook explained: “the Cold War fostered client states whose repressive behaviour was often condoned in return for their loyalty to one camp or another. This was a particular paradox for the West. All too often it found itself in the pursuit of a proclaimed crusade for freedom shoring up regimes for whom freedom was not on the agenda.”

Cook’s prescription was reified the following year with the British deployment of force in Sierra Leone – a smaller-scale incursion justified solely in the terms of this new argot of civilian protection. In its aftermath, Blair himself pointed to the morality of the operation - “up in the high ground” as it was – as an exemplar to detractors of New Labour’s ethical foreign policy. Unlike Kosovo, the Sierra Leone mission was bolstered by approval at the UN Security Council and served to vindicate many of the Labour government’s nascent military practices, as well as its principles. Yet it was the more resounding campaign in Kosovo which cast the template for both British diplomacy and international doctrine. In seeding and apparently winning a new “battle between barbarity and civilisation, good and evil”, Blair had set the course for a “new epoch” of foreign policy. In Whitehall, meanwhile, the Foreign Office itself was overhauled to reflect this transformation – a revolution which was declared to signal “The End of Foreign Policy.” Announcing the most radical restructuring in the office’s history in January 2001, Foreign Minister Peter Hain explained that geographic divisions would scrapped, with new “issues”-based departments implemented to reflect

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128 Cook, “Speech to the Royal Institute of International Affairs”.  
129 Bulley, Ethics as Foreign Policy, 42.  
130 The action went some way to diminishing the early blemishes on his government’s “ethical” record left by 1998 revelations of British weapons exports to the country, in violation of both UN sanctions and UK law. Attempts to prosecute the firm involved were at the time undermined by Blair's attempts to dismiss the matter as overblown. See “UK Government faces Sierra Leone grilling”, BBC News, 18 May 1998, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/1998/05/98/arms_to_africa_row/95823.stm [accessed 14 April 2012]. On Britain’s role in the Sierra Leone campaign, see Kampfner, Blair’s Wars.  
the new configurations and concerns born from globalization, among them, human rights, the environment and conflict-prevention. As Hain told an audience at the Chatham House launch of the pamphlet, these fresh challenges demanded the evolution of a new approach which recognized global linkages, embraced global responsibility and cast-off distinctions between the foreign and the domestic: a foreign policy for “a world in which there is no longer any such place as abroad.”

The price of influence: Britain and ‘war on terror’

Only months later, after New Labour’s 2001 re-election, Blair addressed his peers at the October autumn party conference to announce another turning point in history. The events of three weeks earlier, he explained, heralded a new era – one in which leaders would “confront the dangers of the future and assess the choices facing humankind”. The world had been awakened to the fragility of national frontiers and this would be an epoch overhung by unparalleled threats of chaos by “the machinery of terrorism” (the latter term featured some twenty times in Blair’s speech). Nonetheless, the PM argued, the surge in violence and insecurity which had manifested so forcefully in New York might be countered by a coalescent, productive new force – that of global community. As he proposed, “amidst all the talk of war and action, there is another dimension appearing. There is a coming together. The power of community is asserting itself… We can't do it all. Neither can the Americans. But the power of the international community could, together, if it chose to.” United global powers might thereby end wars, address climate change, alleviate poverty and broker peace in the world’s most intransigent political conflicts (chiefly, that in Israel-Palestine). These were bold claims, but the occasion lent itself to oration as well as enterprise and Blair’s alacrity and

132 ibid.
urbane confidence in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks set him out against the prevailing equivocation of other world leaders.135

Across the Atlantic, Washington had also taken swift measures. Just hours after the planes made their descent, US Secretary Donald Rumsfeld briefed his department with a prescription for policymakers’ response to these events. As one staffer noted, Rumsfeld’s directives indicated: “[we] want best info fast. Judge whether good enough to hit S.H [Saddam Hussein] at the same time, not just UBL [Usama Bin Laden]. Need to move swiftly. Go massive. Sweep it all up - things related & not.”136 The official response from the Whitehouse was somewhat more guarded. In a televised speech the same night, President George Bush Jnr. addressed a nation reeling from an attack on its way of life:“these acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining. Today, our nation saw evil, the very worst of human nature, and we responded with the best of America.”137 Such sentiments belied the disunity which would soon open up in Washington over coming months around America’s response to developments in the Middle East, namely its Iraq policy.138 Yet Bush’s words resonated with the discourse of the British PM, also a self-declared patriot who had long proclaimed his love for Britain and his attendant discomfit with any anti-imperial connotations of New Labour’s progressive platform.139 As he had been quick to qualify soon after taking office at his 1997 Lord Mayor’s Banquet speech, the British Empire (about which “a lot of rubbish [is] talked”) should be cause for “neither apology nor hand

135 As Rosemary Hollis notes, Blair was the most prescient of leaders outside the US in perceiving the events of 9/11 as a geopolitical earthquake. See Hollis, Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era, 93.
139 At a 1997 speech in Manchester drafted by Jonathan Powell, Blair had declared that “I am a British patriot and I love my country”. Though the original text went so far as to claim that “I am proud of the British Empire”, this was removed at the last moment. Cited in Kampfner, Blair’s Wars, 45.
wringing”. Instead, national history should be used to further Britain's global influence, most especially through the country’s role as a transatlantic interlocutor, for as he noted, “when Britain and America work together on the international scene, there is little we cannot achieve.”

The advent of 9/11 thus enabled Blair to attempt to realise this claim, as his New Labour government embarked on Britain's biggest nation-building project since its empire in the Middle East was eclipsed by the superpower ally. Echoing the US President, Blair swiftly proclaimed that developments in America signified a wider existential threat to liberal democracy - that posed by radical Islam. Downing Street’s official response to events across the Atlantic was articulated in the PM’s speech to union delegates in Brighton, where within hours of the crash in New York, he confirmed that Britain would stand “shoulder to shoulder” with America in a common front against an “attack on civilisation.” Blair was unambiguous in his use of terminology: “this mass terrorism is the new evil in our world today. It is perpetrated by fanatics who are utterly indifferent to the sanctity of human life and we, the democracies of this world, are going to have to come together to fight it and eradicate this evil completely from our world.” So too, London’s willing recruitment to this offensive (christened the “War on Terror” in Congress the following fortnight) presented an opportune moment to conclusively dispel cumbersome, long-standing notions that Labour was “weak” on defence. According to the PM, where “the good life of the West” was under siege by a campaign of “chaos and strife”, a path of firm and active engagement was the only “serious” foreign policy on offer. The more concrete tenets of this new programme – one which would simultaneously bring “values of democracy and freedom to people around the world” - were set out by Blair at the Labour Party conference. As he noted in his opening remarks, “this is the moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken, the pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order the world around us.” This re-ordering would

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140 Blair, “Speech by the Prime Minister at the Lord Mayor's Banquet”, 1997.
141 Blair, “Speech by the Prime Minister at the Lord Mayor's Banquet”, 1997.
extend from the plains of North Africa to the “slums of Gaza”, but its first phase would be reflected in joint action to combat militant Islamism in Afghanistan. This would be followed by a more comprehensive campaign against “international terrorism in all its forms.” Within its bounds, Blair noted, there would be no further tolerance for the routine violators of international norms. Veteran “rogue” states like Iraq would henceforth become targets of an evermore assertive (and as it transpired, more centralised) British foreign policy. It was time, the PM declared, “for the Saddam-induced suffering of the Iraqi people to stop.”

There was little public stipulation at that time of how this might be achieved, but private discussions with the US President were already beginning to give shape to any such action. The following December, after the apparent success of the Afghan mission, Bush telephoned the PM to discuss options for dealing with the Iraqi dictator who had not yet provided evidence, as requested by UN weapons inspectors, of relinquishing his biological and chemical arsenal since the First Gulf War. The prospect that these weapons might be deployed against the West could no longer be countenanced, the President argued, proposing various strategies for eradicating the threat, including regime-change. The British PM in turn emphasised his preference for the present UN-backed route of disarmament, but nonetheless confirmed that “if [regime-change] became the only way of dealing with the issue, we [are] going to be up for that.” Blair soon after noted to Downing Street colleagues that a military victory against Saddam would significantly enhance the credibility of the allies’ “war on terror” in its next phase.

However, the PM also expressed reservations that an overtly imperialist strategy to quash Islamic extremism might prove unwieldy and costly, while risk heightening anti-Western sentiment in the region. Where the action in Afghanistan, premised on purportedly humanitarian as well as military and national interest objectives, conformed

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150 Kettell, Dirty Politics? 53.
to the mould of New Labour's prior interventions, the notion of a pre-emptive campaign against Iraq marked a more radical departure from its espoused charter.\footnote{Fairweather, \textit{A War of Choice: The British in Iraq} 2003-9, 8.} Cabinet thus set about investigating the feasibility of an intervention against Saddam within the established terms of its foreign policy manifesto. The ensuing “Options for Iraq” paper of March 2002, produced under the supervision of the PM's foreign policy adviser David Manning, thus served to recast Britain's policy toward the Ba'athist regime with a view to a politically-compatible, US-led campaign for regime-change.\footnote{“Cabinet Office Options Paper, Secret UK Eyes Only”, Overseas and Defence Secretariat, Cabinet Office, 8 March 2002, \textit{Iraq Inquiry Digest} at: http://www.iraqinquirydigest.org/?page_id=244 [accessed 4 July 2012].} As the report described, Britain’s central objective in relations with the country since 1991, had been to “integrate a law-abiding Iraq which does not possess WMD or threaten its neighbours in the international community”. This, the authors noted, “implicitly… cannot occur with Saddam Hussein in power.”\footnote{“Cabinet Office Options Paper, Secret UK Eyes Only”, 2002.} Nonetheless, it argued that Britain faced the choice of either strengthening its existing containment policy or actively pursuing regime-change. In light of Washington’s diminished confidence in (or patience for) a containment strategy, three possible regime-change strategies were put forth: covert support for opposition groups to mount an uprising or coup; air support for opposition groups to mount an uprising or coup; or a full-scale ground campaign by external forces. (Direct assassination was noted, but ruled out due to it being “illegal”).\footnote{“Cabinet Office Options Paper, Secret UK Eyes Only”, 2002.} The former two scenarios were deemed unlikely to yield success based on historical precedent. Forces of organised resistance on the ground in Iraq were minimal and disparate, and the external opposition similarly weak, fractious and “lack[ing] in domestic credibility”, though the options were not discounted as possible precursors to a full-scale regime-change. The report concluded, however, that the only guaranteed means of removing Saddam while boosting the odds of a favourable outcome for British interests was “to invade and impose a new government”. As was noted, “the greater the investment of Western forces, the greater our control over Iraq’s future”.\footnote{“Cabinet Office Options Paper, Secret UK Eyes Only”, 2002.}

The report nonetheless cautioned that such a campaign not only connoted a costly investment of troops and lengthy nation-building endeavours, it posed the additional

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151 Fairweather, \textit{A War of Choice: The British in Iraq} 2003-9, 8.
difficulty of generating a sound pretext for the invasion where current intelligence on WMD was poor and no legal basis for war yet existed. It was therefore advocated that Britain should consider a “staged approached” to the campaign: a strategy proceeding from a show of greater pressure on the regime through toughening containment measures. As was explained, “stricter implementation of sanctions and a military build-up will frighten his regime. A refusal to admit UN inspectors, or their admission and subsequent likely frustration, which resulted in an appropriate finding by the Security Council could provide the justification for military action.” Preparation for such a military invasion must also comprise careful planning, international coalition-building, incentivising the Iraqi people and “sensitising the public” via a media campaign warning of the Ba’athist threat and thereby, priming international opinion for war.156 Reflecting on these imperatives in a correspondence with then Chief-of-Staff Jonathan Powell, the PM noted that “the persuasion job on this seems very tough… Yet from a centre-left perspective, the case should be obvious. Saddam’s regime is a brutal, oppressive military dictatorship.”157

It was this subjective reading of New Labour’s “centre-left” internationalist precepts that guided the PM several weeks later, when he met Bush at his presidential ranch in Texas to ratify Britain’s support for US-led regime-change in Iraq. London’s endorsement of the campaign, however, came subject to core conditions set forth by Blair at their meeting. These included international backing in the form of a UN mandate, ample time to win public support for the invasion, and broader American engagement in the Middle East peace process.158 Downing Street was likewise sober about the distaste with which such a campaign would be met by the British public - not least on the centre-left – as well as by the international community. As was noted, a more transgressive paradigm would therefore be required to promulgate military action: a legal and political matrix whereby Saddam’s own non-compliance might serve to legitimise “serious consequences”, namely, the threat of force.159 A confidential memorandum from a meeting between the PM and Downing Street officials in mid-

2002 proposed: “we should work up a plan for an ultimatum to Saddam to allow back in the U.N. inspectors. This would help for the legal justification for the use of force. [The PM] said that it would make a big difference politically and legally if Saddam refused to allow in the U.N. inspectors.” The (apparent) pursuit of multilateralism thus became central to projecting the campaign as consistent with New Labour’s stated values. By contrast to the party’s unilateralist, anti-NATO stance of the 1980s, Blair sought to confirm his government as a reliable international player - a “safe pair of hands.”

Yet within the PM’s own quarters, these aspirations were equaled by an increasingly unilateral approach to policymaking. Outside Cabinet’s customary foreign policy forum of the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, the de facto decision-making body for the invasion evolved from a series of meetings between the PM and select ministers, officials and military staff. Foremost among these was the new Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, who despite an energetic team of strategy and media advisers, reflected only a minority of FCO opinion, and a fraction of its expertise. From mid-2002, direct channels were likewise established between Downing Street and national security and intelligence apparatus - mechanisms that served to minimise, or even actively obviate, discussion of the campaign coalescing within Cabinet, Whitehall or parliament more broadly. It was also to the exclusion of mounting public opinion against the war that the Iraq team – a retinue of the government that Blair claimed “involves people fully” – forged plans for the invasion.

As the prospects of securing a second UN resolution in support of the invasion began to diminish alongside Downing Street’s apparent commitment to its abiding multilateral goal, resistance swelled to threaten the campaign from within New Labour itself. In

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161 Little and Jones, *New Labour’s Foreign Policy*, 16.
162 Kettell, *Dirty Politics?* 54.
164 Mr Straw said it was never British policy to achieve “regime-change” in Iraq “and there would have been no legal base for it ever to be our policy”. See “Foreign Office memo shows 2002 plan to sell Iraq invasion to UK media”, *The Guardian*, 11 December 2010, at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/10/memo-2002-iraq-invasion-media [accessed 27 July 2012].
165 Cited in Kettell, *Dirty Politics?* 65.
September 2002, within twenty-four hours of Downing Street’s long-awaited unveiling of its WMD dossier,\(^{166}\) fifty-six Labour rebels used a technical Commons vote to register their opposition to the government’s stance on Iraq. With a new draft UN resolution days away and Attorney-General Lord Goldsmith advising that clear UN authority was needed for war in Iraq, Straw nonetheless echoed the PM’s view that containment had failed. A UN resolution was desirable, he noted, but not "essential" for military action under international law. This stance contrasted with that of Straw’s predecessor and now Commons leader, Robin Cook who had that same week claimed that any use of force must have full UN authority.\(^{167}\) So too, discord within Cabinet itself was signaled by the International Development Secretary, Clare Short, who publically warned against “another Gulf War”, stating in a televised interview that, “we cannot have the people of Iraq suffering again. They have suffered too much. That would be wrong.”\(^{168}\) Efforts to procure expert advice on the campaign beyond the ambit of Blair’s increasingly narrow Iraq policy faction, however, also yielded unfavourably recusant outcomes. Within weeks of the November Commons vote, Downing Street invited a panel of distinguished Iraq and international security experts to assess the viability of the proposed regime-change campaign - one of few consultations which took place between London’s war architects and regional specialists of any form.\(^{169}\) When briefed on the possible ethnic and political repercussions of a US-led regime-change in what amounted to almost unanimous counsel against the war, the PM appeared unreceptive to facts which contravened his intended course against

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\(^{166}\) Also referred to as the “September dossier”, the document “Iraq's Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Assessment of the British Government”, claimed to be based on the work of the Joint Intelligence Committee – the “heart of the British intelligence machinery”. The report was chaired by the Cabinet Office, including representatives from the Intelligence and Security Agencies, the Chief of Defence Intelligence, as well as other senior government officials and was presented to the House of Commons 24 September 2002. Full text available at: https://fas.org/nuke/guide/iraq/iraqdossier.pdf [accessed 26 July 2012].


\(^{169}\) The participating experts did not report having been engaged in any meaningful advisory discussions with the Foreign Office, and Blair's policy-making circle included no experienced Arabists. As Steele notes, “interviews with top Foreign Office officials involved in the pre-war discussions as well as Arabic-speaking British ambassadors in the region reveal a damaging vacuum in the department's advice.” See Steele, *Defeat: Why They Lost Iraq*, 17.
Saddam.170 (As one Iraq expert present at the meeting recalled, “we tried to think of another way of saying ‘don’t do it you fool!’ but in fact, the option of not going to war never came up.”171)

By contrast, the PM enjoyed the unqualified endorsement of the Conservative frontbench. Opposition leader Iain Duncan Smith echoed Blair’s rejoinder that “ten years of second chances” signaled the limit of international tolerance for Saddam. Yet when MPs were recalled in November to debate the new UN resolution 1441 amidst public outcry, dissent had extended to include former ministers on the right and left of the Labour party. Many adopted the “principled internationalist” stance of their Liberal Democrat counterparts who for the first time rejected a deployment of force by the New Labour PM.172 Other rebel Labour allies forecast “devastating consequences for the whole of the Middle East region” if the invasion were to proceed.173 Nonetheless, assiduous individual lobbying efforts saw Downing Street garner sufficient support for the Commons to endorse the existing UN resolution and reject a motion requiring a second resolution to mandate the use of British force in Iraq.174 Though bound by a commitment to debate any pending military action in the House, Blair’s New Labour government was licensed to pursue arms against Iraq without the authorisation of the UN.175

Thus, as substantive evidence of WMD evaporated over subsequent months alongside prospects of a multilateral mandate, it was with an emphasis on moral, rather than political or legal authority that Blair attempted to sell the war – that is, an allegorical

170 As another former Director of the Royal United Services Institute expert recounted, “we all pretty much said ... Iraq is a very complicated country, there are tremendous intercommunal resentments, and don't imagine you'll be welcomed.”
172 Curtis, Web of Deceit, 41.
175 There is no constitutional requirement for the UK government to seek explicit approval before committing UK forces to military action, as The Royal Prerogative permits the government, under the aegis of Sovereign, to give an order to undertake military action.
narrative that Saddam was “uniquely evil”\textsuperscript{176}. By the end of 2002, a “Coalition of the Willing”\textsuperscript{177} had succeeded in winning a UN resolution, which reasserted demands that UN weapons inspectors be allowed back into Iraq with unrestricted and unconditional access. British officials in turn seized every public opportunity to reinforce the threat of WMD, with the PM embarking on a new PR offensive (what Blair deemed his “masochism strategy”\textsuperscript{178}) to advocate foreign intervention to a sceptical British public and international community. London’s case against Iraq thus came to rest on the twin pillars of security (both national and global) and human rights. As was then noted by Straw’s press adviser in a memo headed “Not taking the UN route”, the government’s “argument should be narrow, and put with vigour – Iraq is uniquely dangerous.”\textsuperscript{179} Such an argument was coupled with a more universal contention from Downing Street – a broader appeal to the doctrines of humanity, community and of responsibility that the PM had so successfully mobilised years earlier. The threat of WMD, he warned the Commons, “like terrorism, represents savage indifference to human life.”\textsuperscript{180} Yet it was nonetheless apparent to many within parliament (and beyond) who had rallied around the PM’s campaign in the Balkans, that Iraq was neither Afghanistan nor Kosovo.

Despite related claims about the need to prosecute or deter serial human rights violators and nuclear recalcitrants, links between the Iraq campaign and Britain’s national interest were seen by many as tenuous, if not illusory. The credibility of Downing Street’s September dossier on WMD, which promulgated the notorious “45-minute threat” faltered\textsuperscript{181}, with the PM’s detractors meanwhile arguing that any extant security threat could be dealt with via the appropriate procedural mechanisms of the weapons

\textsuperscript{176} As another expert witness invited to advise Downing Street noted of Blair’s response, “he wanted us to reinforce his gut instinct that Saddam was a monster. It was a weird mixture of total cynicism and moral fervour”. Steele, \textit{Defeat: Why They Lost Iraq}, 172.


\textsuperscript{178} Peter Stothard, \textit{30 Days: A Month at the Heart of Blair’s War} (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 70.


\textsuperscript{181} For further details of the dossier’s fabrication, see: Eric Herring and Piers Robinson, “Report X Marks the Spot: The British Government’s Deceptive Dossier on Iraq and WMD”, \textit{Political Science Quarterly} 129(4) (2014).
inspections then underway.\textsuperscript{182} (The dossier’s patchiness was similarly apparent to its authors, among them Intelligence Chief John Scarlett, who proposed measures to “sex-up” or “increase the authenticity of the document” in light of its use by opponents.\textsuperscript{183})

Blair’s commitment to the campaign in Iraq was, however, driven by a conception of furthering British interest (and thereby global interest) which transcended the particularities of WMD. Despite the much-touted security threat from Saddam, disarmament had long since been privately ruled out as an viable option for achieving the established transatlantic objective of regime-change\textsuperscript{184}. While the PM ostensibly shared Bush’s belief in the necessity (and moral rectitude) of removing the dictator, his strategic sensibilities aligned more closely with those cautious of US adventurism in the State Department than the hawks gaining primacy in the Pentagon. It was simultaneously clear, however, that he had reconciled himself to the fact that a US-led campaign would be waged in Iraq, irrespective of international endorsement. Such an acknowledgement was reflected in a memo drafted by Blair and his aides – what became a routine reference point for developing London’s strategy – which noted that, “President George W. Bush vs. Saddam Hussein – would happen whatever anyone else said or did”. The document also concluded, “it would be more damaging to long-term world peace and security if the Americans alone defeated Saddam Hussein than if they had international support to do so.”\textsuperscript{185} Having subscribed to Bush’s determined Coalition for regime-change,\textsuperscript{186} the issue of chief concern for Downing Street thus

\textsuperscript{182} These arguments were publically outlined in a December open letter to The Times newspaper from Liberal Democrat leaders pleading for more time to allow inspectors to garner evidence that Iraq had disarmed, and thus avoid a “drift” into war. It was likewise argued that greater time to uncover evidence of any existing weapons would make military action more convincing. See “‘Help UN inspectors’ urge Lib Dems”, BBC News, 26 December 2002, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/2606259.stm [accessed 30 July 2012].


\textsuperscript{184} As Peter Riddell outlines, this view was put forth by Sir Christopher Meyer who “seemingly took it for granted that 100 per cent compliance with UN resolution on disarmament would be impossible with Saddam Hussein in power. The implication being that full compliance with disarmament conditions was the same as regime change.” See Peter Riddell, Hug Them Close: Blair, Clinton, Bush and the ‘Special Relationship’ (London: Politico’s, 2003), 199.

\textsuperscript{185} Cited in Stothard, 30 Days: A Month at the Heart of Blair’s War, 41.

\textsuperscript{186} A letter between the private secretaries of Blair and Straw from 17 October 2002 later confirmed Downing Street’s view that “if for some reason [such as a French or Russian veto] there were no second resolution agreed … we and the US would take action”. See “Blair and Bush planned Iraq war without second UN
turned not on how to handle the security threat posed by Saddam, but as Blair’s adviser Christopher Meyer described, “how to handle America.” For all the campaign’s justificatory moral veils of global interest and Iraqi democracy, Blair’s paramount concern became the advancement of Britain’s own interests through its position at the vanguard of the alliance – that is, a strategy imbued with realism.

The PM was nonetheless dogged in his determination to publically reconcile this position with his motif liberal interventionism. Until the eleventh-hour, Blair expressed confidence in forging international legitimacy for the Washington-led invasion via the UN. When this aspiration was conclusively dispelled with the pledge by French President Jacques Chirac to veto a second UN resolution on military action (“the worst solution”, as the President called it), Blair therefore sought to manufacture vindication from his own doctrinal precedent. This was attempted through recourse to the “unreasonable veto” clause which had been put forth by many of his multilateralist and liberal internationalist peers throughout the Balkan conflict of the 1990s. As he had earlier told viewers in a Newsnight interview referring to the existing UN resolution, “supposing in circumstances where there was a clear breach…and everyone else wished to take action, one put down a veto. In those circumstances it would be unreasonable.” Yet unlike in the case of Kosovo, the voices of “everyone else” were less resounding in the case of Iraq. Rather, the PM’s willingness to circumvent UN authorisation suggested for many in London an abandonment of multilateralism that exceeded even the exceptional clauses chartered by parliament’s leftist interventionists the previous decade. The perceived magnitude of this betrayal was evidenced in February when 121 Labour MPs defied the Party whip to vote for a Commons amendment stating that “the case for military action is as yet unproven” in the biggest revolt of Blair’s premiership. Such sentiments were equalled by the British electorate

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days later when opponents of the war staged the largest demonstration in the nation’s history, engulfing the streets of central London.\textsuperscript{191}

Blair’s crumbling legal and factual scaffolds for the campaign were in subsequent weeks gradually eclipsed in Downing Street’s public discourse, as alleviating the “suffering of the Iraqi people” themselves, assumed primacy in the framework for war. This shift in focus to the moral mandate of internationalism had been presaged by the FCO’s own Iraq Media Strategy months earlier, where it was noted that: "the humanitarian argument needs to be made more noisily and consistently. The record is horrific … and it is not something that critics like \textit{The Guardian} should be allowed to pass over without comment.\textsuperscript{192} It was in this enduring theme of common humanity and British magnanimity that Blair thus located his last-ditch appeal to the campaign’s internationalist detractors in London. Within weeks of his failure at the UN, the PM attempted to bridge the growing schism over the campaign with what was emerging as a signature evocation of Britain “pivotal role” in shaping global affairs\textsuperscript{193}. It was this changing place as actor on the international stage which had seen Britain morph from imperial power to consensus-builder and now, peace-maker: “a force for good in the world.”\textsuperscript{194} As he claimed in a speech to ambassadors in London, this new role compelled the nation, with all its empirical understanding of the Arab world and tradition of diplomatic influence, to support the US and thereby support Iraqis themselves. Only through these determined alliances, inspired by fairness and equality if demanding of British sacrifice, could “democratic stability, liberty and human rights” be fostered in the Muslim region and peace advanced in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{195} If the will of international bodies like the UN could not be conjured towards these ends, Blair argued, “then the will should be enforced.” As he claimed:

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\textsuperscript{191} See anniversary review of protests in Patrick Barkham, “Iraq war 10 years on: mass protest that defined a generation”, \textit{The Guardian}, 15 February 2013.
\textsuperscript{192}Whitehall sources had also noted at the same time that “lawful and legitimate are not necessarily the same thing”, arguing that legitimacy did not derive only from a UN mandate, as cited in “Blair to order invasion force this month”, \textit{The Guardian}, 8 October 2002, at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2002/oct/08/uk.iraq1 [accessed 26 July 2012].
\textsuperscript{193} As Blair detailed in a speech to the Confederation of Indian Industry in January 2002, Britain no longer had empire and was not a superpower, but 11 September has made clearer than ever that it still had a role to play in the world. See “Blair returns to new world order”, \textit{BBC News}, 4 January 2002, at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/1742954.stm [accessed 16 October 2014].
\textsuperscript{194}“Blair returns to new world order”, \textit{BBC News}, 4 January 2002.
\textsuperscript{195}Tony Blair, “Prime Minister's address to British ambassadors in London”, London, 7 January 2003.
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The price of [British] influence is that we do not leave the US to face the tricky issues alone... The fanatics have to be confronted and defeated - in ideas as well as militarily... This is not a time for British caution or even British reserve, still less for a retreat into isolation on the basis of some misguided view of patriotism... Now is the moment to make our future as exciting in impact, if different in character, as our history.196

As the drive for war pressed implacably forward in Downing Street, this narrative of moral duty hence emerged as both an exoneration of its architects and a rejoinder to its opponents.197 So too this reconfiguration of ideals of global cooperation shortly received its arduously-sought legal vindication (only weeks after Chirac’s unqualified rejection of Blair’s terms) in the form of a March judgement by Attorney-General Goldsmith who confirmed that authority for the use of force in Iraq was implied within existing UN resolutions, including 1441.198 Goldsmith’s conclusion was sufficient to secure the final support of the nation’s military apparatus and to sway an oscillating House of Commons in favour of the US-led campaign - what had by now come to be represented as the “only true hope of liberation” for Iraq.199

And yet, the means adopted to realise Blair’s long-standing ambition had discredited his foreign policy wholesale in the eyes of many of its principal founders. By March, the campaign had split ranks in New Labour, with a string of ministerial resignations shortly followed by a second parliamentary motion that saw backbench dissent swell to 139 votes.200 On the eve of the final Commons vote, the House leader and pioneer of Blair’s ethical foreign policy likewise announced his resignation in protest at the pending unilateral invasion. Although applauding the efforts of the PM and the Foreign Secretary to secure a second resolution, Cook lamented the abrogation of Britain's defining commitment to multilateralism, and thereby it was argued, of its own national interest. As he explained:

197 For more on the development of this narrative, see Coates and Krieger, Blair's War.
200 Coates and Krieger, Blair's War, 60.
History will be astonished at the diplomatic miscalculations that led so quickly to the disintegration of that powerful coalition. The US can afford to go it alone, but Britain is not a superpower. Our interests are best protected not by unilateral action but by multilateral agreement and a world order governed by rules. Yet tonight the international partnerships most important to us are weakened: the European Union is divided; the Security Council is in stalemate. Those are heavy casualties of a war in which a shot has yet to be fired.201

Two days later, the Coalition launched its first strikes on Iraq.

**Conclusion**

The ideological platform that supported Blair’s government in its fifth and final armed incursion into a foreign sovereign state had been hewn out against the grain of its predecessors, on left and right. The concept of community at its core reflected a rebuttal of Thatcher’s individualist convictions that there was “no such thing as society”.202 But equally, the PM’s platform offset the anti-individualism of communitarian socialists to his Labour left and disparaged the passivity and parsimony of Major’s inward-looking government with its curtailed parameters of national interest. In their place, the “Third Way” appeared to offer an active, reciprocal internationalism – a global community in which “the rights [Britain] enjoys reflect the duties we owe”.203 And yet, however constant the PM’s subjective belief in this ideal, such a logic could less easily or consistently be applied to the domain of “real-world” international politics. Where Blair’s Washington allies after 9/11 shifted to a more hard-edged internationalism that evoked universal values insofar as they aligned with (and were be enforced by) American power, the dual pursuits of global impact and global interest could not be readily reconciled with New Labour’s liberal internationalist cannon. The price of Britain’s attempts at influence would subsequently be far higher than the PM envisaged in 2003. To many, the pursuit of an active internationalism amid a US-led ‘war on terror’ saw New Labour shed its internationalist credentials alongside its espoused

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202 Ralph, “Another Doctrine of International Community?” 3.
203 As per Blair’s amendment to Clause Four of the Labour Party Constitution. See discussion of this and other amendments in Ian Budge, The New British Politics (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), 400-403.
cosmopolitan ethos – an abandonment of community whose returns would prove ever-
diminishing over the coming decade. Not only would the destruction wrought to Iraq
from the campaign be ongoing and incalculable, but Blair’s insistence on reconciling
unilateral military action with a doctrine of “international community” - a liberalism
which both “bit and purred”\textsuperscript{204} - would also seriously maim the ethical worldview New
Labour had attempted to foster, also with lasting consequences.\textsuperscript{205} The enduring
implications of this damage will be explored in subsequent chapters, with his political
successors’ own efforts to re-forge a role for Britain in the Middle East under the banner
of morality and democracy. More immediately, Chapter Two documents how Blair’s
vision of international community and an interventionist “moral duty” would be
assessed somewhat differently by members of the Iraqi diaspora in Britain.

\textsuperscript{204} See Michael Gerson, “Tony Blair's Unshaken Logic”, \textit{The Washington Post}, 18 May 2007, at:
http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/17/AR2007051702091.html [accessed
28 August 2012].

\textsuperscript{205} Jason Ralph, “Tony Blair's ‘New Doctrine of International Community’ and the UK Decision to
CHAPTER TWO

All the Dangers of War: Iraq in Britain, Britain in Iraq

The people of England have been led in Mesopotamia into a trap from which it will be hard to escape with...honour. It is a disgrace to our imperial record and may soon be too inflamed for any ordinary cure. We are today not far from disaster.

T.E. Lawrence, *Sunday Times*, August 1920.¹

I know that if we fail to take action in the face of an obvious evil and an unresolved problem, the costs not only to the international community but, over time, to this country and the rest of the world will be calculable and high. The substantive motion places a heavy responsibility on each of us. We will carry it for years to come.

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, House of Commons, March 2003.²

Forty-eight hours before the first Coalition munitions were unleashed over Baghdad, Blair proffered a last-ditch appeal for his case to a fractured House of Commons. Having the previous day lost his bid for a second UN resolution to support the war, Blair now submitted his motion to parliamentary vote amid an air of mutiny. Commentators at the time described the speech as one of the PM's finest performances in the House, despite his antagonised position, with Blair assuming the rich timbre of moral purpose that had by now become his trademark. After reiterating the security threat posed by Saddam, the address turned to the plight of the twenty-million Iraqis subject to the dictator’s tyranny. Sixty per cent of those inside the country were dependent on food aid, Blair noted, and some four million were then living in exile.³ The PM went on to detail a recent interaction with one of these, a woman now living in Britain. As he recounted:

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I recall a few weeks ago talking to an Iraqi exile and saying to her that I understood how grim it must be under the lash of Saddam. ‘But you don’t’, she replied. ‘You cannot. You do not know what it is like to live in perpetual fear.’ And she is right. We take our freedom for granted. But imagine what it must be like not to be able to speak or discuss or debate or even question the society you live in. To see friends and family taken away and never daring to complain. To suffer the humility of failing courage in face of pitiless terror. That is how the Iraqi people live. Leave Saddam in place, and the blunt truth is that that is how they will continue to be forced to live. We must face the consequences of the actions that we advocate. For those of us who support the course that I am advocating, that means all the dangers of war.  

Over the preceding two decades, the UK had come to play host to one of the largest populations of Iraqis seeking refuge from the Ba'athist regime. In 2002, the Border Agency (UKBA) received more applications from Iraqis than any other nationality (almost one in five), and Blair's reference indicated the centrality of the exile presence in Britain to his public campaign to liberate Iraq. A party whip at the time, Labour MP Jeremy Murphy, later recalled the atmosphere in the House as the motion was posed. Although Blair’s speech was commanding and the din of protestors outside Westminster (including some from his own Glasgow constituency) difficult to dismiss, he explained, these were not the most compelling elements:

The most powerful thing that happened in the 24 hours before the Iraq war vote in parliament was not Tony Blair’s speech. It was Kurdish refugees in committee corridors upstairs in the House of Commons trying to persuade MPs of all parties to vote for military action. That was more powerful than anything that happened in the chamber that day, than any twisting of arms by government or opposition whips. It was in itself a decisive factor in terms of people’s sense of morality.

So too, this influence of Kurds and other exiled Iraqis would come to bear in politics after the invasion, as figures from the diaspora were recruited to prime positions in the

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reconstruction and governance of post-Saddam Iraq. Yet despite Blair’s conceptual and practical promotion of an exile role in the Coalition campaign, examination of de facto collaboration between policy makers and Iraqi communities in Britain in the project of regime-change suggests an engagement that was narrower both in its ambit and intent. For all Blair’s pre-invasion appeals to “global community” as a framework for justifying a humanitarian war, it appears that the same “normative glue” that came unstuck when the Coalition disregarded international support for the invasion would also fail the PM’s domestic arena. It is in this gulf between the moral projection of the war – a “noble and necessary” mission to democratise – and its bungled realisation that the failings of Britain’s Iraq policy come to light. With attention to this disjuncture, this chapter draws on interviews, reportage and other documents to examine the actual and perceived dealings of Coalition leaders in the months prior to the war through the perspective of proximate observers and active participants from the British-Iraqi diaspora. The implications of these actions for Iraq, as well as for the diaspora’s engagement therein, are traced over the decade until the tenth anniversary of the invasion in 2013 – a year which would mark the threshold of renewed international calls for military intervention in Iraq.

The lash of Saddam: the Iraqi diaspora in Britain

Britain’s Iraqi population is distinguished not only by communities of diverse ethnic backgrounds and religious affiliations, but also by the economic and social means related to time and manner of arrival. By the time Blair came to contemplate a military campaign in Iraq in 2002, Iraqi claims for refuge represented some 17 per cent of total applications to the Home Office. With Saddam's overthrow in 2003 and Britain’s concurrent suspension in assessing claims from Iraq, asylum applications dropped

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8 Coates and Krieger, *Blair’s War*, 42.
sharply, but re-escalated with the surge in sectarian violence from 2007, again making Iraqis among the most numerous applicants to the UK by 2009. The diaspora in Britain is consequently a diverse and multifaceted diaspora, as reflected at its extremes in the disparity between settled communities with high levels of education, employment and social mobility, and more recent failed asylum applicants living transiently or sometimes illegally on the margins of British society. Generalisations about social status, ideological outlook or politics are therefore difficult. The majority of those interviewed for this research migrated to the UK during the 1970s and 1980s, either as university students or with their parents as children, and their social profiles broadly reflect the characteristics of the established British-Iraqi population. So too, as magnified in debates leading up to the 2003 invasion, the Iraqi diaspora is riddled with political and ideological divisions (and often long-standing grudges), many stemming from the country's history of conflict, repression and revolt. Yet by contrast to the sectarian fissures prominent among more recent arrivals from Iraq (and indeed the region), ethnic and religious differences do not appear to have inspired the same fragmentation of the settled diaspora. Socialising and political cooperation were reported to have taken place across various ethnic and faith groups throughout decades of residence in Britain and many Iraqis were emphatic that their friendships were not

11 Implementation by the Home Office of annual resettlement quotas resulted in the majority of Iraqis in the UK having their claims rejected or left in transition awaiting the outcome of lengthy appeals. For a critical examination of the UK reception of Iraqi asylum claims, see Matthew J. Gibney, “Asylum: Principled Hypocrisy”, in Bridget Anderson and Michael Keith, eds, Migration: A COMPAS Anthology (Oxford: ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, 2014).

12 By contrast to more recent waves of immigration from Iraq, these individuals were predominantly from middle-class backgrounds with the economic resources to migrate as students or professionals without reliance on British welfare or protection mechanisms. The majority of the Iraq-born interviewees in this study were foreign-educated, in Britain or elsewhere, and had gone on to work as professionals in medicine, engineering or commerce – fields in which the British-Iraqi community in Britain has gained prominence. Participants in the study represented a range of ethnicities and religious backgrounds, including Kurds, Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, Christians, Turkomen and those who identified as secular.

13 Problems of representation and accountability apparent within the British-Iraqi diaspora have been widely noted by researchers, as the complex and divided nature of Iraqi communities has raised questions about who is authorised or equipped to voice Iraqi views in the public or political arenas. Previous studies of Iraqi communities in Britain by the UK government have noted the divisions amongst expatriates of various social, political, religious and ethnic backgrounds. These differences have been magnified post-Saddam, with research suggesting that fear and mistrust within the community have caused many to disengage from political or community affairs in Britain. Similarly, the conflict in post-Saddam Iraq had in the view of some expatriates, created an environment in which issues of leadership and politicisation had become sources of tension or taboo, and subsequently accounted for the lack of public figures or community leaders in the UK. See, “The Iraqi Muslim Community in England: Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities”, UK Department for Communities and Local Government, London, 2009 [web source?].

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dictated exclusively by such affiliations. Rather, participants in this research characteristically identified themselves “first and foremost as Iraqis”.

The contexts in which many left (or fled) Iraq have simultaneously fostered a British-Iraqi population that is distinct for its culture of public engagement and activism, with the UK often recognised as the cultural and political centre of the global Iraqi diaspora. From the 1970s onwards, a range of civil, social and political organisations were founded in parallel with the growing Iraqi presence, many of them premised on circumstances attending their departure, such as the ethnic rights of Turkomen and Kurdish groups. Others were associated with political causes in Iraq, including socialism, trade unionism or women's rights. A number of Iraqis interviewed for this project had been involved in the vibrant student activist scene of the 1970s, which spawned seminal political networks among Iraqis in Britain, with many taking up roles in politics and community leadership alongside professional employment. Involvement in campaigning apparently assisted in their retaining strong ties to the politics of Iraq and for some, activism was premised partly on the belief that they would return to the country after what were perceived as transient political instabilities or dangers. Yet for many, in particular those who came to Britain as privately-financed or government-sponsored students, it was this political activity that later precluded return to an Iraq under evermore repressive rule. As one journalist and activist who came to Britain in 1976 explained: “some of us went back to Iraq and some were imprisoned or disappeared there. But a lot of people stayed in Britain for longer than anticipated by virtue of their political activities. We effectively became exiles.”

Indeed, successive decades of war and political violence compelled many Iraqis to relinquish the idea of ever returning to their country and to forge new roots in the UK with ensuing attachments to British citizenship and institutions. Others by contrast still owned property in Iraq and expressed a desire to return at some, as yet unforeseeable, future date. Even among longer-term settled or exiled Iraqis, formerly-documented

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14 It is significant that this observation applies only to more established Iraqi communities in Britain who emigrated before the 2003 conflict and subsequent rise of sectarian conflict. Needless to say, many of those who have left Iraq since the war have been affected by ethnic and religious divisions.


16 Interview with Sami Ramadani (via telephone), 14 October 2011.
strengths in the bond to home country between first and second generation migrants were thereby echoed in references to a “myth of return” among British-Iraqis. One interviewee who migrated as a student in the 1970s explained how his Iraqi peers were described at that time as “homing pigeons” by virtue of their proclivity for repatriation. As he noted, “Iraqis don’t like to stay away from their place and people. We always had a lot of communication with Iraq and once people finished their studies, they would almost always go back, even if they had the opportunity to work here.”¹⁷ Similarly, Muhammad, then an independent MP in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), described the enduring primacy of his country of origin across his decades in Britain. As he noted: “I never lived here, really. Physically I was here, but mentally I was always there with the Iraqi people. If I was here, I would have joined the Labour Party, but my view was that it is a temporary thing and when the moment came, I would go back.”¹⁸

Irrespective of intention (or capacity) to return to Iraq, most expressed an ongoing affiliation with Iraq and continued investment in its future – a connection which was reflected in and sustained by social and/or political activity after emigration. Moreover, the magnitude of suffering experienced by its population and high personal cost of involvement in struggles for civic or human rights in the country appeared to have galvanised commitment to the cause of Iraq, even where a personal desire to return had since extinguished. In this vein, Shatha, the president of the UK's Iraqi Women's League (IWL) explained how despite having herself left Iraq as a teenager, her exhaustive efforts to promote human rights in Iraq were inspired to a large extent by the price her exiled mother had paid for her own activism. As she noted:

I probably wouldn’t be that close to Iraq if it was not for my mother who died so young and ill. In her last weeks she told me, ‘I know how hard it is for you to have grown up outside Iraq all your years, but I am sure you have that flame inside you and that Iraq is still your country and you can do something for it.’ If she hadn’t said that, I wouldn’t be so eager to be all the time going there trying to change things.¹⁹

Many of the perspectives outlined here thereby testify to the observation by Sami Zubaida that “the tragedy of Iraq is the loss of the ties that bind, not their non-

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¹⁸ Interview with Muhammad Kayani, London, 6 December, 2011.
existence." Against common perceptions that loyalties in Iraq have arisen purely from ethnic, tribal or religious ties, Zubaida documents the formation of a modern Iraqi civic culture across the twentieth century in which political and cultural networks and their associated identities were instead founded on ideological commitments, commercial interests and political factions. As he notes, “it is the suppression of this autonomous process under successive governments, and their near elimination under the Ba’athist regime which now makes the internal divisions based on ethnicity and religion so threatening and significant.” The apparent survival of many of these political and ideological affiliations in exile, augmented by demographic diversity and sustained by specific local factors, has produced an enduring culture of political mobility amongst Iraqis in Britain. Relative to other Iraqi diaspora groups, such as those in the United States, the spectrum of views reflected in Iraqi activism in the UK is wide-ranging. As Nadje Al Ali notes, this proliferation of non-sectarian alliances and organisations has been aided by the presence of secular political parties like the Iraqi Communist Party and Iraqi National Accord, with the geographical density of communities enabling more fluid affiliation and cooperation. So too, the UK’s relatively generous social welfare provisions and climate of political expression have helped produce a dynamic activism, buttressed by bridges between communities and across national borders to Iraq.

Historic ties between Britain and Iraq, alongside the UK government's ongoing involvement (albeit questionable) in its former colonial outpost, have likewise generated channels through which diaspora communities in the UK might influence political conditions in Iraq. This transnational impetus has emerged with increasing prominence since the 1970s in campaigns directed at specific aspects of British foreign policy in Iraq, as well as the wider region. Early activism among Iraqis in the UK, for example, centred on issues of human and civil rights, namely, the many political and ethnic abuses of the Ba’athist government. These campaigns served to found continuing links

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21 Zubaida, “The rise and fall of civil society in Iraq”.
between the diaspora, British civil society and parliamentary bodies, as Jabbar of the Iraqi Association UK explained:

Our activities put us very much in contact with different institutions, whether it was Westminster, the media, trade unions, local authorities or the women's movement. We were received by MPs, mainly liberals from the left and Labour parties like Ann Clywd, and together we built up a number of campaigns, like that against oppression of working class in Iraq, which was led by MPs. We were no stranger to them and they showed solidarity with us, whether Kurds, Arabs, Islamists or Communists.  

As well as political endorsement, activists emphasised the utility of collaborating with NGOs, for example Amnesty International, as significant mechanisms through which to expose and denounce atrocities committed against their peers inside Iraq. The mobility of Iraqis who continued to travel between the UK and their country of origin also enabled activists to disseminate the most current information via British media outlets and human rights advocacy groups – platforms which were by then altogether repressed in Iraq. As Sabah, a London-based activist and journalist who came to Britain in the 1970s explained:

A lot of Iraqis had no access to information, even about their own lives. But we had organisations with branches and members inside Iraq and in Britain and that enabled us to take up campaigning on specific issues, such as the execution or imprisonment of activists. We often mounted pickets outside Iraqi embassy in London and distributed leaflets. We were never ill-informed.

The cognisance of British-Iraqi diaspora activists to realities on the ground in Iraq, as well as to contemporary geopolitics, was central to campaigns that evolved during the 1990s in response to British, and more generally, Western foreign policy. Mounting Ba’athist tyranny throughout the 1980s broadened the scale and demography of the Iraqi diaspora in the UK as myriad elements of Iraqi society were driven into exile through dissent or targeted persecution. The Ba’athist regime’s manifold atrocities

meanwhile assumed greater geopolitical weight with Saddam’s incursions into Kuwait in August 1990, so excoriated by Thatcher in Westminster, and Britain emerged as a vocal champion of UN sanctions.27 By distinction, however, opposition to Western sanctions and the ensuing “Desert Storm” military operation appeared prevalent among Iraqis in Britain. Inspired by humanitarian concerns as well as empirical experience of Ba’athist rule, many argued that both sanctions and military action would have punitive effects on the Iraqi population while doing little to weaken the regime. As Anas explained:

We knew the sanctions would hit every single Iraqi except Saddam. It would be the people and not the wealth of the regime that would suffer. Sanctions would strengthen its grip over Iraqis because the threat of enemy infiltrators would give the government a defensive premise and so greater validity – it would be a green light to exercise more tyranny.28

Nonetheless, many like Anas described the adversity they encountered in attempting to represent their position to British communities (both public and official) hostile to Saddam. As he recounted, “people asked how we, who claimed to be victims of Saddam could support him by opposing the policies of the international community. I got blue in the face explaining that I was trying to protect my people – that it was my people who would go hungry.”29 Accordingly, a number of UK-based organisations were established by Iraqis to oppose the 1991 invasion and damage wrought to ordinary Iraqis by the sanctions regime. Yet despite endorsement from a range of civil society bodies and elements of the left-wing political establishment, their influence within Westminster was limited.

The Conservative government’s maintenance of sanctions (whose detriment to Iraqi civilians was confirmed by independent research at the time)30 in the face of this...

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28 Interview with Anas Al Tikriti, London, 7 October 2011.
29 Interview with Anas Al Tikriti, London, 7 October 2011.
opposition thus served to amplify existing hostility among British-Iraqis - most were already to some extent cynical - toward British policy following the Gulf War. More formative, however, were official responses from London and Washington to the popular uprising that swept Iraq in the aftermath of Saddam's withdrawal from Kuwait. Many politically active Iraqis in Britain, Kurds in particular, retained strong links with groups participating in the wave of anti-government rebellions erupting from March 1991. Like those inside Iraq, diaspora activists were inspired by a perceived weakening of the Ba’athist regime, which after decades of war, was seen as vulnerable to destabilisation or even overthrow by domestic forces, if granted foreign assistance. Many thus described looking to the transatlantic powers with the expectation that they might redeem a tarnished record on Saddam and capitalise on fresh triumph in the war by way of sustained military backing to topple the dictator. (Indeed, as Kanan Makiya later wrote, the allied Gulf War victory represented “an opportunity to rectify this record, to show that the West…was capable of reaching out the hand of friendship and support to the peoples of the Arab world, to their democrats and civil libertarians, not merely to a host of tyrannical and unrepresentative regimes.”31) The subsequent paralysis (or lethargy) of these prospective Western allies to sponsor the groundswell in turn saw the movement chronicled among Iraqis, both inside Iraq and abroad, as an historic, missed opportunity. British-Iraqis typically lamented their inability to rouse either British or US assistance, despite both governments having explicitly encouraged the uprisings among Iraqis on the ground, and bitterness stemming from this perceived betrayal was palpable in accounts of Western foreign policy of that time. As Jabbar, an exiled Kurd and prominent community leader, recalled: “it was just like the first days of the Arab Spring. All the towns and villages fell into power of the uprising, from Kurdistan to Basra. But Saddam still had the military advantage, and Britain did nothing, absolutely nothing, even though their armies were right there on the border.”32

For some other Kurds, this resentment was mitigated by their ensuing cooperation in British initiatives to secure “Operation Provide Comfort” the following year and the

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attendant media attention to their cause. As one interviewee explained, “people were of course supportive of the idea of a no-fly zone after all the publicity about the persecution of the Kurds. A delegation from the Kurdish community went to meet John Major and the proposal for the operation came from the British government itself. It was a very successful campaign and helped the situation in Northern Iraq to calm down.”

Nonetheless, the perceived failure of British policy-makers to assist in either realising the democratic potential of the 1991 movement or to forestall its most brutal ramifications remained a hallmark of Western duplicity in Iraq.

It was these events, indelible in collective memories if more fleeting on official records, which provided a reference point for British-Iraqis a decade later when the New Labour PM first claimed his government’s aspiration to liberate Iraq. As one Kurdish exile explained of his response to Downing Street’s initial murmurings about regime-change in Baghdad:

> Straight away, we thought ‘Britain had no such policy in 1990’. That was a totally different scenario and a time when they could have done just 50 per cent of what they were planning in 2003. But they allowed Saddam to return to power. They were just audiences. Then they wait 13 years and suddenly wake up in the morning and want to bring democracy to Iraq? To us, this was ridiculous.

**No choice is perfect: the 2003 campaign**

Although a central theme of Blair’s appeal for support in the campaign, the brandished “suffering of the Iraqi people”, was one amidst a catalogue of justificatory pillars. As he posed to the Commons on the eve of invasion:

> Why does it matter so much? Because the outcome of this issue will now determine more than the fate of the Iraqi regime and more than the future of the Iraqi people... It will determine the way Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the twenty-first century; the development of the UN; the relationship between Europe and

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33 Interview with Peter, London, 21 September 2011.
34 Interview with Muhammad Kayani (via telephone), 21 January 2013.
the US; the relations within the EU and the way the US engages with the rest of the world. It will determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation.35

Where Blair cast public and political imaginations forward to these future prospects of global security and cooperation, it was however to the past that many Iraqi minds turned in evaluating the PM’s claims. The backdrop to British-Iraqi expressions of doubt at the Coalition’s stated cause was a longer-standing recognition of the vicissitudes of Western foreign policy, as fostered by Britain’s previous centuries of involvement in Iraq. Consonant with this record, many British-Iraqis emphasised the historical memory of their communities, whose views had been shaped by a heritage of subjection to British imperialism, as well as by more direct experiences of recent Western agendas in the country. Even those who had spent the majority of their adult lives in Britain expressed an informed scepticism about the virtues of foreign involvement in the region – a judicious realism that dispelled the illusion of any herioc “freedom agenda”. As one Stop the War activist, Sabah, claimed of the Iraqi perspective on Britain’s role in the region: “we were very sceptical. A lot of people in Iraq think that the Western position in the Middle East is a corrupt one and had no faith that the Coalition was coming over because they wanted the people to be free. Those powers that supported sanctions and waged war against us had almost no credibility.”36

However earnest the PM’s belief that his campaign would seed democracy in Iraq, the Iraqi diaspora shared little of this faith in British foreign policy, whether current or historic. Rather, habitual mistrust of Western motives inspired a \textit{prima à facie} opposition to the Coalition campaign on the part of many, with Blair’s espoused ethical mandate regarded as insincere, or indeed deluded. This principled objection to Western hypocrisy – fuelled among some by more radical anti-imperialist politics – thus formed a lynchpin in many British-Iraqis stances against the war. Likewise, the unreflective philanthropy of so much of Blair’s oration on the war was easily caricatured as an enduring ethos of benevolent colonialism by Downing Street.37 As the NGO-founder and former activist Anas explained:

36 Interview with Sabah, London, 5 December 2011.
37 The reverberations of Britain’s imperial mission in Blair’s value-laden discourse in the prelude to war were similarly noted by those inside Iraq, among them, the prominent Salam Pax who wrote in October
When I read history, I see centuries of people wanting to do good by the black man – something we are still paying the price for now. The whole British colonial mentality was justified by a notion that 'we have a responsibility towards the poor Iraqis because we are so blessed with education and civilisation.' It was the very same thing with Tony Blair in 2003 when the war became an ideological issue: it became his war of ideas.

The ideological thread with which the PM sought to bind New Labour’s foreign policy to a US-led campaign in Iraq was nonetheless as much a source of divergence among Iraqis in Britain as for other commentators and analysts. As reflected in public debates of the time – and widely noted since (see Chapter One) – dominant accounts of British participation in the invasion loosely align with two differing perceptions of the New Labour’s goals. The principal, detracting narrative (or “lap-dog” account) argues that the foreign policy of Blair’s re-elected government was shaped by its subservient relationship with the US and ensuing desire to further British interest, in the Middle East and globally, through the alliance in Iraq. Another account, meanwhile – that of an arguably neo-liberal interventionism - suggests that Downing Street genuinely perceived regime-change as the most effective means of promoting global security and regional democratisation: that is, one of policy-makers motivated by sincere intentions and concrete convictions (irrespective of their questionable realisation). These divergent conceptions appeared to be broadly reflected in Iraqis’ own perspectives on the British role as momentum toward the war mounted. For those with prior doubts about Britain’s ambitions in Iraq (or indeed, the overarching pattern of Western geostrategic involvement in the region), Downing Street’s decision to be absorbed into a campaign piloted by Washington, consolidated their opposition. Where goals on the part of Bush’s Conservative administration that could only be interpreted as malign or misguided (as a Newsday editorial described at the time, the case for war was “more notable for its rhetoric than its logic”), Blair’s public advocacy of the US agenda connoted his subscription to similar values. The permeation of Blair’s discourse with a Bush-style

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2002 that: “this is really just a bad remake of an even worse movie. And how does it differ from Iraq and Britain circa 1920? The civilized world comes in to give us, the barbaric nomad Arabs, a lesson in better living and rid us of all evil.” Salam Pax, The Baghdad Blog (London: Atlantic Books on behalf of Guardian Newspapers, 2003), 43.

38 Ralph, “Tony Blair’s ‘New Doctrine of International Community’”, 2.

39 Kettell, Dirty politics? 42.

argot of ideological motifs (if somewhat tempered for a British audience), likewise appeared to confirm that messianic zeal had been substituted for informed policymaking. For many British-Iraqis then, Blair’s endorsement of Washington’s ambitious campaign signaled a defiance of concrete realities in Iraq, as well as of characteristically more prudent styles of British policymaking. As one British-Iraqi labour activist later noted of Downing Street’s uncritical co-option:

The British understood Iraq. Americans didn't. But because of changing influences in the region, the British would do whatever America told them and Tony Blair became obsessed with American power, just like a person possessed. With religion, everything becomes a mission.41

The inevitable preponderance of an American agenda over Britain’s own foreign policy aspirations in Iraq was thus readily apparent to British-Iraqi observers from the campaign’s nascent months – as it was stark to many on the inside of British policy machinery.42 Indeed, the former UK ambassador to the UN, Sir Jeremy Greenstock, who was at that time pivotal in attempts to secure a second UN resolution, later recounted being himself aware that Britain would be by necessity bound to US policy in Iraq, with its influence curtailed accordingly.43 With the bonds of American supremacy in the Coalition partnership evermore apparent in the lead-up to invasion, principled objections to US-led regime-change among British-Iraqis were aggregated by concerns about the dubious credentials of the superpower partner to implement such a programme. The prominent academic and anti-war campaigner, Sami, described this dual platform of opposition, commonly articulated by activists from the Stop the War Coalition, noting that: “I was against the war on two grounds: opposed in principle to a military intervention by the US and the kind of hypocrisy it reflected, and ultimately because on a practical level it needed to be the Iraqi people themselves who rose up.”44

The very reluctance of both British and American leaders to support any form of popular liberation in the previous decade, had in the eyes of many irreparably sullied

41 Interview with Abdullah Muhsin, London, 29 June 2011.
42 This was later expressed in the account of Sir Jeremy Greenstock who noted that, “what the PM did was to handcuff ourselves to American decision-making without the real opportunity to affect it. [Blair] never set a bottom line on where British interests would really lie, whether precisely with the US or by making decisions ourselves.” As stated in an interview at The Frontline Club, London, 20 March 2013.
43 Greenstock, interview at The Frontline Club, 2013.
44 Interview with Sami Ramadani, 14 October 2011.
any such fresh aspirations on the part of the Coalition in 2003. So too, the apparent absence of a genuine humanitarian or democratic motive in Washington confirmed for many in the diaspora that any Coalition programme for regime-change would be innately flawed. As Sami elaborated:

> It would be impossible for external forces who once aided Saddam against his people to bring democracy to Iraq. We had already seen that the US feared a grassroots uprising in Iraq with Bush senior, who worked against the 1991 uprising because it was not under his control. Our plea was therefore not to back the US campaign, but for governments to highlight the plight of the Iraqi people, and isolate Iraq's leaders on an international scale.45

Notwithstanding its logistical opacity, the notion of an exogenous campaign of liberation naturally ran counter to many British-Iraqis’ perceptions of what might constitute authentic or sustainable democracy in their country of origin. Reflecting this view, Shatha, who was then attempting to coordinate anti-torture and women's rights initiatives in Iraq, described by analogy the basis of her own opposition to Coalition agenda:

> Anything that comes from within will always be stronger. Imagine that you decided to make a dress. You want to make it perfectly, as well-tailored to your body as possible and you strive to do it, you are enthusiastic, you focus hard to reach this aim. And of course, you will love it much more than any other dress because you've put all that hard work into it. But when you buy one, it doesn't fit quite right and you will be likely to discard it - its only value is money.46

Similarly, the veteran activist and president of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, Abdullah Muhsin, expressed being equally sceptical that a Coalition “liberation” could sew any enduring form of democratic government to Iraq. Exiled as a youth by his activism around labour and civil rights in Saddam’s Iraq, Abdullah had engaged in transnational lobbying efforts on the part of campaigners inside the country over preceding decades, including as he noted, when Saddam was the “darling of the West”. His grass-roots perspective on the finer nuances of Iraq’s political and social landscape

45 Interview with Sami Ramadani, 14 October 2011.
lead him to caution against attempts to import democracy. Yet simultaneously, his background in small-scale unionist activism was perceived to have undermined the gravity of his claims in official quarters in Britain. As he explained:

Even though we also fought against Saddam, we believed that this war was not the answer, because we knew that it would not be managed properly. We argued that without grass-roots support, it would lead to terrorism, sectarian violence and civil conflict. But we were just a very small underground union of a few hundred activists, so what could we do to stop it? Of course we were not listened to and our advice was not heeded.47

Downing Street’s own official ruminations on the campaign and Blair’s assiduous, if cosmetic, attempts to garner a multilateral mandate, however, confirm that the PM was himself sober to the pitfalls of a campaign masterminded by Washington. Indeed, it was on this basis that he submitted his own entreaty for support from MPs on the eve of the invasion, telling the Commons hours prior to their final vote:

If our plea is for America to work with others, to be good as well as powerful allies, will our retreat make them multilateralist? Or will it not rather be the biggest impulse to unilateralism there could ever be. And what of the UN and the future of Iraq and the Middle East peace plan, devoid of our influence, stripped of our insistence? This house wanted this decision. Well it has it. Those are the choices. And in this dilemma, no choice is perfect, no cause ideal. But on this decision hangs the fate of many things.48

By contrast to the war’s detractors, this very question of Iraq’s fate appeared sufficient to tip the balance in favour of supporting Blair’s cause among other Iraqis in Britain, regardless of the risks posed by a Washington-forged agenda. Many saw the campaign as an unprecedented opportunity, and while acknowledging the choice as far from ideal, significant elements within the British-Iraqi population chose to align themselves with the PM and his powerful, if imperfect ally. Indeed, some embraced Blair’s campaign as one fuelled by genuine humanitarian concerns - a faith which was most apparent amongst members of ethnic minorities, among them Turkomen and Assyrian Christians as well as Kurds, persecuted over decades by Saddam.49 One leader of the London-

49For documents relating to Saddam’s campaigns against minorities in Iraq, see Stacy E. Holden, A Documentary History of Modern Iraq (Gainesville, Fl.: University Press of Florida, 2012).
based Iraqi Turkomen Front, Sundus, emphasised how Coalition plans for regime-change had been at first welcomed by her community and others who retained little agency or hope for creating an effective local opposition to Ba’athist rule. Exiled to Britain during the First Gulf War, Sundus had been involved in campaigning for Turkomen rights amongst British MPs over the decade prior to the war and thus appreciated the political novelty of proposals for regime-change. As she explained, “we were all very happy at the thought of getting rid of Saddam. We should not lose sight of that. Iraqis alone could not get rid of him – we needed help.”50 This was likewise a dominant theme among Kurdish advocates of the war, and echoed by representatives of Iraq’s Assyrian Christian community. Among the latter, Busra of the Iraq Assyrian Association, recounted his own view of that time, namely that: “we all saw the invasion as a liberation. It was necessary because the Iraqi people were suffering and there was no security, and no other way out.”51

Alongside those with more positive interpretations of New Labour’s guiding sentiments, support for the war also emerged from more seasoned sceptics in the diaspora – that is, British-Iraqis typically critical of Western foreign policy, but who were nonetheless willing to set aside their customary mistrust for the prospect, however remote, of some form of national liberation. Despite long-standing doubts about the premises of foreign involvement in the region, many described investing themselves in an exogenous Coalition regime-change as the last hope of extricating Iraq from an ineradicable Ba’athism. As one Kurdish interviewee described, his community’s support for Blair’s campaign was inspired as much by a sense of cumulative fatigue and collective despair about Iraq’s alternate future as by any real credence in London’s espoused humanitarianism:

We are not fools, but we were hopeless. We were shattered, physically and psychologically. Every family was touched by the regime, even here in England. We couldn't do anything alone, so that is why many of us suspiciously convinced ourselves that they wanted to replace Saddam's regime with a democratic one and we took this

50 Interview with Sundus Saqi, London, 28 October 2011.
51 Interview with Busra, London, 10 January 2012.
chance. Sometimes when the devil comes to help you, you will just take his hand and say ‘let's go’.  

This common logic was similarly characterised by another anti-war Iraqi community leader who watching the war unfold, noted its prevalence among British-Iraqis. As he explained, “there’s a saying in Arabic - show someone death and he will accept fever.”

Just as among academic and political commentators, the campaign thereby disaggregated its British-Iraqi advocates from the more characteristic alignments of right and left-wing domestic politics. Where veteran radical commentators (most notably Christopher Hitchens who famously beckoned the Coalition to “bring it on”), were accused of providing ammunition for neo-conservatives in their support for the war, so too some British-Iraqis found themselves for the first time at loggerheads with a leftist sphere overwhelmingly opposed to the invasion. One British-educated Iraqi Kurd, who was at the time of the invasion completing a PhD in London, later noted of this schism with his leftist peers that: “I supported the war. That didn't mean I was in favour of US foreign policy or the killing of civilians. I supported it because it meant the end of Saddam… We grew up with the terror of Saddam, and his institutions. It was a kind of nightmare… We were desperate. If the Russians had come, we would have cheered them too.”

Despite a shared aspiration toward a free and democratic Iraq, diaspora communities in the UK were thereby cleaved by the readiness of groups and individuals to adopt a

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52 Interview with Mohamed, 2011.


54 Hitchens wrote and spoke at length on justifications for the war, noting in particular that: “It will be rapid and accurate and overwhelming enough to deal with an army or a country many times the size of Iraq, even if that country possessed what Iraq does not, armed forces in the command structure willing to obey and be the last to die for the supreme leader. And that will be greeted by the majority of Iraqi people and Kurdish people as a moment of emancipation, which will be a pleasure to see, and then the hard work of the reconstitution of Iraqi society and the repayment of our debt — some part of our debt to them — can begin. And I say, bring it on.” See “Machiavelli in Mesopotamia: The case against the case against ‘regime-change’ in Iraq”, Slate, 7 November 2002 at: http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2002/11/machiavelli_in_mesopotamia.html [accessed 24 January 2012].

forthright public stance (in addition to private lobbying activities) on the war. With both supporters and detractors claiming to represent the interests of the Iraqi nation and welfare of its people, disputes were ignited over the capacities and more importantly, the commitments of the Coalition to uphold these same ends. Even within opposing camps, activists and community leaders spoke of the challenges of forging a unified lobby or representative political front from the strands of a heterogeneous diaspora amid fractious political circumstances. As was recounted by Fareed, the leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party in the UK in the years prior to 2003, efforts to campaign against the invasion were hampered by antagonism from within his community, as well as by the perceived bias of policy-makers to pro-war voices:

We saw so many possible alternatives and submitted reports to MPs talking about change from inside Iraq. But we could not build a campaign. If you talked about being against an attack on the Iraqi army, people would straight away say you were a Saddam supporter. There were so many differences in the political agendas of the Iraqi diaspora, each had their own interests depending on the background of the political group they were associated with.56

With pro-war sentiments seemingly dominating political commentary and mainstream media in the lead-up to invasion, other detractors emphasised the inherent problematic of defending their position to their own communities, as well as to non-Iraqi advocates of war. Noting this, Anas described how the oppositional paradigm established by Washington’s discourse on the war arrested discussion among British-Iraqis themselves at that time: “even amongst the anti-war element, many of my friends found it difficult to come out with their views because they did not want to be seen as supporting Saddam. The Bush government shrewdly and disgustingly tried to create this narrative of being for or against Saddam, though I and many others did not fit into it.”57 Accordingly, some British-Iraqis privately opposed to the invasion opted for reticence over the risk of expressing a view perceived by many of their peers as heretical.

57 Interview with Anas Al Tikriti, London, 7 October 2011.
Nonetheless, the prevailing sentiment at the time appeared to be that of deep-rooted individual and collective conflict. As Sami Zubaida, then a professor at the University of London, recounts:

Many [British-Iraqis] were extremely torn. On the one side, after three decades of war and devastation, with no sign of any possibility of displacing the regime, the prospect of getting rid of Saddam via an external attack was just too tempting. On the other extreme, against the war there was a body of vocal nationalist opinion, including communists, who took the line that Saddam himself was an American agent. So of course, the community was divided further by the debate.58

As some perceived it, this charged ethical and political debate served ultimately to obscure any broader common goals for the advancement of Iraq. Shatha, who was a vocal opponent of the war at the time, related her sense that any unifying commitment to a programme of political change was overshadowed by discord over the legitimacy of the US-led Coalition agenda:

We became two big camps, against and for war. Those against it were saying that Saddam had tortured us for all those years with help from the US - the same government now expressing concern for human rights. But the majority supported it, whether quietly or openly, for many different historical and psychological reasons. Anti-war Iraqis were portrayed as supporters of Saddam and we did not hear any rational voice that could distinguish between the two camps. It became so black and white, but really we were all just tired, we all wanted an end to the regime.59

So too, this incendiary conflict appeared to obscure longer-standing mobilisations by British-Iraqis around alternate programmes for regime-change – campaigns whose aspirations transcended the precarious “hand-of-the-devil” or best-worst case scenarios contemplated in 2003. Conversely, these various political agendas placed an overarching emphasis on the need for indigenous involvement in any progressive campaign toward regime-change. Characterising this value, one activist described his organisations’ platform in the years preceding the invasion: “our position was clear: we want to get rid of regime, but we have to allow people to have won the fight themselves,

58 Interview with Sami Zubaida (via telephone), 24 July 2014.
you cannot gain a triumph on behalf of another nation – that is now how history is written, but not how democracy is attained. We needed to go through the ups and downs, strife, blood and guts, ourselves, without being expected to accept the ‘gift’ of democracy from others.”

Similarly, other exiles emphasised that the very process of organic democratic struggle should be valued above any more expedient and cosmetic removal of Iraq’s Ba’athist malignancies. It was on this foundation that the prominent activist Tahrir Swift, who was exiled to Britain in the 1970s after the torture of family members, also countered advocates of Blair’s campaign. As she explained to audiences of ITV’s *Good Morning Britain*:

> The Spaniards had a despicable dictator for years, but nobody went and liberated them with bombs – Franco died and then Spain moved on. But Western interference in the Middle East only makes things worse. I don’t want revenge. I want Iraqis to learn the lessons. If we got rid of Saddam ourselves, then we would have rejected everything he stands for, all of his values.

The fundamental request made of Britain (or other foreign powers) by Iraqi democratic campaigners was thus characterised, not as one for armed intervention *per se*, but as one of non-interference – for an abrogation of national interests in recognition of longer-term local aspirations toward autonomy. In retrospective speculation on the possible outcomes of a campaign perceived to embody such aspirations, that of the 1991 uprisings, Sabah noted that: “[regime-change] could have been done even without intervention – our people would have sorted things out themselves. Let them have the key for the future in their own hands. In fact, you find most of the demands of human rights activists when they ask the West to do something are based on the simple issue of national interest: if you want to help us, the only thing we ask you to do is to not support our dictators.”

**The actions that we advocate: the diaspora and the case for war**

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60 Interview with Abdullah Muhsin, London, 29 June 2011.
Contrary to this vision – and to Blair’s own emphatic invocations of the “future of the Iraqi people” – it was those representatives whose goals appeared to align more fluidly with Coalition designs in Iraq who were given primacy by the architects of regime-change in Washington and by corollary, in London. Whether owing to their relative agency or parallel interests, a number of prominent pro-war diaspora politicians were able to garner traction for their agendas on both sides of the Atlantic, such that the US strategy would later be described by a senior Coalition official as resting “upon two things: exiles and optimism.”

A key source of the latter was the prominent Shi'ite businessman and politician, Ahmed Chalabi who had left Iraq as a child and was raised in the UK and US, attending a number of elite universities before returning to Jordan. Following a conviction for fraud, Chalabi established himself in London in the wake of the Second Gulf War, where he founded the Iraqi National Congress (INC) – an umbrella group comprising various opposition politicians and parties, including Islamists, communists, Kurds, monarchists, ex-Ba'athists and liberals. The INC declared itself the coordinating body for the Iraqi opposition in 1992, and shortly afterwards issued a charter committing its members to work together “to eliminate the dictatorial and oppressive regime.”

Towards this end, the INC confirmed the need for a democratic constitution, eradication of sectarian and ethnic divisions and the territorial integrity and unity of Iraq.

From its inception, the INC was the beneficiary of generous funding from the CIA and was tasked by the administration of Bush senior with creating conditions for the overthrow of Saddam inside Iraq in the seemingly fertile post-war political terrain. Though the organisation fell into disrepute with the CIA and Clinton administration after a series of botched coup attempts from Kurdistan, Chalabi later re-established himself in Washington, courting new alliances among the Republican right that would

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63 Comments by Former CPA Regional Coordinator, February 2006, cited in Herring and Rangwala, Iraq in Fragments, 12.
64 Chalabi has since been described by US officials as the “single most important source of unrealistic optimism about post-war Iraq”, though he was a polarising force among both Iraqis and officials in the US and UK. See Charles Ferguson, No End In Sight: Iraq’s Descent into Chaos (United States, Public Affairs, 2008), 41.
67 Ferguson, No End in Sight, 42.
endure until the Bush administration assumed office.68 Ingratiating himself alongside Chalabi in these circles, the exiled academic and writer Kanan Makiya extolled the prospects of a US-led regime-change in Iraq to transform the superpower’s image in the eyes of the region.69 Makiya was a reputed idealist and rare supporter of Israel (having reportedly gone so far as to tell Condeleeza Rice that the Iraqi people “were too focused on their own oppression to hate Israel”70) and was received favourably among advocates of regime-change in Washington, as well as by some of the left. Likewise, Chalabi was looked upon as a secular guarantor that Iraqi democracy would not lead to Shi’ia theocracy and his claims about WMD and post-Saddam security were given credibility by those hawks supportive of regime-change, notably Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.71 Despite its fractious internal dynamics and fraught record in Washington, the INC thus emerged as the Coalition’s de facto representative for the Iraqi opposition. Over the months leading up to the 2003 campaign, INC members liaised with officials - as well as oil company executives (Chalabi is alleged to have told the Bush administration in January 2003 that “American companies will have a big shot at Iraqi Oil” post-Saddam) on both sides of the Atlantic.72 So too, information provided by the INC (later proven to be false), had by February 2003 found its way into intelligence dossiers in London and Washington, with the notorious “45-minute threat” assuming primacy in their public cases for war.73

68 See Packer, The Assassin’s Gate.
69 Makiya had been based in the US since 1968, writing prolifically on Iraq and had gained prominence as one of Saddam's most articulate public critics. Makiya was also embraced by the Republican right from early on, and later gained influence in the Pentagon by virtue of his ties to Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, among others. It is Makiya who is also attributed with the infamous claim that Iraqis would “greet the troops with sweets and flowers”. See Phillips, Losing Iraq, 49.
70 Phillips, Losing Iraq, 49.
73 A former senior US military expert in the Pentagon at the time later recounted how the INC, who were “at best ... liars ... [a]nd at worst ... provocateurs”, were regarded with suspicion by intelligence advisors in Washington but that this “was not the case with policy-makers”. Marc Garlasco also emphasised that INC sources were “always looked at very, very skeptically by the analysts. But that wasn’t the case with the policy-makers”. Cited in Ferguson, No End in Sight, 42.
Where Chalabi’s tenacious lobbying saw him emerge as the so-called “Northern Star” of the Iraqi exile opposition in Washington,\textsuperscript{74} London also became the site of a number of pre-war collaborations between policy-makers and diaspora politicians, to which the INC was central. Even before the adoption of regime-change as official policy in Britain, advisers from the Foreign Office had noted the importance of maintaining contact with a number of diaspora groups who had approached to the government to lobby for British intervention.\textsuperscript{75} Alongside the INC, parties such as the Iraqi National Accord (INA), Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), were represented in the UK Iraqi diaspora and began articulating interest in a foreign-sponsored campaign for regime-change.\textsuperscript{76} Indeed, reports from the time noted that senior policymaking discussions around such a campaign made mention of these groups as a focal point for any action to overthrow Saddam. Despite express observations from Whitehall advisers that some lacked credibility as an opposition force due to having lived outside Iraq during Ba'athist rule, official liaisons with such groups was advocated.\textsuperscript{77} FCO Minister Ben Bradshaw and other Downing Street representatives consented to meeting requests from diaspora members, including Chalabi, the UK-based former Ba'athist Ayad Allawi (INA) and Kurdish Latif Rashid (PUK), who jointly pressed for UK support for a military programme of regime-change. Indeed, in a March 2002 meeting with Minister Bradshaw, Allawi stated that the UK needed to move beyond UN resolutions on Iraq, reiterating the desire of the Iraqi people for external intervention and alleging the support of some additional fifteen opposition groups who agreed that Saddam should be dealt with “militarily”. Likewise, Allawi argued that official fears of sectarian disintegration or regional spill-over stemming from an invasion were unfounded.\textsuperscript{78} A number of diaspora representatives instead reiterated the high rates of defection from the regime, emphasising the possibility of harnessing support from the extant Iraqi army alongside the need to retain the country’s infrastructure and avoid retributive de-

\textsuperscript{74} Ferguson, \textit{No End in Sight}, 7.
\textsuperscript{75} Letter to Mr Bradshaw’s Office, \textit{Foreign and Commonwealth Office}, 12 April 2002.
\textsuperscript{76} James DeFronzo, \textit{The Iraq War: Origins and Consequences} (Bolder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2010), 118.
\textsuperscript{77} As noted in a Memorandum to Mr Bradshaw’s Office, \textit{Foreign and Commonwealth Office}, 25 March 2002.
\textsuperscript{78} Minutes from meeting of Mr Bradshaw with Iraqi opposition, \textit{Foreign and Commonwealth Office}, 20 March 2002.

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Ba’athification measures. The danger inherent in dismantling Iraq’s existing bureaucratic and military structures was restated at subsequent conventions by prominent exiles, among them, Tawfiq Al Yasiri, an Iraqi officer based in London.

Chalabi meanwhile argued in Whitehall that the Iraqi opposition, so disregarded by Britain in 1991, should now be afforded the opportunity of a role in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Claiming that the INC’s main priority was to create a concrete plan for a viable, democratic replacement to the regime, Chalabi suggested in a March 2002 meeting with the Minister that the UK might assist in training Iraq’s administration and judiciary in a transitional period, while helping to secure support from other European countries in the prelude to war. Diaspora representatives appeared unanimous on the necessary involvement of the Iraqi people in any regime-change and reconstruction programme, with some implying that they could recruit peers from within Baghdad-controlled Iraq to participate in such planning. London, in turn, outlined the role that the exiled Iraqi opposition could play in promoting the case for regime-change through continuing to “remind the world” of the repressive nature of Ba'athist rule, while generating a clear vision for post-Saddam Iraq.

With Blair’s effective guarantee of participation in a Washington-led Iraq campaign in Texas the following month, Britain thus became the staging ground for a number of convergences between transatlantic policy-makers and the Iraqi opposition, headed by the INC, in an effort to give concrete form to Coalition plans. Months after Blair’s pledge in Texas, the INC convened a press conference in Kensington with the intention of announcing an interim government. (Indeed, Sherif Ali Bin Hussein, the INC monarchist spokesman, declared days earlier that, “Saddam's regime is about to fall. We must move from being exiled opposition into preparing a broad base provisional government representing all Iraqis.”) However, growing discord over the Coalition’s Iraq strategy among officials in Washington and London was reflected in Iraq’s

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79 Minutes from meeting of Mr Bradshaw, 2002.
80 Minutes from meeting of Mr Bradshaw, 2002.
81 Memorandum to Mr Bradshaw's office, 2002.
82 Minutes from meeting of Mr Bradshaw, 2002.
purported representative body itself. The proposed opposition meeting collapsed hours
prior to its opening amid persistent feuding (the cancellation was delicately framed by
the INC as “enabling further discussion among Iraqi opposition groups”). Dysfunction
and disagreement at the highest echelons of the organisation were subsequently
lamented by a representative of one of its constituent groups, the KDP, who noted that
the intended announcement of an interim government, which has been planned without
full disclosure, “was not a very clever move… A provisional government is not
something to be taken lightly. It dents the credibility of the opposition and reinforces the
impression that it is disunited… The INC is not functioning.”

This prevailing disarray inspired efforts toward another officially-sponsored opposition
meeting – deemed the “Democratic Principles Working Group” – in Surrey in
September 2002, including INC affiliates. However, with the internecine realities of
Iraqi politics again surfacing during the convention, Republican administration officials
also began to doubt the capacities of the working group to present the type of unified,
legitimating opposition front the Coalition campaign required. A second, broader-based
conference was thus convened in London in December 2002, bringing together over 300
attendees from a spectrum of opposition groups. The four-day meeting included
discussion and draft planning for a number of transitional issues, including the
establishment of interim authorities in Iraq, constitution building and parliamentary
elections, all of which became subjects of fractious debate among participants.
Significantly, however, American officials noted an overarching rejection of any US
attempts at prolonged control of Iraq in the form of a transitional government under
American military supervision. With a number of opposition groups having boycotted
the event on the grounds of it being a US ruse, participants were similarly determined
that they not be perceived as American “puppets”. As the Kurdish leader and later
President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani, reportedly claimed during the meeting, “this is not an

84 La Guardia and Darwish, “Iraqi exiles split on post-Saddam plan”.
85 La Guardia and Darwish, “Iraqi exiles split on post-Saddam plan”.
86 Although Downing Street did not expressly endorse the event, British officials facilitated the
conference by granting visas to non-UK representatives and sending representatives to monitor the
proceedings. See Phillips, Losing Iraq, 95.
The conference concluded with the appointment of a 65-member coordinating committee who issued an opposition policy statement and a paper on the “Transition Period Project” addressing the two-year phase following regime-change. Whitehall attendees meanwhile reported the combative nature of the opposition, whose ability to represent the diverse ethnic and religious constituents in Iraq, it noted, was questioned by other diaspora groups. American officials charged with coordinating the Coalition’s Iraqi opposition likewise noted the near impossibility of achieving a cohesive programme amid such discord – observations which were largely dismissed by those at the helm of the campaign. (As one State Department delegate later noted of the conference, “forging a common vision would take time, but administration hawks knew that time was not on their side. Waiting could undermine the push towards war and eventually weaken the case for invading Iraq.”) The unity and diversity reflected at the conference were instead hailed by the White House and State Department, who pledged to work with the coordinating committee in achieving its goals.

Two days later, Downing Street received leaders of the KDP and PUK, Massoud Barzani and Talabani, and likewise expressed support for the opposition's role in mapping the future of post-Saddam Iraq, including questions of constitution drafting and reconciliation.

Dissonance over the myriad and ambiguous opposition agendas was nonetheless apparent. While some Iraqi delegates at the London conference publically declared that Saddam’s “days were numbered”, others among Washington’s Iraqi envoys argued that war was undesirable, instead claiming that “the ball is in Mr Hussein's court”. Discord was likewise palpable beyond the conference halls as hundreds from Kurdish and Islamist groups assembled outside, chanting denunciations of the participants. As one protestor told reporters, “these self-appointed rulers cannot be trusted. They will continue the cycle of repression in Iraq.” Some, however, expressed optimism about forging consensus on a shared future for the country. As the prominent London-based

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89 *Phillips, Losing Iraq*, 105.
90 *Phillips, Losing Iraq*, 106.
92 “Iraq opposition agrees blueprint”, CNN News.
Shi’ia cleric, Abdul Majid Al Khoei, who had come to Britain during the 1991 uprising and worked closely with the PM, told the BBC: “there are differences between groups but this is the main aim and we all agree with it. Some people think the future of Iraq will be bad for them but we want to forget the past and shake the hand of everyone.”93

While Downing Street officials continued to iterate support for a representative opposition in sustaining any regime-change, other British-Iraqi opponents of Saddam viewed the resulting alliance between Coalition and exiles as the fruit of expediency. Despite the London meeting having included a relative breadth of ideological and political perspectives on transition in Iraq, many suggested that the final INC-dominated programme marginalised the majority of these views, as well as, significantly, those from inside Iraq. Most notable among these omissions were voices opposed to a US-led invasion.94 Consequently, there was a widely-held view among both the war’s British-Iraqi advocates and its detractors that official dealings with exiles were shaped by a drive for legitimation above imperatives of an informed, nuanced picture of Iraqi opinion or a cohesive regime-change programme. Criticism was levelled chiefly at the selective nature of London allegiances with the exiled opposition – figures who, it was argued, had greater credibility in policymaking circles than among the Iraqi population they claimed to represent. (Indeed, the exiled opposition’s perceived lack of currency on the ground had been previously critiqued by expert commentators in the UK and US,95 as well as by Washington officials themselves.96) As Anas observed with relation to the pre-war dealings of British officials:


94 As was also later observed in official accounts of the conference. See, for example, Douglas Feith, War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism (New York: Harper Collins, 2008).


96 One Pentagon official disparagingly described Chalabi as a man who “could fight you for your last petit four at the Savoy, but that's about it”. Cited in Nicholas Lemann, “The Next World Order”, The New Yorker, 1 April 2002 at www.newyorker.com/archive/2002/04/01/020401fa_FACT1? [accessed 6 February 2012].
The 2002 London conference supports a thesis of coincidence, rather than cooperations between the diaspora and policy-makers. The manner the opposition was used was totally unethical. Chalabi, Allawi and others at the congress were very well supported by the US and British who pumped resources into them because they suited the Coalition agenda – they were capable politicians, but they were ultimately self-serving and did not have very deep roots on the ground.97

Such a view appeared prevalent among the British-Iraqi diaspora, many of whom denounced Chalabi’s cohort as mercenary and/or alienated from popular opinion inside the country. As one academic observed, although Chalabi ostensibly had firm connections with Iraqis in Kurdistan and exiles in Iran, his links to wider Arab Iraq were negligible.98 Indeed, some exile lobbyists themselves were frank about the alienation of many opposition politicians from local society, as the US-based Feisal Istrabadi later noted: “I knew nobody who spent four decades in exile who knew what was going on in Iraq. I didn’t and Kanan [Makiya] didn’t.”99 Policy-makers’ inattention to the more fraught (or altogether absent) allegiances of exile politicians inside Iraq in assembling an opposition alliance, was thus widely disparaged by British-Iraqis. Fareed, the London representative of the Iraqi Islamic Party at the time of the conference, reiterated the naiveté of Coalition officials who were nonetheless anxious to ensure their geostrategic interests in Iraq:

Figures sprung out of the community, supported by foreign powers such as Iran, but at the same time, they were very clever in showing the US and UK that they would support their campaign one-hundred per cent. [Bush and Blair] did not know how to deal with all these political groups. Chalabi presented himself as secular, a moderate, and the Americans and British were taken for a ride by those whose agenda coincided with theirs.100

Others also questioned the political plausibility of self-appointed representatives, many of them from elite backgrounds, who had lived in exile abroad for decades. Consonant with later accounts by Coalition officials, there was a widespread perception that INC and other exile politicians had employed whatever means necessary to goad Washington

97 Interview with Anas Al Tikriti, London, 7 October 2011.
98 Interview with Sami Zubaida, 2014.
99 Cited in Packer, Assassin’s Gate, 96.
100 Interview with Fareed, London, 11 October 2011.
toward regime-change, tailoring their case to align with the ideological trajectory of their allies.\textsuperscript{101} Common perceptions of this alienation and venal opportunism, as embodied in the Coalition-opposition alliance were reflected in the account by the exiled anti-war activist, Sabah, who noted that: “when groups are abroad in isolation for long periods they can lose touch with ordinary people, making them more vulnerable to accept foreign influences. You need to be in your own community in order to sing in tune. Once you are not in tune, you are weaker both to foreign pressure and in terms of your own local resources.”\textsuperscript{102}

Beyond relations with elite elements of the exiled opposition, there was reportedly little effort by officials to engage resources which might reflect the political plurality of the diaspora, and thereby of Iraq, on a more grass-roots level. Conversely, the lobbying efforts of a number of diaspora opposition groups who claimed more consistent ties to democratic movements in Iraq appeared less valuable to policy-makers in both London and Washington. Even among British-Iraqis communities - for example, Kurdish or Turkomen groups who emerged as vocal supporters of the war or advocates of specific transitional arrangements – it was suggested that by the time Coalition war plans were made public, any wider input had been foreclosed. As Jabbar of the Iraqi Association recounted of London’s interactions with Iraqi exiles in the months prior to invasion: “they involved some influential individuals and met with elite opposition and other political groups, but there was no broader consultation. We wrote many letters and reports and contacted a range of MPs, but I wouldn't say that Blair involved the community at all. To whoever claims this, I would say, give me examples.”\textsuperscript{103}

For those mobilising against the invasion, this sense of exclusion was all the more striking. In particular, the experience of British-Iraqis from the Stop the War Coalition mirrored the broader perception among experts, officials and the public, that Downing Street was wilfully deaf to dissenting views. As Sabah described of his impression of dealings between British policy-makers and diaspora: “the decision to go to war was taken not in consultation with Iraqis, but very high up in Washington and Westminster. After that, policy-makers worked very actively to recruit Iraqis they had befriended over

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{101} Phillips, \textit{Losing Iraq}, 75.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Interview with Sabah, London, 5 December 2011.
\item \textsuperscript{103} Interview with Jabbar Hasan, London, 14 November 2011.
\end{itemize}
the years. They put up the smokescreen that they were listening to Iraqis but in fact were just listening to the echo of their own voices.”\textsuperscript{104}The evident aversion of London’s war advocates to engage with the arguments of their detractors outside the designated confines of Downing Street’s media spectacle, likewise suggested for many that Blair’s campaign had been forged not only beyond the reach of the British public, but also of many in Westminster itself. That contradictory evidence fell “on deaf ears” in the presence of the British PM was confirmed by the former IAEA chief and weapons inspector himself, Hans Blix, who later noted with relation to WMD data that “[Bush and Blair] were convinced they had their witch in front of them, and they searched for the evidence and believed it without critical examination.”\textsuperscript{105}Reflecting on this domestic policymaking ethos, Sami of the Stop the War coalition described the implications of Blair’s “sofa-government” for lobbying efforts within Westminster. As he explained: “most members of parliament were under heavy pressure to vote for Blair's government. Some were taken in by the lies about WMD and some were actually enthusiastic to liberate Iraq. There was a lot of opposition amongst rank and file members of parliament who supported us, but they of course had little influence.”\textsuperscript{106}

London’s pragmatism in seeking expedient vindication for the Coalition campaign in the form of endorsement from Iraqi exiles was likewise acknowledged by their more agreeable diaspora interlocutors. Where many observers of the campaign perceived an “eleventh-hour” recruitment of exiled politicians – an Iraqi facade for a pre-fabricated war plan – this narrative was echoed by those who dealt directly with British and American officials. Among them, one former KDP member and participant in the London conference was candid about the utilitarian nature of these official dealings:

\textsuperscript{104} Interview with Sabah, London, 5 December, 2011.
\textsuperscript{106} Interview with Sami Ramadani, London, 14 October 2011.
By the time we were having the conversation about the war, it was already a done deal. The discussion and conferences which took place in London were largely discussions for our own convenience. The decision had already been made and unofficially, ministerial posts for the new Iraq were being given out. It was not a question of if, but how and when.  

Such dynamics, already so enshrined in policy-making practices in the prelude to invasion, would intimate what would become more readily apparent with its implementation: that the campaign against Saddam was for Blair a means, one in which Iraqis themselves would figure little beyond the perfunctory or the performative.

**Any possibility of liberation: the aftermath of war**

Hence, Blair concluded his address to the House of Commons on the eve of war with a re-animation of the role of the Iraqi people. As he cautioned his peers: “for others who are opposed to this course, it means—let us be clear—that for the Iraqi people, whose only true hope lies in the removal of Saddam, the darkness will simply close back over. They will be left under his rule, without any possibility of liberation—not from us, not from anyone.”

Concurrently however, Iraqi voices in Britain were issuing their own alternate, and equally sombre prognoses for the country amid the spectre of a seemingly inevitable war. Writing in the days before the Commons vote, Sami Zubaida sought a more concrete picture of the prospects for any democratic governance in post-Saddam Iraq than proffered by the PM. As he described:

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107 Interview with Mohamad Kayani, London, 12 December 2011.
108 As Charles Tripp noted of his interaction with Blair in 2002, “Even at this stage it was clear that the war in Iraq was a means to an end, or possibly to several ends, few if any of which the Iraqis themselves would be allowed to determine.” See “Three costly lessons from the invasion of Iraq”, The World Today 69(1) (2013).
What type of new regime would foster or at least permit the regeneration of an autonomous public life of politics and culture? One clear answer is a democratic, pluralist state under the rule of law. But that would seem Utopian. If the present regime is displaced, then the forces that are likely to emerge are those which are predominantly communal, religious and tribal… Any agency involved in regime-change will probably find it easiest to deal with chieftains and bosses who can deliver, and that is precisely the opposite of a healthy civil society and public sphere.110

Giving substance to this vision within weeks of the Ba’athist overthrow, what appeared to many as omens of ill-health began to emerge in Coalition-governed, “liberated” Iraq. Shortly before he was expected to take part in another London conference in early April, the Shi’ia cleric Al Khoei returned from exile in Britain to Iraq and was days later hacked to death by a sword-wielding crowd inside the Imam Ali mosque in the holy city of Najaf.111 Likewise, the brutality of the act reverberated within months when a car bomb was detonated during Friday prayers at the same sacred site, killing in excess of one hundred people, another prominent Shi’ite leader among them.112 (The attack came only days after the equally foreboding, if more prominent, bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad.)

Yet it was over years that the precise divisions and contours of Iraq’s new, nominally democratic, society would come into starker relief, alongside the role of the Coalition and diaspora allies in its shaping. By the time of the country's inaugural free elections in January 2005, Blair’s one-time expert interlocutor Charles Tripp ventured his own forecast for the prospects of democratic governance. Reflecting on the intervening years under the ICG (during which Chalabi and other exiles had served as president), Tripp observed that:

110 Zubaida, “The rise and fall of civil society in Iraq”.
111 Al Khoei had been noted for his efforts at political non-partisanship. The 41-year-old son of the Grand Ayatollah was also eulogised by Blair at the time as “a religious leader who embodied hope and reconciliation and who was committed to building a better future for the people of Iraq”. See “Shia leader murdered in Najaf,” BBC News, 10 April 2003 at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2936887.stm [accessed 14 November 2013].
the formal trappings of constitutional and democratic government were little connected to
the life-and-death struggles that formed the texture of a much more local, violent and
communal politics… There is a strong possibility that newly-won privileges will be
entrenched and Iraqis will have good reason to fear subjection once more to a regime that
equates power with force and dissent with treason.\textsuperscript{113}

The ensuing elections were received with a promising some seventy per cent voter
turnout, but the occasion was marred by another bloody development as a series of
suicide bombings swept polling stations across the country, killing more than three
dozen.\textsuperscript{114} The previous week, an open letter in \textit{The Guardian} from some twenty UK-
based exiles had pre-empted this violence in a forthright condemnation (and practical
boycott) of the inaugural event – what it described as “a process for reproducing the
US-appointed Iraqi interim government to prolong the occupation and incite sectarian
and ethnic conflicts.” As its signatories argued:

\begin{quote}
Iraq is being denied free and fair elections, after enduring decades of Saddam's brutal
dictatorship. Millions of Iraqis, under siege in many parts of their homeland, will be
disenfranchised… We, as exiles, are confident that the vast majority of Iraqis, at home
and abroad, shall unite to end the US-led occupation and establish democracy, whatever
their stance on participation. We echo opinions within Iraq stressing the impossibility of
holding free and fair elections while under occupation, and being subjected to war crimes
by the US-led forces.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

When two years later in 2007, another suicide bomb ripped through Iraq’s
parliamentary complex during the height of sectarian violence, killing a member of the
National Dialogue Council, Iraqis had by now come to find black humour in their ailing
political order. As became a source of popular derision, the blast had targeted only the
politicians’ canteen and not the chamber itself.\textsuperscript{116} These incriminating events served as

\textsuperscript{113} Charles Tripp, \textit{A History of Iraq} (London: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5.
\textsuperscript{116} For details of the development of these features in Iraqi governance, see Toby Dodge, \textit{Iraq – From War to a New Authoritarianism} (London: Routledge, 2013).
a barometer for political and civil society in the nascent democratic Iraq, already being diagnosed with myriad ailments of corruption, sectarianism, insecurity and repression. Similarly, the prescience of Tripp’s forecast later continued to be born out in the permutations of power that appeared with the re-election of the former Shi’ia exile and Coalition ally, Nouri Al Maliki as Iraq’s Prime Minister in 2010. Indeed, the lament that “you got rid of one Saddam and you left us with 50” had by that time become a common refrain among Iraqis. As the British-Iraqi exile Tahrir Swift herself described at the time of Blair’s first Chilcot testimony in 2010, “today we have thirty Saddams, acting with impunity, violating human rights in an appalling catalogue of abuses.”

Many of these developments appeared as predestined among diaspora Iraqis in Britain who recounted even before the war, perceiving a direct causal link between the architecture of regime-change and fresh scourges of political violence and authoritarianism in Iraq. Foremost among these associations (and most difficult to overlook through the lens of hindsight) was that between the sectarian divisions which came to govern the country over the first post-war decade and the agendas of diaspora figures with whom Coalition forces aligned. Many British-Iraqis lamented the Coalition’s flagrant pre-war neglect of Iraq’s socio-political ecology in which reconstruction would take place – a disregard which was disparaged as a central failure of policy in both London and Washington. Such perceptions were indeed corroborated by Peter Hain who later confirmed that Cabinet saw no papers on post-war Iraq prior to the invasion. (As he noted, "the failures of covert intelligence were compounded by the absence of political intelligence: a comprehensive lack of the understanding of sectarian forces and fault lines present across the country." In reconstituting the country's new

120 This pivotal error in Britain’s own Iraq strategy has also since been identified by commentators and politicians as one of understanding, more than planning. As The Guardian former Iraq correspondent Jonathan Steele later argued, London’s “failures of political intelligence” were as grave as those of its military and strategic intelligence - “why were Bush and Blair not told about the depth of Iraqi nationalism or ... that hatred of Saddam did not produce automatic support for the war?” See Steele, Defeat, 5.
ruling administration along ethnic and religious lines, the Coalition was widely seen by British-Iraqis to have inscribed sectarian rivalry and virulent nepotism domestically, while ushering in regional powers from abroad. The limited purview of many of the opposition figures allocated leadership in the new administration, as overseen by the Coalition, was thus identified as a prime catalyst in the country’s ensuing fragmentation. Overwhelmingly, British-Iraqis argued that governing prerogatives focused on restoring influence to the country’s previously-marginalised groups (attended by their various foreign backers, most notably Iran’s Shi’ite theocracy) above any imperatives of national reconciliation. As Fareed observed of this interplay of interests:

> From a geopolitical point of view, the US and UK should have known that there was a power vacuum in Iraq that would be filled by regional powers. The Coalition was oblivious to the strength of emotional, historical and religious ties and was easily drawn in by those who told them they would be welcomed with open arms in Iraq. They did not understand that their interests were transient and not long term.

While some Coalition officials recognised (and sought to obviate) potentially suspect agendas among the exiled opposition in the immediate aftermath of war, from late 2003, the primacy of exiting Iraq came to hold sway over Washington’s Iraq strategy. Within a year of the invasion, the British PM likewise set himself an eighteen-month target for withdrawing "substantial" numbers of British troops from the country, conceding that Iraq’s unravelling crisis was casting a "shadow" over his government. This revised strategy of expedient departure over sustained state-building saw several

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121 Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 228.


124
expatriate politicians recruited to key posts in the nascent administration.\textsuperscript{125} Though no statistical surveys had been conducted in Iraq in the years prior to invasion in order to determine the country’s religious and ethnic composition, seats in the ICG were in July 2003 assigned in line with an assumption that sixty per cent of the population was Shi’ite, twenty per cent Sunni, and twenty per cent Kurds (predominantly Sunni).\textsuperscript{126} The 25-member council was henceforth constituted by thirteen Shi’ites, five Sunni Arabs, five Kurds, one Turkomen and an Assyrian, with three women among its members.\textsuperscript{127} Not only was this quota-driven leadership template seen to have encouraged fiendish power struggles among Iraq’s rulers, later exacerbated after the 2005 elections, it was similarly perceived by some as having ignited sectarian tensions hitherto more marginal in everyday Iraqi society.\textsuperscript{128} Other commentators similarly observed that much of Britain’s invasion and previous policy in Iraq, including its establishment of the Kurdish no-fly-zone in the 1990s, had served to confirm a sectarian view of the country through formalising, both politically and geographically, ethnic separation.\textsuperscript{129}

Indeed, many of these divisions which would come to permeate Iraq’s society as well as its institutions were seen to have been hitherto more alien to the country. As Dodge has noted with respect to the effects of Iraq’s so-called ‘national unity’ governments of 2005, 2006 and 2010, “this is not a return to the supposedly dominant religious allegiances that, according to those who favour the Sykes–Picot narrative, have always animated Iraqi politics. Instead, it is the deliberate development or reinvention of sectarian identities by a ruling elite that judges this the best method for rallying an alienated electorate.”\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{125}Patrick Cockburn, \textit{The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq} (London: Verso, 2006), 57.
\textsuperscript{126} For further data on the ICG quota system and its legacy for Iraqi governance thereafter, see Osman, \textit{Sectarianism in Iraq}, 38-39.
\textsuperscript{128} This was also later argued by Britain’s own 2003 ambassador to the US, Sir Christopher Meyer, who noted that the Coalition’s handling of regime-change was “perhaps the most significant reason” for the ensuing sectarian violence. Cited in Nigel Morris, “Tony Blair Iraq comments”, \textit{The Independent}, 16 June 2014 at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tony-blair-iraq-comments-senior-labour-figures-distance-themselves-from-former-pm-after-he-refuses-to-accept-blame-for-new-crisis-9538591.html [accessed 17 June 2014].
\textsuperscript{129}Michael Stephens comments on “Newshour”, \textit{BBC News}, 15 June 2014.
order – one which would later cripple Iraqi society along with the leadership of one of its alleged political progenitors, Maliki – ethnic and religious identities were commonly described as having been more peripheral among those who had left in the decades prior to 2003. This contrasting experience was encapsulated in the perspective of one Christian expatriate who suggested that “the divide between Christian and Muslim was never a factor. The majority of my friends in Iraq were Muslims and to this day I do not know if they are Sunni or Shi’ia. We did not even think to ask. We co-existed in school and with our neighbours and there was never a problem.”131 (The significance of religion was likewise more luridly compared by another to the social taboos around sexual activity. As he claimed, “asking someone whether they are Shi’ia or Sunni was like asking them about their sex life. It is irrelevant, intrusive and of no interest to me!”132)

However, some attempts to attribute Iraq’s burgeoning sectarianism to the Coalition campaign were rejected by others in the diaspora, in particular those with extensive experience of living across its diverse provinces, as well as abroad. Refuting the common correlation, one cosmopolitan Kurdish academic and writer, Hoshang, emphasised that “nobody bombed us into sectarianism.”133 Rather, it was argued that current manifestations of these “narrow identities” were linked to more complex conjunctions of power and culture over preceding decades. As Hoshang noted, “overthrowing Saddam meant the collapse of a state which was led for 35 years by a strange mixture of totalitarian Ba’athist ideology with a flavour of Sunni sectarianism.”134 The post-2003 rise of the Coalition-backed, Shia-dominated government – whose dominance was amplified by the wholesale voiding of Iraq’s army and civil-administrative structures – was nonetheless identified as a goad to sectarian rivalry. Yet the brutally hostile capacities of this configuration of state power were not regarded solely as a byproduct of exogenous regime-change, previously absent from Iraqi society.

131 Interview with Peter, London, 21 September 2011.
133 Interview with Hoshang, Erbil, April 2013.
Similarly, narratives of Iraq’s pre-war communal harmony naturally retained less currency for those whose ethnic or religious identity had served as the specific incitement to their persecution under Saddam, notably Assyrian Christians, Kurds and Turkomen. Many from these minorities therefore lamented the pronounced sectarianism into whose powerful current post-Saddam Iraq had fallen, albeit under a reconfigured governing apparatus. Strained sectarian identities under Ba’athism were thus seen to have been exacerbated by post-invasion actions on the part of Iraq’s new political custodians, including former exiles, and the rough-hewn practices of their Coalition sponsors. One member of the UK Assyrian General Conference, who had at first supported the invasion, described his community’s disenfranchisement under the resulting government, whose influence proved all the more adverse for Iraq’s Christians. As he explained:

we were happy about the invasion because we knew nobody could topple Saddam unless the international community assisted. But after liberation, the Iraqi opposition established a political process on the basis of sectarianism and ethnicity and now everyone is loyal to their narrow affiliation, not to a unified Iraq. The government is fragile because everyone wants to be in power, and groups like Assyrians with no political influence or militia to protect them are the weakest link. There is nothing we can do.\textsuperscript{135}

This palpable disenchantment was most apparent among those who, having welcomed the intervention, had been neither empowered by regime-change nor able to affect sustained support from Britain (or other Coalition governments) in the years since. Saqi of the Iraqi Turkomen Front (ITF) described how her cause had been eclipsed post-invasion by those of more influential minority representatives, as groups vied to make restitution for their persecution under Saddam. As she recounted:

\textsuperscript{135} Interview with Alin Bahram, London, 2 November 2011.
long before 2003, there was a strong Iraqi opposition in London with significant Turkomen involvement. But after the invasion, Turkomen did not get the rights or position they should have, because the US and UK had no effective post-war plan. They gave sectarian control to one of two groups, the Shi‘ia or Kurds - groups which had been more successful in promoting their case around the world.\textsuperscript{136}

Although a number of MPs had lent support to ITF's campaigns, Saqi expressed frustration at their inability to gain the same prominence among policy-makers as Kurdish groups with greater perceived political and/or economic currency. As she explained:

Visibility of one group should not mean that their situation is any better. We have to remember that 98 per cent of Iraqis suffered under Saddam. We cannot forget this - we are all Iraqis and the rights of one minority should not come at the expense of another.\textsuperscript{137}

The triumph reflected in the founding of a semi-autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan under the authority of the KRG (with all its accompanying resources) meant that few Kurdish exiles viewed regime-change in the same prevailing pejorative terms. Yet beyond perceptions of these more authentically liberating outcomes for Iraq’s long-suffering Kurds, many were acutely aware of the culture of division and corruption that the war had sewn in the country at large – a legacy that many argued would be difficult to reverse. Among them, one former member of the PUK in Britain, Muhammad, had supported Blair's role in the 2003 campaign and returned to Kurdistan to be elected to the KRG in the liberal reformist party Movement for Change ("Gorran"). A self-declared independent, in 2003 he continued to endorse the war as a genuine emancipation, yet he equally deplored the sectarianism that had been allowed to tarnish Iraqi politics (and thereby society) in the years since. As he reflected, a decade after his own first dealings with policy-makers in 2002, these outcomes could be traced directly to the incipient dynamics of the Coalition regime-change with all its emphasis on \textit{muhasasah} or quota systems:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{136} Interview with Sundus Saqi, London, 28 October 2011.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Interview with Sundus Saqi, London, 28 October 2011.
\end{itemize}
Kurdish interests converged with those of the Coalition and we had a lot of coordination with other groups before the war. But there was no consensus about how to solve the Iraqi problem or any cohesive approach to politics. If we want a common idea of Iraq, we needed each component of Iraqi society to recognise the rights of the other. But this was not encouraged and there was no such discussion amongst the political elites. Instead Arabs were told to stick to Arabs, Sunni to Sunni and Kurd to Kurd.\textsuperscript{138}

Such rivalries had, according to Kayani, bred a corrupt governing culture so inimical to economic and democratic development as to signify the death-knell of political efforts toward Iraqi national unity. As he noted: “these days, I define Iraqi politics as the convergence of interests. It is big blocks with various foreign lobby groups and regional powers backing them - the government is a convergence of interests, not people.”\textsuperscript{139}

Against the backdrop of these early indications of violently fragmenting interests in post-Saddam Iraq, authorities in Britain were swift to extol the need for repatriation of exiles, in particular to Kayani’s home region of Kurdistan, in order to assist with reconstruction. Within eighteen months of regime-change, then Home Secretary David Blunkett stated that he wished to mandate return for those from Kurdish Northern Iraq who had been granted asylum in Britain prior to the war.\textsuperscript{140} Describing the region as “generally overwhelmingly safe”, Blunkett suggested that incentives such as the cessation of benefits and the removal of children may be used to encourage return among newly-arrived Iraqi refugees. As he claimed, “[Iraqi asylum seekers] came here on the premise they were threatened with death and torture. When you are no longer threatened... I think there is a moral obligation to return and assist in the rebuilding of the country.”\textsuperscript{141}

A distinctly buoyant interpretation of circumstances at the time, any such notion was in following years proscribed for many British-Iraqis by the persistent and mounting threats of political and/or sectarian violence. Even among those who had attempted or aspired to repatriation, by 2013 the view was widespread that a decade of conflict had

\textsuperscript{138} Interview with Mohamad Kayani, London, 12 March 2013.
\textsuperscript{139} Interview with Mohamad Kayani, London, 12 March 2013.
inured Iraq’s government and civil society to even the most basic forms of political or infrastructural progress. Characterising this resulting sense of dejection among British-Iraqi campaigners, one long-standing human rights activist recounted how she had since ceased efforts to involve herself in justice campaigns in Iraq:

the system that was created after Saddam’s overthrow cannot address any of the Iraqi people's needs because it was founded on ethnic and religious lines. The Coalition set up a system which breeds division and any political group, even if it supports reform, will be incapable of change because corruption is rife. All this is an environment which is incapable of producing positive change regarding basic services, let alone something more fundamental.142

The ultimate relinquishment (or outright renunciation) of investments in local politics apparent among many was attributed to myriad factors, not least personal safety and subjective despair. Amid this post-Saddam matrix of security threats and political snares, many cited the causal effects of Coalition policy-makers’ alienation from Iraq’s existing grass-roots politics, all be it an embattled resource. This fundamental gulf between the foreign architects and Iraqi subjects of regime-change had in turn left little scope for cultivating democratic activism in its aftermath. Despite having opposed the invasion, Abdullah returned to Iraq from Britain shortly before the establishment of the IGC in 2003 in order to convene the country’s first trade-union congress and engage in local campaigns with support from British trade unions. At this close range, he noted a continued malignancy in Iraq’s post-Saddam government, with former oppositionists now presided over a nominally-democratic structure that retained many of the most pernicious features of Ba’athist rule, including the persecution of trade unions. As he recounted:

Before the war, no attempts were made to consult groups outside the key faces of the opposition at the time. We were calling for internal unity, but we were not listened to and preference was given to figures like Chalabi whose agenda was simply to remove Saddam with no view to the future. Now we are all paying for it: we have a corrupt system which arrests and murders people who are merely calling for reform. This is not

a failure of democracy, but of the way it was organised – a failure of planning and consultation and the arrogance of decision makers.143

Other human rights activists likewise noted how the scale of repression in post-war Iraq left them confronting the same struggles as under Ba’athist rule, whose influence continued to permeate politics post-Saddam. Shatha of the Iraqi Women's League detailed her experience of returning to Iraq to found a centre for survivors of torture in Baghdad in the early days after the fall of the regime. As she explained:

under the old regime, almost all facets of Iraqi society had been involved in violent intimidation and torture, so we were perceived as a threat by everyone – even people in the Ministry of Health. We received direct threats from the government, who came and intimidated the workers with guns and death threats. One of my colleagues was murdered and eventually, I was completely devastated to have to close the centre in 2005.144

A similarly dismal account of Iraq’s intrinsically corrupt politics was given by a former exiled member of the KRG who, even from within its ruling structures, noted that, “if you are honest in Iraq, you are in trouble. And after a while you realise it's better to be dirty with them or to leave the party.”145

Simultaneously, many were aware of the stranglehold of the Coalition agenda over political redevelopment in post-Saddam Iraq. Bountiful resources were at first pooled into the Coalition Provisional Authority’s (CPA) reconstruction effort – the largest American-led occupation since the Marshall Plan146 - and associated “democratic transition” programmes. However, projects appeared to have been overwhelmingly beholden to the interests of their Western sponsors, to the exclusion of local or other expatriate political influence. Noting the broader effects of the coalition reconstruction programme in disaggregating Iraqi political leadership, Herring and Rangwala observe that the US programme sacrificed long-term state-building efforts to the more myopic imperative of retaining American influence.147 The outcome of this imperative, as

143 Interview with Abdullah Muhsin, London, 29 June 2011.
144 Interview with Shatha Besarani, [21 July or 20 December?] 2011.
146 “So, Mr Bremer, where did all the money go?” The Guardian, 7 July 2005 at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/jul/07/iraq.features11 [accessed 13 January 2012].
147Herring and Rangwala, Iraq in Fragments, 7.
observed, was to “[ensure] that any Iraqi actor aspiring to secure office had to coordinate with the Coalition authorities, which undermined any such actor’s potential for nationwide legitimacy.”¹⁴⁸ Such accounts reverberated on a more local political level, as many returned activists described their efforts to forge popular democratic agency, and thereby governing accountability, as being stymied by the Coalition’s own programme. With funding from the UK Department for International Development (itself in a post-war paralysis following Clare Short’s resignation over the lack of international involvement in reconstruction¹⁴⁹), and USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives, as well as soft-power instruments like the National Endowment for Democracy, civil society campaigners confirmed that on a local level, there appeared little scope for political contestation in Iraq’s alleged new democratic transformation. As the anti-occupation campaigner Sami observed of the post-Saddam environment:

They wanted to manipulate the process of development by controlling institutions. Anyone who wanted to do anything positive needed to cooperate with Coalition forces who made attempts to control civil society rather than encourage it. Hundreds or thousands of pounds were handed out to organisations in the name of feeding civil society: youth, women, democratic awareness, education – anything provided you didn't mention war or occupation.¹⁵⁰

Further aggravating these efforts were political feuds among British-Iraqis themselves. Those who conceded to engaging with elements of the country’s new government in attempts to achieve democratic progress were excoriated as Western “pawns” by others in the anti-occupation camp. Among these, Abdullah of the IFTU quickly found himself ostracized as he sought to navigate a precarious political path between Britain and Iraq: opposing the occupation on one hand, while condemning the violent insurgency as a

¹⁴⁸ Herring and Rangwala, Iraq in Fragments, 3.
¹⁵⁰ Interview with Ramadani, 2011.
chimeric “national liberation” and cooperating with British and American labour groups to achieve protection for Iraqi workers.151

The “shoulder to shoulder” alliance declared by Blair in the aftermath of 9/11 was thereby seen to have contracted Britain’s policy-makers wholesale to an innately flawed mission in Iraq: an enfeebled state-building project which embodied the worst elements of its colonial involvement in the region re-enacted on the coattails of US imperialism.152 For many, the ensuing misguided and/or hegemonic Coalition reconstruction efforts reflected not only Iraq’s captivity to a US agenda, but also those of Britain’s attempt to revive its diminished influence in the region through an American superior. As another Iraqi activist noted of the broader arch of London’s involvement in the campaign: “it became clear that Britain has no independent foreign policy: that since Suez, UK policy has been completely tied to that of the US… Tony Blair put a new gloss of humanitarian intervention on the war, like what happened in the Balkans, but we know that this was actually just another name for direct imperial intervention by the West.”153

Where some British ministers attempted to take premature credit for the apparent success of the UK’s campaign in the south of the country, where relative stability in the days after the war markedly contrasted with violence in central Iraq,154 such hubris masked the more inherent failures of the US-led governance project. As the UK CPA coordinator himself later recounted of London’s mission, “no amount of congratulations could disguise the fact that this neo-colonial organisation…which had assumed responsibility for the governance and administration of a country of some 26-million people” had so quickly failed in its arrogantly ambitious goals.155 Likewise, other UK officials had earlier noted the unfavourable colonial resonances of Britain’s role in “Operation Iraqi Freedom”. As one former FCO envoy to Basra described of his own

153 Interview with Sabah, 2011.
155 Hilary Synott, Bad Days in Basra, x.
sceptical impression upon learning of the proposed campaign in April 2002: “it seemed just like 1920 again, coming in as foreigners and giving instructions on how to administer a country to people who were perfectly capable of doing it themselves. It was not a bad aim to get rid of Saddam, but it seemed terribly misguided and my first thought was, can Blair have possibly consulted any expertise?”156

Indeed, the very project of conferring democracy through an ill-fitting exogenous regime-change was to many British-Iraqis innately repugnant. One exiled human rights activist described this sense of indignation in the aftermath of the invasion when she and other campaigners were invited to facilitate workshops on “democracy-education” in Iraq:

They talked about how Britain and the US came to teach democracy, wondering whether we Iraqis understood anything at all. Iraq was one of the first civilisations to establish it, but now it is gone and all of a sudden we are being taught it. When my mother became an activist at age 17 she stood on a big stage in Baghdad and took off her veil, telling women to be free. Who lead her - the Americans or the British? Or didn’t she have a mind of her own?157

Antagonism between diaspora Iraqis and the country’s new Coalition-sponsored custodians was further compounded by layers of resentment from those who had remained in Iraq throughout the war, and thus later questioned the credibility of their peers returning from abroad in its aftermath.158 This gulf between local aspirations and what were often perceived to be the “foreign” influences of expatriate Iraqis was noted in the context of women’s rights activism in post-war Iraq by Nadje Al Ali. As she observed in 2007, “except for a relatively small number of secular activists inside Iraq, many Iraqi women construct their differences with the mainly secular diaspora activists as a contestation between “authentic” culture and values on the one side, and the

157 Interview with Shatha Besarani, [21 July or 20 December?] 2011.
158 This was also noted by US official Tom Warrick, the director of the “Future of Iraq” project in the lead up to regime-change, who observed that “Iraqis living in exile were naturally resented by locals for living the good life overseas while they suffered under the brutal rule of Saddam”. Cited in Feith, War and Decision, 42.
imposition of foreign values and political agendas on the other”.\textsuperscript{159} Such friction was noted even by diaspora activists who had opposed the invasion, and attempted to foster autonomous, grass-roots democratic projects in the years after 2003. Not only had the disproportionate Western backing of unsuitable and/or venal expatriate candidates during regime-change tarnished diaspora figures more broadly, it had also engendered hostility towards those who had not endured the hardships of war and occupation. As one Iraqi activist, resident in London since the 1990s, explained:

There is a chance that if I am called upon to go back to Iraq, I will. But now there are sensitivities amongst those living in Iraq who say we from the outside did not suffer as they did – and they are right. Many Iraqis feel mistrust or anger at all those who went back just to take up political positions, and when a government post opened up, they would call upon friends in Britain or the US.\textsuperscript{160}

Amid this morass of historical loyalties and individual and collective suffering, interwoven with new conjunctions of persecution, hostility and corruption, few British-Iraqis could by 2013 discern any pathways toward progress. The schisms and mistrust entrenched in Iraqi society by decades of Ba’athist despotism had for many been aggravated by new post-Saddam divisions. Where some had lent their last vestiges of hope for a democratic Iraq to the sparse odds of a Coalition-backed liberation, there remained little optimism for the country’s future. Encapsulating this bleaker outlook, Shatha recounted her final resignation from a decades-long career of campaigning for human rights in Iraq. With diaspora politics riven and her activities inside the country rendered exponentially more lethal by the gender-specific violence of reigning religious extremism, she explained that:

I’ve tried as much as possible to have goods relationships, to avoid fights, to hear others’ views and to see how we can overcome and change ideas. But I feel there is no real interest in finding common ground. Everyone is working for their own agendas, and I am exhausted to the point of giving up. Politics in Iraq is just a dirty war which is why I am retreating from it. We have backward people in power and nobody is thinking about real changes, apart from a few who are powerless to do anything. It is completely

\textsuperscript{159}Al Ali, “Iraqi Women in Diasporic Spaces”, 118.
\textsuperscript{160} Interview with Saqi, London, 28 October 2011.
corrupt because of money and power. For me, going to Iraq now is like going to a big prison. A big, dirty prison.161

Conclusion

Following Blair’s 18 March appeal to the Commons, poised for a vote which might forestall invasion, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw took to the podium to conclude his government’s case for war. As he explained:

I impugn the motives of no-one in the House. The different positions that we have taken all come from the best, not the worst, of intentions. But as elected Members of Parliament, we all know that we will be judged not only on our intentions, but on the results, the consequences of our decisions… Yes, of course there will be consequences if the House approves the Government's motion… but far fewer Iraqis in the future will be maimed, tortured or killed by the Saddam regime. The Iraqi people will begin to enjoy the freedom and prosperity that should be theirs. The world will become a safer place, and, above all, the essential authority of the United Nations will have been upheld. I urge the House to vote with the Government tonight.162

Over the years since that weighty Commons debate, the subjective motives of the PM and his Iraq war unit have provided a font of commentary and disputation among Britain’s activist, media, scholarly and official classes alike. Among the cabal of the war’s official architects, meanwhile, retrospective appraisals have relied evermore heavily on an ideological narrative - a humanitarian argument conjured in the prelude to war, and amplified over its course with the collapse of the Coalition’s myriad justificatory premises. As the Human Rights Watch Director Kenneth Roth observed in 2004, “as time elapses, the Bush administration’s dominant remaining justification for the war is that Saddam Hussein was a tyrant who deserved to be overthrown—an argument of humanitarian intervention.”163 Indeed, nowhere was this re-casting more flagrant than during Blair's famed “no regrets” testimony at the Chilcot Inquiry in 2010.

161 Interview with Shatha Besarani, [21 July or 20 December?], 2011.
when he claimed that, “Saddam Hussein was a tyrant and monster who gassed his own people and threatened not just the region, but the world.”

Yet by contrast to their non-Iraqi peers, those from the diaspora in Britain appeared more fatigued by questions of New Labour’s political, ideological or material incitements to war in Iraq. It is doubtless that many at that time saw through the brash heroics of the transatlantic alliance and its philanthropic war of liberation. (A mendacity later magnified by the Coalition’s apparent indifference to documenting Iraq’s civilian death toll.) Others at the time remained quietly sceptical or cautiously optimistic about the campaign’s prospects. Yet simultaneously, such speculation had quickly worn thin for many British-Iraqis - immaterial when set alongside the concrete reality and everyday tragedies of life in post-Saddam Iraq. As Sami noted wearily in 2013 in response to continuing public debate around Blair’s motives:

I don’t know to what extent he shared in the illusions of his Neocon allies about what was achievable by invading Iraq, or in the disastrous failings of their policy planning and provisions… He must have done. But we have all now paid the price of a failed war and occupation – what happened to the Brits in Basra, if it weren’t tragic would be laughable. Such blunders, such miscalculations.

Indeed, the PM’s own aspirations in Iraq had long-since been overlaid by the multifarious ambitions and agendas of its new governing powers. It was instead those still palpable consequences of a conceptually flawed invasion which assumed primacy in Iraqi minds. And it is their reflections which attest most powerfully to the

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166 As one British-Iraqi activist later explained, “I opposed it unequivocally at the time, but still cheered when the statue of Saddam Hussein was hauled down. Inwardly, I desperately hoped that Tony Blair’s rhetoric was right and I was wrong.” See Peter Kandela, “Will it really be a spring for the Arabs?” The Guardian, 18 September 2011 at: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/18/arab-spring-human-rights-iraq [accessed 27 December 2011].
167 Interview with Sami Zubaida, 2014.
168 Labour MP, and now Secretary of Defence, Jim Murphy likewise described on the decade anniversary of the invasion that, “pressing the green light in parliament to vote in favour of military action, while forcing you to search your conscience…is the easy bit. In 2003, we spent a vast amount of time debating whether we should go to war and disproportionately little discussing its conduct, the post-war plan and its implementation.” Interview at The Frontline Club, 2013.
disjunction between the moral and practical architecture of New Labour's Iraq campaign – a shortfall which manifested in his government’s own dealings with purported agents of Iraqi democracy in the diaspora. The present day calamity of post-Saddam Iraq had similarly confirmed the redundancy of Western (or other foreign) agendas for many British-Iraqis, now seeking new forms of moral and practical redress within a more local ambit. As has been argued in this chapter, conclusions like these rested on suspicion of colonial interference in the region informed over centuries and now confirmed by an empirical experience of the twenty-first – namely, that as one activist described, “the West will support a movement only if it can be controlled.”

Accordingly, any continuing echoes of the 2003 campaign had for those like Kurdish MP Muhammad underscored that authentic concern for democratisation would require new allegiances to be forged, beyond international forums of geopolitical and military power or the influential strata of Iraq’s diaspora and ruling elite. As he explained, “the good politics in Iraq is in the street now. It is not in the corridors of parliament or the diaspora. The lessons should be learnt by the West: the most important thing we can do to defend human rights and freedom of speech is to listen to those on the streets.”

The following chapter will examine London’s response almost a decade after the Coalition campaign in Iraq was conceived, when calls for assistance from democratic forces on streets in the region became, seemingly, too powerful to ignore.

170 Interview with Mohamad Kayani, London, 12 December 2011.
CHAPTER THREE

A Precious Moment of Opportunity: Britain in Libya

These developments present a great opportunity for many who have long been sold short by their governments. And there is an opportunity and responsibility for all of us... We must not now lose our nerve.

David Cameron, United Nations, 22 September 2011

I had never been anywhere where hope and apprehension were at such a pitch. Anything seemed possible and nearly every individual I met spoke of his optimism and foreboding.

Hisham Matar, Benghazi, 2011

Almost sixty years to the date after the October 1951 enactment of the Libyan constitution, the first and only legal document formalising the rights of citizens since Libya’s post-war creation, the man most singularly responsible for its denial was pulled from a drainage pipe in Sirte and shot to death. The body was moved to an industrial freezer in Misrata where it was displayed to members of the Libyan public for three days, "to make sure that everybody knows he is dead." Speaking on the phone from Manchester several days after the event, Hisham, a veteran Libyan exile and member of the UK-based Libyan Constitutional Union, praised the campaign that culminated in the execution of Colonel Qadhafi. By no means naïve about the ethics of British foreign policy, Hisham endorsed the role of his adopted country in goading the NATO intervention. As he added, “it is part of the Libyan mindset that when you fight on my

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side in a time of need, I will turn a blind eye to the past.”

Nonetheless, David Cameron’s Coalition government was quick to project the Libyan campaign as a showpiece of a re-fashioned Anglo-Arab relationship. The envisioned new accord would be premised on a turn away from past catastrophe in Iraq and dubious handshakes in the desert toward London’s more forthright support for local democratic movements – “not because Western nations advocate these values, but because all people everywhere aspire to these freedoms.” Yet Cameron’s first bold effort to realise this regional project in Libya would itself invoke timeworn quandaries around the boundaries between responsibility, intervention and interference, not yet exorcised over the years since Iraq. Tracing the flux of Britain’s role in Libya over the course of the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first, this chapter will refer more extensively to diaspora accounts, like that by Hisham, to examine whether the UK record in the region could be so easily neutralized or redeemed. In doing so, it will refer to questions re-animated by the 2011 campaign around the very possibility of autonomy and ownership under the overarching narrative of British strategy, that is, in Lord Palmerston’s infamous words, that "England has no eternal friends and no perpetual enemies. England has only eternal and perpetual interests". Despite London’s rhetorical reinvention of its response to political transformation in the region, as in Libya, perspectives from beyond Downing Street and Whitehall will be employed to argue that any more decisive overhaul in the dynamics of UK involvement is difficult to corroborate.

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4 Interview with Hisham Ben Ghalbon, Manchester, 5 November 2013.
A changing world: Britain and Libya

In what would become one of his seminal speeches of the nascent ‘Arab Spring’, as rebellions threatened to topple a third North African dictator in two months, PM Cameron addressed the Kuwaiti parliament in February 2011 with an express reference to events in Libya. As he explained: “I come here today offering a new chapter in Britain’s long partnership with our friends in this region. Over generations we have built a partnership based on our shared interests in prosperity and security. But in a changing world ours must now also be a partnership that recognises the importance of political and economic reform… So whenever and wherever violence is used against peaceful demonstrators, we must not hesitate to condemn it.”

The PM was frank about the misguided notions that had informed prior British strategies in the region - assumptions around the Muslim world’s unfitness for democracy which amounted to “prejudice bordering on racism.” Yet his pledge for a new compact, whose potential might be substantiated in Libya, was not the first such pronouncement of reconfigured Anglo-Libyan relations. The year after British forces had declared their victory in Baghdad, Blair had personally travelled to deliver a similar message to Tripoli. There he was photographed embracing Colonel Qadhafi or as he explained, “reaching out the hand of partnership” to the hitherto pariah leader. That year, 2004, marked two decades since a young policewoman, Yvonne Fletcher, had been killed in a siege at the Libyan embassy in London, eighteen years since joint American-British bombing raids on Tripoli and fewer still since Qadhafi’s indictment in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie which killed some 275 people.

Blair’s actions had until recently been unthinkable for many in London. Equally stark to some was the juxtaposition of the PM’s amity toward Qadhafi, with his visit only twenty-four hours earlier to Spaniards mourning the victims of the Madrid bombings – the worst terrorist attack in Europe since Lockerbie. Blair was nonetheless determined

to smooth over these political disparities with his usual optimistic gloss. As he explained, “we are showing by our engagement today that it is possible for countries in the Arab World to work with the US and the UK to defeat the common enemy of extremist fanatical terrorism driven by Al Qaeda.”11 From Whitehall, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw praised the courage of the Libyan leader, while Blair pronounced, "not only Libya's determination to carry on down this path of cooperation, but also [Qadhafi’s ] recognition that Libya's own future is best secured by a new relationship with the outside world".12 The meeting had been presaged by the visit of Libya’s own Foreign Secretary to Britain months earlier to meet with Blair and Straw, in what the latter hailed as an “historic” development in relations between the countries.13 The talks followed a series of concessions by the Libyan regime aimed at ingratiating itself into the international community, in particular the US and UK, under whose sanctions it had been subsisting since the 1988 Lockerbie incident.14 Citing Qadhafi’s "enhanced cooperation" on issues around Fletcher, Lockerbie, terrorism and WMD, Straw endorsed moves to normalise relations with the region’s longest-standing dictator (the “mad dog of the Middle East” in President Reagan’s words15) and established sponsor of the Irish Republican Army (IRA)16. Indeed, the Foreign Secretary acknowledged that these new diplomatic gestures might prove “difficult” for the relatives of those who had suffered as a result of Qadhafi’s “past actions”.17

Discomfited alongside these victims were many from Britain’s Libyan community, the

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11 Tyler, "Blair Visits Qadhafi".
16 After a series of terror attacks by the Provisional IRA, Qadhafi in 1976 claimed that “the bombs which are convulsing Britain and breaking its spirit are the bombs of Libyan people. We have sent them to the Irish revolutionaries so that the British will pay the price for their past deeds.” See “The 38-year connection between Irish republicans and Gaddafi”, *BBC News*, 23 February 2011 at: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-12539372 [accessed 2 January 2014].
largest and most affluent of that country’s diaspora\textsuperscript{18}, which also included key suspects in the embassy siege and perpetrators of a string of violent attacks against its members on British soil. This British-Libyan population, now estimated at around 25-30,000 and centred in Manchester with some 2,000 families, found its roots in a wave of Libyans who came to Britain during the seventies and early eighties for university education. Like emigrants of a similar demographic from Iraq at that time, the politicisation of many Libyan students who adopted open stances against Qadhafi after arriving in Britain resulted in their effective exile from Libya, governed since 1969 by the self-proclaimed revolutionary and anti-imperialist regime.

For Libyan dissidents at the time, however, geography provided little cover. Colonel Qadhafi at first openly disdained British authorities for giving refuge to so-called “criminal elements” whom he claimed were fleeing the justice of the Libyan republic\textsuperscript{19}. Activists quickly found themselves the targets of campaigns of elimination by British-based agents of his Libyan Revolutionary Committee (LRC), tasked with “liquidat[ing] enemies of the revolution” at home and abroad\textsuperscript{20} (Britain’s ambassodor to Libya at the time also described the Colonel’s undisguised efforts to “rub out oppositionists” in the UK\textsuperscript{21}.) Shortly after an express call by Qadhafi for the assassination of his Libyan detractors abroad in 1980 - a year in which a dozen were gunned down in foreign capitals - two young opposition figures were murdered by gunshot in London.\textsuperscript{22} As was explained by the regime’s de facto London ambassador and secretary of the Libyan People's Bureau, Moussa Kousa, a practice of eliminating "stray dogs" would continue irrespective of condemnation by UK authorities. Indeed, even after Koussa’s ensuing removal from Britain as \textit{persona non grata},\textsuperscript{23} the attacks escalated to a spate of bombings in 1984, explosions which were aimed chiefly at Arabic newspaper kiosks

\textsuperscript{19} Yehudit Ronen, “Britain’s Return to Libya: From the Battle of al-Alamein in the Western Libyan Desert to the Military Intervention in the ‘Arab Spring’ Upheaval”, \textit{Middle Eastern Studies} 49(5) (2013): 682.
\textsuperscript{20} Nouri Gana, ed., \textit{The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 188.
\textsuperscript{22} “1984 Libyan embassy shooting victims speak out”, \textit{BBC News}.
\textsuperscript{23} Oliver Miles, “Moussa Koussa’s defection should be exploited”, \textit{The Guardian}, 1 April 2011 at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/31/moussa-koussa-defection-exploited [accessed 2 April 2011].
selling dissident literature like that produced by the Libyan Constitutional Committee (LCC), one of the main opposition groups of the time. So too, violence spread to Manchester, where two bombs exploded outside a suburban apartment block in March 1984, ripping apart a car and injuring several people. In this instance, the targets were the co-founder of the LCC, Hisham Ben Ghalbon, and his brother, as well as their families, who had been placed on a hit-list following their efforts to expose regime atrocities in the UK. As Ben Ghalbon later recalled, “it was hell at that time…always looking over our shoulders knowing there was a hit-squad with our names on their list who would get a lot of money and credit for spilling our blood.”

Domestic disturbance of this kind in turn propelled diplomatic hostility from Thatcher’s Conservative government, toward which the Colonel remained defiant (as he declared shortly after the 1984 Manchester bombing, “if Britain wants bad relations…she can have them”). Yet Qadhafi’s opponents remained similarly resolute. Their activities intensified, culminating in an April 1984 peaceful demonstration outside the Libyan embassy, or ‘People’s Bureau’, in Piccadilly with some 75 protestors arriving from Northern England. Libyan patriotic anthems blazing from the building were followed by machine gunfire, striking Fletcher and a dozen protestors, and police surrounded the building in what became an eleven-day stand-off with the embassy staff under siege inside. Then Home Secretary Leon Brittan condemned the attack as “disgraceful and barbaric”, emphasising his determination for a peaceful resolution. Labour meanwhile disparaged the government’s failure to act on prior intelligence, with its foreign affairs spokesman denouncing as “intolerable” that the “streets of London are to be used for shoot-outs over Libya's domestic affairs”. In Tripoli, Libyan soldiers surrounded Britain's own embassy, entrapping 18 diplomats, with the British ambassador, Oliver Miles, informed that further such "aggressive action" against the Libyan people would have "dangerous" consequences. Though renowned for her customary assertiveness in

24 Interview with Hisham Ben Ghalbon, Manchester, 5 November 2013.
28 Nordheimer, “Gunman in London in Libyan embassy fires into crowd”.
29 Ibid.
foreign policy disputes, PM Thatcher remained notable for her absence throughout the embassy siege, eschewing Fletcher’s funeral and spending the climactic days of negotiations at her country estate (her only public appearance was at the farewell performance of ice-skating duo Torvill and Deane). When diplomatic relations with Tripoli were eventually severed by London in late April, and the Bureau’s occupants given seven days to leave the country, commentators attributed Thatcher’s continued absence to the undesirable connotations of being associated with such a politically-unfavourable outcome. FCO staff were instead left to account publicly for the unsatisfactory resolution, which the following week saw Libyan diplomats depart unquestioned, Britain’s embassy in Tripoli ransacked, Fletcher’s killer slip under the radar and the subsequent detention of six British nationals as hostages in Libya.

The outcomes for Britain’s Libyan exiles were, however, relatively favourable. After years of covert threat from Qadhafi agents, the public assault and murder of a British national had ultimately served to extend protection to regime opponents in the UK. The political and economic cost of the embassy siege also compelled Thatcher’s government to crackdown on Qadhafi operators within Britain, as Ben Ghalbon recalled: “afterwards, they kicked out all suspects, so Qadhafi’s hit-squads found it very difficult to roam the streets of Manchester and London. Ironically, the UK became safer for opponents of Qadhafi thanks to Yvonne Fletcher.” Testament to the ruthless potential of the Libyan regime, these developments in London also facilitated awareness-raising activities among Qadhafi’s dissidents in Britain. Accordingly, Guma Al Gamaty, a long-standing exile who had organised the fatal 1984 embassy demonstration, reflected on its more positive repercussions for those denouncing human rights violations by the Libyan regime. As he explained:

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30 As one newspaper column noted at the time, no major political or diplomatic event had drawn so little overt involvement throughout PM Thatcher’s time in office. R. W. Apple, “Mrs Thatcher Shuns a Siege”, *The New York Times*, 29 April 1984.
31 Apple, “Mrs Thatcher Shuns a Siege”.
32 Ibid.
35 Interview with Hisham Ben Ghalbon, Manchester, 5 November 2013.
36 El-Gamaty later became the UK coordinator of the National Transitional Council (NTC).
It had a huge impact. Thatcher decided to close down the embassy and dispel all agents involved in terrorism and espionage. It also had a huge impact on us, the opponents of Qadhafi. We generated a lot of attention about the kind of atrocities Qadhafi was committing. If [the regime] was willing to shoot peaceful demonstrators here in the centre of London, then imagine what he would do to those who sought to oppose him inside Libya?37

More resounding indications of the PM’s rancour toward Tripoli, however, came two years later when Thatcher granted President Reagan access to Britain’s military bases for the purposes of counter-terror raids against Libyan targets. The strikes, justified by US officials as “self-defence” against North Africa’s “prime pool of terrorist talent”, were emphatically opposed by the UNSC, as well as among Arab and British publics.38 Thatcher was nonetheless categorical in her support, eschewing parliamentary approval of the measure. As she told the Commons during an April 1986 debate on the Libyan crisis, “terrorism has to be defeated. Terrorism exploits the natural reluctance of a free society to defend itself in the last resort with arms. Terrorism thrives on appeasement.”39 While the raids, which resulted in more than one-hundred Libyan civilian casualties, heralded the advent of US unilateralism40, they also signified the primacy of the transatlantic alliance for both Reagan and Thatcher - a ‘special relationship’ about which the latter was frank. As she explained when challenged in the Commons over the splintering effects of the raid on NATO, “the United States, our staunch ally, keeps over 330,000 troops in Europe to defend the freedom of Europe and…without the US and Britain, Europe would not be totally free. We must continue to keep that alliance.”41

Yet the PM’s obstinacy on the strikes was perhaps also broadly inspired by the historical significance of past military campaigns in North Africa, now emblematic of allied resolve and British valour in collective memory. More than forty years earlier,

38 Two-thirds of the British electorate disapproved of the strikes, while only Canada and Israel supported the campaign alongside London. See Kaldor and Anderson, Mad Dogs, 17.
39 Cited in Kaldor and Anderson, Mad Dogs, 36.
40 Kaldor and Anderson, Mad Dogs, 2.
41 Kaldor and Anderson, Mad Dogs, 36.
Britain’s 1942 conquest of Axis forces in the renowned battle of Al Alamein in the Western Desert had compelled Italian settlers to withdraw from Libya and Cyrenaica, representing a crucial turning-point in the regional fronts of Britain’s WWII campaign, as well as for its national morale. The landing of US troops in North Africa days later in turn marked the beginning of full-scale military cooperation between the Allied powers in the war, with ensuing gains in ‘Operation Torch’ ultimately securing North Africa from the hold of the Third Reich and ensuring Britain’s hold on Libyan territories in its aftermath. British forces had oscillated across the Libyan deserts over the preceding two years in a feeble campaign deemed “Desert Pendulum”, and it was only with this joint victory that London was able to establish post-war governance of Libyan Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in the form of a British Military Administration (BMA) in 1943. The subsequent protracted negotiations between Britain, the UN and Libya’s exiled King Idriss Al Sanussi concluded with the UK conceding to grant the country independence as the best long-term guarantor of continued British interests in the region. The United Kingdom of Libya was thus formally recognised by the UN General Assembly (a “child of the United Nations” as it was later described) in 1951 and two years later, wrought by poverty, internal political conflict and geostrategic rivalry among post-war powers, the fledging nation signed the ‘Treaty of Friendship and Alliance’ with Britain, guaranteeing British protection in the event of a third-party attack.

Where the agreement signified Libya’s economic and military dependence on its most significant post-war partner, it was also a reflection of the country’s significance for Britain in these domains, exponentially so following the discovery of oil bounties later

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42 As Churchill famously proclaimed of the so-called “Last battle of Egypt” following the war, “before Alamein we never had a victory. After Alamein, we never had a defeat.” Cited in David Knowles, “How El Alamein changed the war,” BBC News, 23 October 2002 at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/2347801.stm [accessed 5 January 2014]/
43 Ronen, “Britain's Return to Libya”, 676.
44 Other regions of Libya were held under similar arrangements by a French military administration. For more on these arrangements, see Dirk J. Vandewalle, A History of Modern Libya (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2012).
45 Sanussi had raised an army to fight alongside the British and while in exile in Egypt, King Idriss had been granted authority by other Libyan exiles to negotiate with Britain on matters of post-war independence. Vandewalle, A History of Modern Libya, 37.
47 Vandewalle, A History of Modern Libya, 37.
48 Ronen, “Britain's Return to Libya”, 676.
in the decade. By the 1960s, Britain retained troops at bases in Tripolitania, Benghazi and Tobruk and the country had risen to the rank of the world’s fourth-largest exporter of oil - the majority production of which remained in the charge of British and other foreign companies. Simultaneously, these enduring bilateral ties meant that with the escalation of political discontent and anti-monarchy upheaval, Britain assumed centre-stage as the object of local antagonism. Mounting anti-imperial and Arab-nationalist sentiment, inspired by the rise of Egypt’s President Nasser, were personified in the militant decrees of the then head of Free Unionist Officers, Muammar Qadhafi. When the Colonel’s forces seized power from the Sanussi monarchy in a successful 1969 coup and King Idris was sent back into exile, all existing treaties between Britain and Libyan were therefore declared void. The Libyan Arabic Republic was proclaimed, with “all residual signs of Western colonialism”, as Qadhafi declared, eradicated as a “main condition for achieving freedom”. Accordingly, negotiations were held with British officials, culminating in London’s recognition of the new regime and agreement to withdraw all its forces from the country within the year. As was emphasised by Qadhafi to delegates at the talks, “the Libyan Arab Republic is [no longer] the United Kingdom of Libya and the UK is [no longer] the British Empire on which the sun never sets”. Within months, the last UK soldier departed from Libyan territory and the regime declared 31 March 1970 a national holiday to celebrate the British evacuation: it was the first time since 1882 that no single British troop was stationed on North African soil.

It was this memory of an erstwhile mutually-profitable British-Libyan accord which was therefore evoked some thirty years later with the efforts by PM Blair to resolve London’s acrimonious relations with Tripoli. Duly cautioned by Saddam’s 1991 Gulf War experience at the hands of US-led forces, and already straining under intensifying Western sanctions, Qadhafi had by then already given indications of a desire to thaw

49 Ronen, “Britain’s Return to Libya”, 678.  
50 Vandewalle, A History of Modern Libya, 40.  
52 Cited in The Road to People's Authority: a Collection of Historical Speeches and Documents, The Information Section of The People's Committee for Students of the Socialist Peoples' Libyan Arab Jamahiriya 680, archived online at: https://archive.org/stream/TheRoadToPeoplesAuthorityACollectionOfHistoricalSpeechesAnd/RPP_djvu.txt [accessed 12 February 2014].  
relations with Thatcher’s Conservative successor in the early nineties. Yet Major’s government had appeared unresponsive to conciliatory gestures, instead determining to teach Qadhafi a “short sharp lesson” together with Washington and aggravated by his non-compliance in the extradition of two Lockerbie suspects.54 Over the course of the decade, the Colonel nonetheless edged away from his record as a leading state sponsor of terrorism and by 1999, handed over the Lockerbie suspects, offering an admission of responsibility alongside some £250,000 compensation to Fletcher’s parents.55 So too, Downing Street’s new Labour incumbent was more amenable to diplomacy. Punitive sanctions were suspended and relations between the countries were reinstated in June 1999, shortly after Blair’s formative Chicago address on “international community.” Qadhafi in turn, issued a clear denunciation of terrorism: extremist organisations and training camps were expelled from Libya, ties to Palestinian militants were severed, and terror suspects extradited to Egypt, Yemen, and Jordan.56 In late 2003, while US and UK forces were laying the foundations for governance in ‘liberated’ post-Saddam Iraq, Qadhafi ventured further restitution in the form of a mea culpa (and some £2.7 billion compensation) for the Pan AM bombing alongside a pledge to abandon his WMD program.57 A major boost to the credibility of the Coalition’s ailing WMD platform in Iraq, the latter agreement appeared to have been brokered by Qadhafi’s son, Saif Al Islam who had reportedly approached MI6 to announce his father’s preparedness to comply with US and UK demands.58 Indeed, the Colonel’s son, then studying at the London School of Economics, was rapidly assuming traction in Britain as the face of regime reform. When later Libya was elected to the UN Commission on Human Rights, to the umbrage of many Western states, Saif defended the move, describing the post as an opportunity to “embarrass Middle Eastern governments into improving [their bad] record”.59

57 Kaplan, “How Libya Got Off the List”,  
58 Achcar, The People Want, 237.  
New Labour representatives likewise claimed that monitoring and reforming human rights in Libya was central to London’s “in from the cold” strategy toward regional despots: a diplomatic approach now underpinned by a proven Western willingness to deploy force.\textsuperscript{60} British cooperation in developing education, culture, health, judicial reform and other goals of political transformation in Libya was henceforth identified as a key term of ending Qadhafi’s isolation. Also pivotal, if less touted by Blair, were increasingly lucrative commercial ties between Libya and Britain (among other countries), yielding a billion-dollar contract for oil and gas drilling by BP and later exports of some £165 million by the British military manufacturer General Dynamics.\textsuperscript{61}

Subsequent expressions of concern over Qadhafi’s routine violation of human rights were met by officials with an emphasis on London’s attempts to both apply pressure and support Tripoli in reform, including through collaboration in a constitution-drafting project and campaigns by Saif’s ‘independent’ Qadhafi International Foundation for Charitable Organisations.\textsuperscript{62} (Indeed, so gilded was Blair’s espoused faith in the Qadhafi regime, that he publicly touted Saif’s standing as a “family friend.”\textsuperscript{63}) It was only in a post-Iraq environment, Blair insisted, that such concessions on terror, human rights and weapons could be extracted from the Libyan regime. As the PM noted in a defensive 2004 address, promulgating progress on Libya as an outcome of the Coalition campaign in Iraq, “when they talk, as they do now, of diplomacy coming back into fashion in respect of Iran or North Korea or Libya, do they seriously think that diplomacy alone has brought about this change?”\textsuperscript{64} Likewise, Blair insisted that democratic ideals remained at the core of efforts to draw dictatorships back into international diplomacy, through reiterating that “the essence of a community is common rights and responsibilities.”\textsuperscript{65}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item As Achcar notes, it was Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi who perhaps developed the closest and most lucrative relationship with Qadhafi. Achcar, \textit{The People Want}, 240.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Others in Britain were, however, less able to discern any democratic potential in either Qadhafi or his son, nor in Blair’s attempt to rehabilitate their regime. Instead, many long-standing British-Libyan campaigners perceived that any extant leverage on issues of human rights diminished in inverse relation to the PM’s mounting praise of reform in Tripoli. As one prominent exile, active in Britain since the 1980s, explained:

We were very disappointed with way Blair handled Qadhafi. [The Labour government] essentially became advocates and allies for the regime. To Libyans who had suffered at the hands of Qadhafi, essentially what it said was ‘it doesn’t matter about democracy and reform, as long as you take care of our commercial interests and cut the deals.’ We were very concerned that would make Qadhafi more oppressive inside Libya once he got Western support, because he would then have absolutely no incentive to change domestically.⁶⁶

Indeed, following the resumption of British-Libyan diplomacy, there was a reported sense that lobbying by dissidents was eclipsed in official spheres by reformist posturing from regime representatives such as Saif. As another exile recounted, “no attention was paid to efforts inside Britain, and relations on both sides were driven by limited commercial and political interests. Saif’s motives were hidden under a thin veneer of sophistication, but clearly were not benign at all.”⁶⁷ Despite contesting this façade, many British-Libyans nonetheless endorsed Blair’s claims that the Iraq campaign had partly compelled Qadhafi to action. Among them, one Manchester-based opposition leader agreed that, “at the time it was appropriate to get Qadhafi because of his nuclear ambitions…Because we invaded Iraq, he was suddenly frightened. It seemed that he had learned the lessons and was shaking in his boots.”⁶⁸

This enhanced diplomatic engagement with Tripoli was, however, perceived in the longer-term to have been to the detriment of human rights inside Libya. A widely-held view among British-Libyans, this dynamic was appraised by one exile who detailed that: “suddenly they became friends, and as long as Blair could do business in Libya, Qadhafi was free to kill [all the dissidents]. Both he and Saif were making all these promises to secure their own legacy. If they knew they could stay in power, they could

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⁶⁶ Interview with Amr, Knightsbridge, 12 January 2013.
⁶⁷ Ibid.
⁶⁸ Interview with Saad Essadeg, Manchester, 6 December 2012.
afford to put on a show for Britain and the West. But Blair knew exactly what Qadhafi was about.\textsuperscript{69}

Indeed, the PM’s subjective motives notwithstanding, on a public level the Libyan leader was vested with international credibility over the post-Iraq years such that after three decades’ isolation, Tripoli began to emerge anew as one the West's most promising allies in the region. Qadhafi and his son, then under tutelage at LSE from the prominent democratisation theorist, David Held, in turn welcomed local and foreign investors, encouraged Libyans to travel abroad and laid the groundwork for modernising reforms. In 2007, Blair made a second visit to Libya, taking in the Colonel’s home region of Sirte\textsuperscript{70} to declare British-Libyan relations "completely transformed"\textsuperscript{71}. (The tour also saw the ratification of exploratory oil and gas contracts alongside British air-defence and missile systems sales to the regime.) While Iraq descended further into a violent quagmire over coming months, seminal ‘Third Way’ thinker Anthony Giddens hailed Libya as the new outpost of democracy in the region. As he wrote in The Guardian: “as far as one-party states go, Libya is not especially repressive. Gadafy seems genuinely popular. If he is sincere in wanting change, as I think he is, then he could play a role in muting conflict that might otherwise arise as modernisation takes hold. My ideal future for Libya in two or three decades time would be a Norway of North Africa: prosperous, egalitarian and forward looking.”\textsuperscript{72}

**Legitimate aspirations: the diaspora and the revolution**

Any such potential could nonetheless be cast off as readily as Blair's Third Way by the nascent Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government after 2010. With the toppling of presidents in Tunisia and Egypt in the first months of 2011 appearing to signify the transformative power of popular mobilisation,\textsuperscript{73} Cameron too appeared intent on chartering his own new and progressive course in response to the captivating

\textsuperscript{69}ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} As Brian McQuinn notes, there is a common misconception that Sirte is Qadhafi’s hometown, which is actually some fifty miles south of that city. See Brian McQuinn, “Assessing (In)security after the Arab Spring: The Case of Libya”, *Political Science and Politics* 46(4) (2013): 716.
\textsuperscript{73} Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 5.
events in the region. The PM’s February visit to Kuwait coincided with an award
ceremony to mark the 20th anniversary of the First Gulf war (the former PM Sir John
Major attended alongside) and Cameron embraced the occasion to share his
observations with Gulf leaders assembled at the parliament – namely that:

now, once again, this region is the epicentre of momentous changes, but pursued in a very
different way. History is sweeping through your neighbourhood. Not as a result of force and
violence, but by people seeking their rights, and in the vast majority of cases doing so peacefully
and bravely. Across the Arab World, aspirations are stirring which have lain dormant.\textsuperscript{74}

The previous day, Cameron had become the first world leader to visit post-
revolution Egypt, after a last-minute tacking of the country onto his Gulf tour.
Making an address at Cairo’s iconic Tahrir Square, the PM praised the
moderate, non-ideological "movements of the people" that were seeking to
realise the popular “hunger” for freedom across the region.\textsuperscript{75} Simultaneously, he
was careful to distance himself from the ethical and strategic failings that had
defined his predecessors’ approach to democratisation in the region, including
allegiances with the deposed Mubarak. Indeed, his pronouncements suggested a
Conservative conversion from the nationalist isolationism of Thatcher-era
foreign policy to a new brand of progressive internationalism.\textsuperscript{76} Yet contrasting
the swathe of democratic universals espoused on both sides of the Atlantic under
Blair, Cameron now argued that democratisation must be pursued with an
element of localism: a respect for “particular culture” and an understanding that
“democracy is a process not an event.”\textsuperscript{77} He disparaged the narrow Western
approach which had long-since held that Arabs and Muslims “don’t do
democracy” and fostered policies of stability over freedom accordingly. At the
same time, he eschewed the ardour of an implicitly-Blairite liberal
interventionism which sought democracy in fire-power or sham elections. As he
told Cairo reporters, "I am not a naive neocon who thinks you can drop

\textsuperscript{74}Cameron, “Speech to the National Assembly”, Kuwait.
\textsuperscript{75}Nicholas Watt, “Cameron says UK prejudiced for believing Muslims cannot manage democracy”, \textit{The Guardian}, 22 February 2011 [accessed 4 February 2013].
\textsuperscript{76}Kirsty McNeill, “There’s trouble abroad: David Cameron is a foreign policy prisoner”, \textit{Fabian Society}, 12 May 2014 at: http://www.fabians.org.uk/theres-trouble-abroad-david-cameron-is-a-foreign-policy-prisoner [accessed 14 May 2014].
\textsuperscript{77}Cameron, “Speech to the National Assembly”, Kuwait.
democracy out of an aeroplane at 40,000ft or that, simply by holding an election, you have satisfied the needs of democracy.”78 Instead, the PM propounded a more values-based foreign policy, advocating gradual reform while condemning violence and habitual Western support for authoritarian regimes. (Though many of Britain’s most faithful Gulf oppressors were not privy to visits on his tour, Cameron’s Kuwait address served as tacit acknowledgment of duplicitous practices in the region.) As he explained: “our interests lie in upholding our values – in insisting on the right to peaceful protest. These are not just our values, but the entitlement of people everywhere; of people in Tahrir Square as much as Trafalgar Square….The whole world has been shocked in the last few days by the appalling violence which the authorities in Libya have unleashed on their own people. Violence is not the answer to people’s legitimate aspirations.”79

Behind this decisive rhetoric, however, the formulation of Britain’s response to the sudden advent of protest in the region had been more ambivalent. Accounts by Cabinet ministers in the months preceding the fall of the North African leaders indicated a degree of official indecision around the likely trajectory of the protests, with policy-makers in London deemed by some markedly out-of-step with political currents on the ground.80 (This critique was underscored by a telegram from Britain’s Tunisian ambassador a month prior to the revolution, depicting the country as a pacific beacon of stability.81) Nonetheless, Cameron’s eleventh-hour decision to deliver a personal message of congratulations to protestors appeared to place Britain firmly on the side of democratic transformation. The PM’s express scepticism toward the Iraq campaign also implied a renunciation of interference in local struggles that put him on equal footing

79 Cameron, Speech to the National Assembly, Kuwait.
80 Claims that “the Foreign Office completely misread the Arab spring” were likewise evident in official divisions over Britain’s response to Egypt, where some argued that a failure to support Tahrir’s protestors would alienate Britain from Egyptians. Other officials were more reticent to sever ties with Mubarak, preferring cautious adherence to a policy of “better the devil you knew”. See: Patrick Wintour and Nicholas Watt, “David Cameron’s Libyan war: why the PM felt Gaddafi had to be stopped”, The Guardian, 3 October 2011 at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/oct/02/david-cameron-libyan-war-analysis [accessed 4 February 2013].
81 Wintour and Watt, “David Cameron’s Libyan war”.
with his American counterpart, Obama, who had similarly claimed on taking office that Western nations "cannot impose a military solution" on "someone else's civil war".82

Only weeks after Cameron’s address, however, and this time at London’s behest, both leaders found themselves edging toward the third military intervention in a Muslim-majority country in the region in the space of a decade, in what some perceived as the very resurrection of a doctrine of liberal interventionism.83 By the time the PM flew back from the Gulf, UK officials had announced the temporary closure of the British embassy in Tripoli, increasingly unstable with the advance of Qadhafi’s opponents from rebel-controlled eastern provinces. Twenty-four hours later on 26 February, the UN Security Council cast a unanimous vote in favour of a resolution against the Libyan dictator.84 The motion imposed sanctions in the form of an arms embargo and asset freeze and proposed that Qadhafi be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged crimes against humanity – punitive measures that were backed by Washington’s firm call for the Colonel to "step down from power and leave.”85 With efforts escalating to evacuate British nationals from the country the following day, Cameron delivered his own official address to the Commons on events in Libya. Emphasising a mounting humanitarian crisis and failed regime legitimacy, the PM insisted that “for the future of Libya and its people, Colonel Qadhafi’s regime must end and he must leave.”86 Likening the tumult of the “Arab Spring” to Europe’s upheavals in 1989 (a “moment when history turns a page”), Cameron emphasised the need for similar, locally-driven political change. In this instance, he noted, Libyans’ present political aspirations dovetailed with those of a more universal democratic ethos shared by London. As he explained:

While it is not for us to dictate how each country should meet the aspirations of its people, we must not remain silent in our belief that freedom and the rule of law are what best guarantee human progress and economic success. They are not British or western values – but the values of human beings everywhere…. Those of us who believe in democracy and open societies should be clear: this is a precious moment of opportunity. As the inspiring Opposition leaders I met in Tahrir Square said to me last week: We now have the opportunity of achieving freedoms that you in Britain take for granted. I am determined that Britain will not let them down.87

The same day, Ministry of Defence officials were instructed by the PM to begin drafting plans for a no-fly-zone (NFZ), a directive given by French President Nicolas Sarkozy to his own government five days earlier. The deployment of military assets by the international community would not, Cameron explained to the Commons, be ruled out in preventing Qadhafi’s intolerable use of force against his own people. So too, the PM explained, it would be Britain at the vanguard of these initiatives.

On the streets of Britain’s cities, many were already taking the lead in pressing for coordinated international action against Qadhafi. Inside Libya too, some of the earliest mobilisations of the uprising had taken place through sustained contact, if not direct participation, from exiles and expatriates in the UK who overwhelming emerged on the side of the anti-Qadhafi camp.88 A proliferation of social media platforms, many hosted by diaspora activists, and direct channels of communication between Libya and the UK saw developments on the ground in the country paralleled by opposition campaigns in Britain. Demonstrations across Libya on the seminal 17 February ‘Day of Rage’ (inspired by protests in Tunisia and Egypt and scheduled to mark the anniversary of a suppressed uprising in Benghazi in 200689) were mirrored by activities convened by the diaspora in Britain. Hundreds turned out in solidarity with revolutionaries at the Libyan embassy in London (now relocated to Knightsbridge), calling for an end to Qadhafi’s rule as well as Britain’s alliance thereto. Among protestors’ demands were the cessation of trade relations and intelligence cooperation between Britain and Libya, which

87 “Prime Minister’s statement on Libya”, 2011.
included a Memorandum of Understanding relating to the torture of Libyans forcibly repatriated from Britain. This revolutionary zeal was contested by a smaller contingent of Qadhafi supporters, who assembled in counter-protest at the embassy, bearing patriotic banners and distributing copies of the Colonel’s famed ‘Green Book’. While many in the opposition camp claimed that pro-regime protestors had been paid to attend, others acknowledged the existence of a minority of genuine Qadhafi loyalists in the diaspora. As Al Gumaty of the nascent NTC body noted at the time, “Qadhafi enjoys some support amongst Libyans in Britain, with pockets in Cardiff, Manchester and London. They are largely associated with the Libyan Revolutionary Committee movement and intelligence services, using the embassy as a hub. There is support, but it is limited.”

In defiance of this transnational regime spectre, the net effect of Libya’s domestic uprising emerged in the consolidation of an ever-larger, more mobile and more united body of support for the revolution in the diaspora. Indeed, many British-Libyans recounted a palpable sense that habitual mistrust and divisions among communities diminished as efforts cohered around the anti-Qadhafi campaign. Describing the response by Manchester-based Libyans, Hisham noted that:

“people are not afraid now. More than that, they are proud and happy. They are coming together to know one another. You’re no longer afraid when you meet a Libyan you don’t know - you shake hands, ask where they’re from and generally make friends much more easily. A year, or even four or five months ago, we would never have done that.”

Where Qadhafi’s prolonged terrorising had served to politicise so many first-generation Libyans in the UK, for British-born children of dissidents and exiles, physical and psychological distance from the country appeared to have largely alienated them from

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political culture. The unifying effects of the campaign were thus most pronounced amongst second-generation and young British-Libyans, hitherto disengaged from local affairs. As one young woman noted at a Libyan awareness fair in Manchester in the early days of the uprisings, “doing this gives me an opportunity to be more Libyan, and feel like I am part of Libya, which I have never felt before.” Community fundraising and protest activities such as these combined with social-media to imbue events inside Libya with a new immediacy, proximity and weight and to thereby engage a more technologically-literate generation of British-Libyans in the conflict, often with a frontline role. Domestically, the tepid modernising reforms of Saif Al Islam over preceding years had eased restrictions on internet censorship in Libya, also fostering greater engagement with global democratic and civil norms among many estranged from the ideological extremism of their leader. This was magnified among a generation of post-1969 youths who shared neither Qadhafi’s nationalist ideals nor the anti-colonial experience which had become the motif of his rule.

Diaspora oppositionists were swift to capitalise on these technological and by extension, socio-political shifts. As in other national struggles of the Arab uprisings, the Libyan campaign gained significant local and international momentum through online dissemination. Originally from the opposition stronghold of Benghazi, the young UK-based Saad recalled being drawn into the uprising after seeing the body of a friend displayed in rebel footage of a mortuary, while watching the evening news at his home in Dorset. As he explained, “he was a close friend and my room-mate in Bournemouth where we studied together. I was just watching the news one night and I saw him lying there.” With journalistic access restricted and regular media blackouts in the conflict’s early phases, experiences such as this drew technologically-savvy Libyans abroad into the campaign as nodes for the international transmission of images and information. As well as providing vital updates for friends and family in the diaspora, many social-media activists in the UK became trusted news sources for foreign media. As Saad explains: “there were about five or six people [in the internet cafe] working hard every night. We talked to people who managed to get the internet through satellites… Some of

94 Ash, “The Uprising’s Impact”.
96 Cited in Ash, “The Uprising’s Impact”.

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the news like BBC and Sky didn’t know about the Facebook pages… so we were downloading videos from there and sending them. I’ve seen videos that I sent myself on Al Jazeera, BBC and Sky.”

These transnational linkages swiftly opened up channels for more direct influence. The powerful culture of anti-Qadhafi activism in the diaspora was soon reflected in the repatriation of British-Libyans, both first and second-generation, to take up leadership roles or indeed arms in the rebellion. The fluency of returned diaspora activists in the official language of the West, as well as in the culture of its media and political institutions, became crucial assets to the opposition campaign as the conflict inside Libya escalated. From as early as February, expatriate-led media centres were established in rebel hubs in Benghazi and the Nafusa mountains outside Tripoli to project the revolution to the international community. The British-born, 29-year old Abdul was among the first to return to revolutionary Libya, and as the head of a military media unit in Benghazi, became a key contact for both press and foreign officials. A prominent Muslim Brotherhood exile, Abdul’s father had been subjected to imprisonment and assassination attempts by the Qadhafi regime across multiple countries, and their family name was readily associated with dissent. Abdul nonetheless recalled that when visiting friends in post-revolution Egypt in February 2011, with the conflict in Libya intensifying, the decision to cross the border was simple. As he later explained, speaking at a West London cafe: “without a shadow of a doubt I wanted to go. The only reason I grew up in this country was because of that man. He tried to kill my father - why would I give up a chance to take a shot back?”

For older members of the diaspora too, the impulse for restitution, or indeed retribution, was compelling. Abduladim al Mayet, a Tripolitanian exile of over 30 years, had also been targeted by Qadhafi’s assassination squads in London after fleeing Libya in the 1980s and by March 2011, was inspired to return to Libya with his two British-born sons to help wrest the capital from the Colonel’s forces. As Abduladim explained to an Al Jazeera documentary crew while preparing to travel to Libya from Britain, "when we

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97 Cited in Ash, “The Uprising’s Impact”.
lived in Tripoli, Qadhafi took my house. He took it by force - he took everything from us. I would be very happy if I died there fighting for my country. If we successfully liberate Tripoli, it will be fantastic.”100 For his son, Ibrahim, who had spent most his life in London, affinity with the Libyan struggle was coupled with awareness of the relative privilege that separated him from those inside the country. As he noted: “growing up in the UK, I was always aware of my identity as a Libyan and an Englishman, but I didn't live there so I didn't feel the reality of growing up in Libya in the really difficult times. While I was enjoying a good life, my family in Libya had to queue for clothes, they had rations for food, they had absolutely no luxuries. They were really trapped; they were under siege in the country.”101

Within months of Libya’s first protests, the Al Mayets had convened a campaign to deliver a convoy of aid to fighters outside Tripoli, as well as to refugee camps on the Tunisian border, with supplies including two ambulances and an armoured vehicle which they drove from Britain to Libya in careful coordination with the rebel opposition. As Al Gamaty, who assisted in the campaign, explained at the time, “the way we look at it is that if people inside Libya are paying with their blood, then the least the Libyans outside Libya could do is to pay with their money, their sweat, their energy and their time and I think that has been in abundance.”102 The vast sense of indebtedness among many exiles was equalled by an attachment to their former home country – a sentiment encapsulated by another driver of the convoy who commented after arriving in opposition-held Libya, that: “I lived in Croydon nearly fifteen years. I enjoyed life with my children and family there. But Libya is bigger than anything else, anything in my life. Bigger than even my son, my daughter, my wife, my mother or father. That is my feeling now.”103

The continued vitality of these ties, both political and emotional, for many recast the 2011 uprising as a fresh opportunity to realise the transformation that had eluded them at the time of their exile from Libya. Some older diaspora activists even recounted

101Ibrahim Al Mayet in “The Long Road”.
102Cited in “The Long Road”.
103Cited in “The Long Road”.

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feeling their revolutionary ambition exponentially reinvigorated by the nascent youth movement. As one noted of this new transnational spirit of anti-Qadhafi fervour, “this is a young person’s revolution, but they are blowing the spirit into us again. We are young in our hearts now.”\textsuperscript{104} Indeed, the renewed politicisation of the diaspora produced a sense among some returnees to Libya that expatriates were often more ambitiously-patriotic than their local counterparts. As Abdul observed of his often exasperating experience working with rebels in eastern Libya, “what was disappointing was that that the Libyans in the diaspora were a lot more patriotic than the ones on the ground. Because of what we had been through in exile and our determination to go back, we were more political.”\textsuperscript{105}

Where these modes of diaspora participation in the Libya uprising were spurred by histories of injustice, their approaches to Western involvement in the conflict were equally shaped by a sense of past wrongdoing. Despite rebel victories against Qadhafi forces in the first weeks of battle, namely in Misrata, the scarcity of resources and zeal of the regime crackdown quickly reinforced the asymmetry of the battle. The Colonel’s famed 23 February diatribe, which called for a “rat hunt” against opposition forces “to purge Libya inch by inch, house by house, alley by alley”, likewise left little ambiguity among international leaders about the determination with which Qadhafi would cling to power, in particular his Tripoli stronghold.\textsuperscript{106} This violent (and often deranged) capacity served to enhance activists’ leverage in pressing Western officials beyond mere condemnatory words in a test of international readiness to break ranks with the dictator. From 20 February, the Manchester-based Libyan community staged daily protests outside the BBC headquarters, with pickets coordinated at other UK sites, including outside Downing Street and the French, Qatari and Turkish Embassies. Press briefings by activists meanwhile sought to fill the void produced by media blackouts inside Libya and called on foreign governments to align behind the rebels. As Cameron made his rounds of Egypt and the Gulf, a press-release from a British-Libyan coalition provided a sobering context for his official pronouncements:

\textsuperscript{104} Cited in “The Long Road”.
\textsuperscript{105} Interview with Abdul, London, 9 November 2012.
The Libyan people are looking to the free world to see who their friends are. All they see are the supposed ‘civilised world’ sitting on the fence waiting to see the outcome, ready to back the winner. In the past, Qadhafi has committed atrocities all over the world, after periods of sanctions and diplomatic cessation, Libya’s petro dollars have ensured he can sacrifice a pawn and come back into the international fold. His atrocities have always been tolerated in the past, as he believes this latest episode will also be. It is this redundant theory that is empowering his regime now. The international community must make a clear and strong stand to disarm him of this belief.  

Inside Libya, diaspora and local forces were concurrently coalescing into a political front through which the demands of the Libyan population might be represented to the outside world, an international “face of the revolution”. On 27 February, a coalition of opposition figures, including from the diaspora, from East and Western Libya announced the formation of a new council in support of revolutionary aims, to be based in Benghazi. Within days of its establishment, a spokesman for the body, later called the National Transitional Council (NTC), informed the foreign media that the organisation saw no room for negotiation with Qadhafi’s government - the Colonel must go. Such self-appointed authority to represent Libya’s miscellany of geographically and culturally-dispersed communities, among them defined tribal, ethnic and other loyalties that had remained disaggregated under Qadhafi’s disaffecting “Green Revolution”, was bold. This was magnified amid the revolutionary upheaval of early 2011, in which these various sub-national identities began to embrace their own military and political agendas - as would later become more readily apparent.  

Yet despite this fragmentation, a broader consensus appeared at that time to form among Libyans across the country and abroad, that there would be little possibility of achieving the stated ends of revolution in the absence of international support. Unlike in Tunisia or Egypt, there was no question that Qadhafi would abdicate without a full-scale, armed

109 For more on these various identities and their interaction with revolutionary dynamic see: al-Werfalli, Political Alienation in Libya; Chorin, Exit the Colonel; and Peter Cole and Brian MacQuinn, eds, The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath (London: Hurst, 2015).
110 Cole and McQuinn, The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath, 4.
This widespread conviction about the necessity of force was perhaps rooted in Libyans’ empirical awareness of Qadhafi’s own proven ruthlessness in this arena – a commitment to violence which for most precluded any notion of reform or peaceful resistance. While this shared recognition spurred some to action, others in the diaspora were immobilised, fearing retributive force against friends and relatives inside the country. As one young diaspora woman noted in mid-February, “you have to understand Qadhafi - he will not hesitate to use collective punishment, to strike at those dear to you.” The prevailing sense of the urgency of foreign assistance which flowed from this awareness from the outset of the uprising, was described by a London-based exiled writer and historian, Faraj, who worked closely with both the NTC and Downing Street and explained that: “we knew the man was mad and violent and would use anything in the book to put down the opposition. We were clear that we wanted an intervention and at the outset we were outraged because there was none of it.”

Accordingly, in early March, Faraj made the first of many media appearances on BBC’s Newsnight programme to discuss developments inside Libya where his brother had just been shot in an armed confrontation with Qadhafi loyalists. Later recounting his interaction with co-panelist, the former British diplomat Sir Richard Dalton who had been sent to Tripoli as ambassador with resumed relations in 1999, Faraj explained that, “I said to him, ‘you are enjoying this aren’t you? Qadhafi is slaughtering us and you are in bed with this man, carrying on Tony Blair’s legacy’. The British supported Hosni Mubarak until the very last moment, and we knew that this could be the same in Libya.”

Activists were, as evident in Faraj’s words, thus astute to the need to seize the tide of shifting international discourse on the region in order to capitalise on any equivocation in London. Where Cameron had pronounced “the Arab Spring” a chance for people of the MENA to realise their long-suppressed democratic aspirations, it was equally apparent to British-Libyans that it reflected an opportunity for Western governments to

112 Al-Werfalli, Political Alienation in Libya, 201.
113 Interview with Maher, Melbourne, 16 January 2014.
114 Interview with Faraj, Knightsbridge, 3 January 2013.
115 Ibid.
rehabilitate their own tarnished political records in the region. Thus, as British and French leaders prepared to present their NFZ proposals to the UN in the first weeks of March, Libyans were also prompt to assert (publicly and behind closed doors) the stakes of the campaign for London. As Najem explained of a meeting with Cameron and Foreign Secretary Hague amid this frenetic diplomatic activity, “I knew that they felt guilty, that they were struggling through a kind of redemption, so I said to them: ‘tell us please, which side you are on. Are you on the side of people who want to be free and democratic, or are you on the side of dictatorship, oil, terrorism and blackmail? Tell us clearly.’”

All necessary measures: intervention in Libya

Indeed, it was seemingly anxieties about further culpability for an imminent butchery of a vast scale in Libya which ultimately induced foreign governments to action. With the regime offensive mounting by 12 March, the Arab League called on the UNSC to take measures to implement the requested NFZ. And when the motion was passed on March 17 in the form of resolution 1973, no party to the vote appeared willing to bear the burden of a possible atrocity by opposing it. The motion encompassed the first NFZ explicitly authorised for civilian protection purposes, sanctioning “all necessary measures” to defend those under threat of attack in the country, most especially in Benghazi, toward which the Colonel’s forces were advancing. The language of 1973 was more expansive than the two previous applications of the NFZ principle in Bosnia and Iraqi Kurdistan, but the resolution explicitly ruled out the deployment of ground troops. According to British and EU stipulations, the criteria of a demonstrable need, a clear legal basis and broad regional support had all been met, and ten of the 15-member Security Council voted in favour of the resolution.

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116 Interview with Faraj, Knightsbridge, 3 January 2013.
117 Among the five abstentions were China, Russia and Germany. See Achcar, The People Want, 244.
The following day, as British, French and US aircraft (the latter force now “leading from behind”\textsuperscript{120}) departed for Libya, Cameron formally announced ‘Operation Odyssey Dawn’ to the Commons in a statement woven with legal and moral justification. As he noted of the pending “humanitarian catastrophe” which propelled the Anglo-French alliance into North Africa, “intervening in another country’s affairs should not be undertaken save in quite exceptional circumstances.”\textsuperscript{121} He likewise outlined the three-fold test for civilian protection, emphasising that “the central purpose of this resolution is to end the violence, protect civilians and allow the people of Libya to determine their own future.” The PM's philanthropic overtures were at the same time balanced by a strong appeal to Britain’s own interest in securing a stable and democratic Libya, and he concluded with a pledge to work with the armed services to ensure that his government did “the right thing for the people of Libya, for the people of our country and for the world as a whole.”

Though no direct reference was made to Iraq, the shadow of Britain’s most recent campaign in the region was plain. Lest any allusions be lost, Cameron made a second public appearance twenty-four hours later to state the case explicitly: Libya would not be another Iraq. Speaking this time at the Conservative Party conference in Perth, the PM explained that, "the UN resolution which we…helped to draft makes it clear there will be no foreign occupation of Libya. The people of Libya don't want that, neither do the UK and neither do our allies. It's not going to happen."\textsuperscript{122} During what would become a six-hour parliamentary debate on the campaign just days later, the PM was nonetheless once again compelled to iterate his disclaimer and expressly informed the House that “this is not another Iraq”, but instead a campaign that was “necessary, legal and right.”\textsuperscript{123} The distinction with Blair’s ‘Operation Iraqi Freedom’ ran deeper, however, he explained:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Prime Minister’s statement on the UN Security Council Resolution on Libya, House of Commons, 18 March 2011 at \url{Gov.Uk}: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-the-un-security-council-resolution-on-libya
  \item \textsuperscript{123} United Kingdom, \textit{Hansard Parliamentary Debates}, House of Commons, Col. 680, 21 March 2011.
\end{itemize}
It is not just that this time, the action has the full, unambiguous legal authority of the United Nations nor that it is backed by Arab countries and a broad international coalition, but that millions in the Arab world want to know that the UN, the US, the UK, the French and the international community care about their suffering and their oppression. The Arab world has asked us to act with it to stop the slaughter, and that is why we should answer that call.\textsuperscript{124}

Despite this rhetorical legwork and the crucial Arab League backing, analogies with Downing Street’s past adventurism proliferated. As was swiftly noted, the spectacle of Western attack aircraft targeting Libyan command and control facilities bore little resemblance to humanitarian protection.\textsuperscript{125} Rather, the strategic ambiguity of the mandate quickly evoked comparisons with the messier aspects of Britain's protracted 1999 operation in Yugoslavia, while the failure of participating governments to stipulate the duration of their campaign in Libya or any post-intervention responsibilities evoked former laborious engagements in Afghanistan, and indeed, Iraq.\textsuperscript{126} Couched in hardening language, Cameron’s self-proclaimed “liberal conservatism” appeared to many increasingly indistinguishable from Blair’s maligned liberal interventionism. Although the Conservative PM had not gone so far as to indulge in the idealism of Blair’s “moral force”, his plea to protect freedom through militarism did not indicate a dramatic about-turn from the values of his predecessor. The twin pillars of hard-nosed pragmatism and moralism appeared as easily paired by Cameron as in Blair’s orations, while the lack of clarity around his vision for post-Qadhafi Libya implied an airbrushing of any potential conflict between these two values in Britain's role in the country. As an editorial in The Economist noted of Cameron’s argument for the necessity, legality and morality of the campaign, the PM’s case seemed to comprise of a “not like Blair, definitely not like Blair—and a rather Blair-like argument for war”.\textsuperscript{127}

However, other observers of these machinations suggested that the PM was conscientious to avoid the errors of Iraq in his policy development as well as his

\textsuperscript{124}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} Dunne and Gifkins, “Libya and the State of Intervention”, 521.
discourse. By contrast to the elite cabal who came to preside over Blair’s foreign policy machinery – what Lord Butler famously critiqued as the “sofa government” – Cameron had from his first day in office directed the British Attorney-General to attend all meetings of the National Security Council, overseeing matters of foreign and security policy in their entirety. This new protocol extended to the development of the Libya campaign, with written advice from the Attorney-General issued to all members of the cabinet from its earliest meetings. As one minister noted of this new practice, “[it] marked a very different sentiment to what happened over Iraq, for example, where the Attorney-General had to be kept in a cell and beaten half to death in order that he could deliver the right view.” Other ministers relayed the PM’s determination to avoid a Blair-style failure at the UN through more a more rigorous commitment to multilateralism. A key facet of this approach was securing endorsement from the Arab League, accomplished when Hague afforded the body’s Egyptian Secretary-General, Amr Moussa, guarantees against ground troops or occupying forces. Indeed, the symbolism of Arab League support for strikes by a Western alliance against one of its own member in the context of post-Iraq hostility was seen by some as equal in import to UN backing. As one Whitehall source described of the effect of this twofold authorisation, "it was no longer this red herring of a no-fly-zone…. It was therefore completely transformed. So you have moral and political authority from the Arab League and wide-ranging legal authority from the UN.”

Where the need for rigorous avoidance of Iraq precedents instilled vigilance in many in Whitehall, it was the memory of other invidious foreign policy scenarios which heightened the urgency for others in Cabinet. As one senior official described of the week leading up to the UN vote, “there was a very strong feeling at the top of this government that Benghazi could very easily become the Srebrenica of our watch. The generation that has lived through Bosnia is not going to be the ‘pull up the drawbridge’ generation.” Indeed, the PM’s public addresses specifically invoked an atrocity of the

130Cited in Wintour and Watt, “David Cameron’s Libyan War”.
131Ibid.
132Cited in Wintour and Watt, “David Cameron’s Libyan War”.
same scale as the notorious 1995 incident, varnishing the legitimacy of his campaign as Qadhafi’s crackdown mounted: not only would associations with a genuine humanitarian intervention distinguish the Libyan incursion from the gratuitousness of Operation Iraqi Freedom, it also connoted the moral high-ground associated with those more favourable campaign in the former Yugoslavia. The humanitarian imperative of the joint action in Libya was thus chorused at a Paris summit convened by Sarkozy and including representatives of the UN and Arab League, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as the first British and French planes departed for North Africa. Where Sarkozy emphasised a “peaceful civilian population that is seeking only to be able to choose its own destiny”, Cameron concluded that “the time for action has come. It needs to be urgent, we have to enforce the will of the United Nations and we cannot allow the slaughter of civilians to continue.”

Those with greater stakes in Libya’s fledgling revolution were similarly cognisant of the political currency to be derived from a successful humanitarian campaign in the country - most especially one with local endorsement. Many expatriates were thus enthusiastic to expedite action by giving substance to Cameron’s effusive claims that Libya was not Iraq and described the traction Libya’s opposition itself derived by exploiting such official anxieties in their dealings with policy-makers. Indeed, even those who had witnessed London's mercurial record with Qadhafi expressed eagerness to enlist UK backing for a revolution which might otherwise be quashed. The intervention was therefore acknowledged frankly as an opportunity of mutual benefit by its British-Libyan proponents and represented as such to Downing Street and Whitehall. As one Manchester-based exile, though disparaging the opportunism which had lead Blair to ally with Qadhafi only years earlier, explained of the advantages to both parties of engaging British support in Libya: “the West saw the embarrassment Qadhafi had become. He was bad news for anyone friendly with him and Britain realised it was time for change in their strategy in the region. I think was a good opportunity for any

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Western politician with intelligence and some conscience to take that stand, especially when people were crying out for help - it was in everybody's interest.”

In turn, many noted that due credence was given to exiles and others with first-hand expertise of Libya by policy-makers scrupulous about the need to convey Libyan ownership of the campaign. Blair’s manifest disinterest in expert advice on Iraq from any in Whitehall, diaspora or academia, was contrasted by apparently active measures on the part of Cameron’s cabinet to seek such contributions. Convening meetings in Downing Street with Libya authorities, including exiles, for formal briefings on the terrain into which he proposed to embark, Cameron was described by diaspora interlocutors as conscientious in his efforts. Official accounts suggesting that advice to the PM emphasised the authenticity of the uprisings as a national democratic revolt, while giving assurances about the improbability of a descent into tribal or civil war, were likewise corroborated by some British-Libyans. As one expatriate businessman explained of his early interactions with policy-makers:

We made a concerted effort to engage the establishment - to reassure them that the real face of Libyans was the same as that of the opposition they were agreeing to support; and to allay fears of opening a can of worms like in Iraq. It was clear that there were two main fears about intervening – Qadhafi refusing to go and his replacement by an extremist Islamist government – and we made it clear that these were unfounded.

On the ground in Libya, meanwhile, returned diaspora activists were similarly unambiguous about the active nature of Western interest in their campaign and the reciprocal enthusiasm with which offers of military and political assistance were received by rebels. With the NTC still taking shape inside the country in February 2011, London and Washington had already reportedly ventured contact with those leading the uprising. Among them was the young Abdul who noted the comic circumstances of his first contact with Western officials from his base in Benghazi: “It was a very unusual situation. I was searching for an arms dealer because we desperately needed weapons from anywhere, so I threw my number out onto the internet and all sorts of forums. Somehow, the US government got hold of it and called me. I answered the phone and thought it was a US arms dealer. But no, it was a US ambassador, who said he was

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135 Interview with Saad Essadeg, Manchester, 6 December 2012.
calling on behalf of the White House!”

Despite the ensuing voluntary coordination, diaspora representatives were also clear about terms on which Western involvement was first sought, namely, that they too had learned from the Iraq experience. Overwhelmingly, it was emphasised by British-Libyans that the NATO campaign was one that was both requested and supported by the local population. So too, where diaspora alliances became key actors in catalysing the intervention amongst Western leaders, they also expressed having maintained vigilance to risks of the uprising being co-opted by intervening forces. Many who were in contact with British authorities recounted that the terms and limitations of Western involvement were expressly delineated in their earliest dealings, as the historian Faraj explained, “we wanted a benign intervention, not an Iraqi-style campaign. It was the opposite of the Iraqi case. People were demanding intervention, but wanted it to be customised to their needs; one that was led and owned by Libyans, and with Libyans who benefited.”

Emblematic of this commitment to autonomy was the widely-articulated demand that any purported civilian protection campaign not extend to the deployment of Western ground troops. Most direct intervention of this nature was not only perceived to entail the danger of Western ‘mission-creep’, but also to harbour the potential to provoke hostility among Libyans inside the country, wary of Western interference. As was further noted by Abdulla:

We were clear about the limits and that we didn’t want boots on the ground… We've had enough hatred on both banks between Arabs and the West, and the Americans are notorious for messing these things up. So we said 'we can turn this around: do it our way and it will be safe for you and safe for us. It will restore confidence in Britain and prepare the ground for better, strategic partnerships in the future.'

(So ardent were some in the diaspora to project Libyan ownership of the intervention that they proposed in meetings with the FCO, as documented by officials, that billboards be erected around London “to thank the UK for its support and remind people

137 Interview with Abdul, London, 9 November 2012.
138 Interview with Faraj, Knightsbridge, 3 January 2013.
139 Interview with Abdulla, 2013.
of Libyan support for change in Libya”. Similarly, Khaled al Mayet, who made regular appearances in British and international media to lobby for intervention explained how local demands were publicly represented by Libyans in the UK, noting that “Many non-Libyan Arabs were warning about a Western agenda in Libya, but we were always fully aware that we wanted some form of intervention. Most Libyan people were demanding assistance but were clearly drawing the line at ground troops. We wanted action, we wanted help, but we didn’t want Iraq.”

It was this semblance of a collective and conciliatory international endeavour which the PM thus sought to consolidate at a London conference attended by some 44 foreign ministers as well as representatives of Libyan rebel forces as the battle escalated in North Africa. NATO had several days earlier announced an agreement to enforce the arms embargo against Tripoli alongside a transfer of command responsibility for the no-fly zone and all military operations in Libya pertaining to 1973. And while the London convergence appeared to raise more questions around Qadhafi’s fate than it resolved, officials appeared united in their efforts to emphasise that any action would be consensual. Regional support for the campaign was reiterated by the Prime Minister of Qatar who noted that, “the crisis in Libya is our business, it is Arab business” (as was substantiated the following month when many of the same heads convened in Doha to establish the ‘Libya Contact Group’ in a meeting co-chaired by the UK. Similarly, Foreign Office delegates praised the fledging NATO coalition as a feat of logistics and diplomacy which diverged starkly from events of the previous decade. As was noted by one FCO official, "we had bitter recent experience of military action taken on a unilateral basis. We are trying to achieve the opposite." Within forty-eight hours,

140 Excerpt from a note of a meeting between an FCO official and representatives of the Libya-British Relations Council, 28 June 2011, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, unclassified.
141 Interview with Khaled al Mayet, 16 June 2012.
NATO formally assumed command of the mission under ‘Operation Unified Protector’: for the first time its history, the organisation was at war with an Arab country.\textsuperscript{145}

Indeed, the rebel storming of Qadhafi’s fortified compound in Tripoli only several months later in August, appeared to signify the merits of an ‘anti-Iraq’ strategy for both Western and Libyan parties. Within days of the opposition’s seizing the capital, Cameron hailed the intervention as a humanitarian triumph for Western allies and an historic victory for Libyans. The final advance on the regime stronghold of Bani Walid in September likewise saw the PM extol Britain’s leading role in the mission to the House of Commons. Eschewing any related discussion of revelations the same week about Britain’s earlier role in the rendition and torture of Libyans,\textsuperscript{146} the PM announced that:

Today the Libyan people have taken their country back…We should also pay tribute to the bravery and resilience of the Libyan people themselves. This has been their revolution and none of it would have happened without them… What is clear is that the future of Libya belongs to its people. The task of the international community now is to support them as they build that future.\textsuperscript{147}

The NATO mission was deemed a “success” and the constituent elements of this apparent victory were cited approvingly by foreign policy observers, among them: the protection of civilians rebelling against an oppressive regime; necessary time and space for local forces to overthrow the dictator, and the successful involvement of international and regional partners in a burden-sharing alliance.\textsuperscript{148} The fortitude of this alliance, also widely endorsed among Arab leaders, appeared consummate later in September when the PM attended the UN General Assembly in New York to be greeted


\textsuperscript{147} “Prime Minister’s Statement on Libya”, House of Commons, 5 September 2011 at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-on-libya

by the US President extolling an “extraordinarily special relationship.”\(^{149}\) The PM and his French counterpart were received with seemingly equal enthusiasm on the streets of Benghazi the same month, when they appeared alongside NTC Chairman, Mustafa Abdul Jalil to rapturous applause.\(^{150}\) Indeed, broad affirmation that the opposition’s victory had rested on NATO participation was forthcoming from Libyans themselves (one prominent rebel leader is reported to have credited seventy per cent of the military success to the intervening forces\(^{151}\)) and there appeared little deviation from this view among the diaspora. As one commentator noted at the time, Cameron’s global standing could seemingly not have contrasted more starkly with Blair.\(^{152}\) The perceived confluence of local and foreign aims in Libya was likewise juxtaposed with the events of 2003 in affirmations of a new post-Iraq paradigm for intervention. As Fareed Zakaria noted in \textit{TIME} magazine the day of Cameron’s glowing Commons address: “the international coalition, and even the Libyan opposition, is doing pretty much the opposite of what was done in Iraq. As rough-and-ready rules of the road go, this is not a bad one to follow. The Libyan intervention offers a new model for the West. It was a humanitarian mission with strategic interests as well, support for the Arab Spring and the new aspirations of the people of the Middle East.”\(^{153}\)

Despite such appraisals of the humanitarian, strategic and democratic interests synthesised in Operation Unified Protector, detailed examination of its unfolding suggests a more fraught calculation. The relative political ease of selling campaigns of humanitarian intervention over those of regime change was underscored by flattering early comparisons of the action in Libya with that in Iraq, yet as soon became evident,

\(^{149}\) As the President stated, “obviously there is an extraordinarily special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom ... I have always found prime minister Cameron to be an outstanding partner, so I am very grateful for his friendship, his hard work, his dedication and his leadership on the global stage.” Cited in Nicholas Watt, “David Cameron outlines foreign policy philosophy – but don’t call it a doctrine”, \textit{The Guardian}, 22 September 2011 at: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/wintour-and-watt/2011/sep/22/davidcameron-hillaryclinton [accessed 30 September 2011].


\(^{152}\) Watt, “David Cameron outlines foreign policy philosophy.”

the distinction between these two aims (and their attendant moral packaging) was more ambiguous in practice. As was noted in March, shortly before a NATO missile killed Qadhafi’s youngest son and three grandchildren in their home in Tripoli, it would not have been “unreasonable to suspect that some among those who desire regime change for Libya publicly make a more palatable humanitarian case for war.”\textsuperscript{154} The obscure goals of NATO’s purported civilian protection campaign began to emerge more lucidly within the first month of airstrikes, as escalating military efforts against the recalcitrant Colonel cast doubt on the mission’s mandate. Resolution 1973 set out the core conditions of a ceasefire by the Libyan authorities, including the cessation of violence against civilians and the regime’s full compliance with international law, while stressing “the need to intensify efforts to find a solution to the crisis which responds to the legitimate demands of the Libyan people”.\textsuperscript{155} Nowhere did it specify terms related to the Colonel’s removal or abdication, and instead delegated a UN Special Envoy to Libya with “the aim of facilitating dialogue to lead to the political reforms necessary to find a peaceful and sustainable solution.”\textsuperscript{156} Yet by April 2011, Qadhafi’s departure, so ardently advocated by London and Washington in February appeared to have become a principal condition of Western involvement. During Obama’s visit to Britain the following month, the transatlantic leaders published a joint statement pledging not to depart from Libya until the terms of 1973 had been "completely complied with."

Published in The Times under the title “The Essential Relationship”, the sternly-worded article noted the leaders’ reluctant to use force, but seemed to connote a broader-ranging vision and strategy that transcended the stated aims of 1973. As it explained:

Our efforts against al-Qaeda — and our mission in Libya — are critical to the type of world that we want to build. Bin Laden’s ideology is one that has failed to take hold. Qadhafi’s reign represents the region’s past. We stand for something different. We see the prospect of democracy and universal rights taking hold in the Arab World, and it

\textsuperscript{155} Resolution 1973 in “Security Council Approves ‘No-Fly Zone’ over Libya”.
\textsuperscript{156} ibid.
fills us with confidence and a renewed commitment to an alliance based not just on interests but on values.\footnote{158ibid.}

The statement was swiftly interpreted as an indication that the allies’ civilian-protection mission had been supplanted by a more hard-nosed policy of regime change. (Indeed, recurring analogies between the ‘Arab Spring’ and fall of the Berlin Wall alongside unguarded evocations of national interest, also led some to draw direct parallels with the duo’s militant predecessors, Thatcher and Reagan.\footnote{159} Such a shift in tenor was quickly seized among the PM’s detractors as vindication of malign Western motives, with ensuing forecasts of the entry of ground-troops into North Africa. As an editorial in the \textit{New Statesmen} announced shortly afterwards: “the pretence that the NATO coalition is merely patrolling the no-fly zone over the country has been abandoned in favour of an unambiguous pursuit of regime change. The imminent deployment of Apache helicopters confirms that what was initially presented as a limited, protective action has morphed into a war of aggression.”\footnote{160}

While predictions of a ground presence by NATO troops did not come to pass in subsequent months, the significant expansion of the air campaign signified an overt step beyond authorised goals, reifying the pitfalls of a nebulous resolution. Early claims from French, British and American heads indicating that Qadhafi’s rule was no longer acceptable, were meanwhile undercut in the military campaign by strict “warning orders” from NATO and the US that their deployed forces were not to exceed the civilian protection mission.\footnote{161} Although such a rigorous limitation had been essential to garner Security Council backing for the resolution, it nonetheless left NATO’s mission without clear ends – namely, a point at which all threats to civilians would be deemed eliminated. One practical implication of this ambiguity, as was later noted, was the absence of coordination between NATO and anti-Qadhafi rebel forces themselves – a

\footnote{158ibid.}
gulf which was instead filled by liaison efforts from various member-states across Libya. The potential for a more liberal interpretation of the mandate by the latter soon manifested in the entry of various foreign coordination units into the Libyan conflict, alongside their various foreign national agendas. 162 Accordingly, the practical realisation of overarching NATO goals soon saw various parties to the alliance charged with attempting to strategically manipulate the course of the conflict – an outcome which some critiques of the campaign had long-since deemed inevitable. As Richard Falk noted shortly before the UN vote to end Libya operations in October 2011, its restrictions had from the outset been perfunctory. Rather, he argued, “NATO forces were obviously far less committed to their supposed protective role than to ensuring that the balance of forces within Libya would be tipped in the direction of the insurrectionary challenge.” 163

Indeed, those at closer quarters to the battle in Libya acknowledged the tensions provoked by overt attempts from Western member-states to steer the campaign in line with their perceived interests. 164 A number of diaspora figures pointed to the delayed assault on Tripoli as a prime example of allied efforts to influence the possibilities for reconstituting power in any post-Qadhafi government. As it was perceived, a protracted battle for the capital created conditions more favourable to Qadhafi falling via internal coup or regime implosion over a potentially bloody (and politically unpalatable) rebel assault. A general consensus appeared to emerge among British-Libyans, as among other commentators, that NATO powers had engineered such an outcome in order to enhance the likelihood of ex-regime figures being retained in a post-revolution administration, thus also affording greater guarantees of Western influence therein. On Libyan terrain, opposition leaders and rebel fighters were similarly cognisant of encroaching agendas in the military campaign. As one NTC spokesman for the Sirte locality told reporters in June, “NATO itself is progressing slowly in its military operations against Qadhafi’s brigades in order to maintain him longer in power, and to

162 Wehrey, “NATO’s Intervention”, 111.
164 For more on the specifics of the campaign, such as the shifting location of NATO strikes in Libya, see Cole and McQuinn, The Libyan Revolution and its Aftermath, 55-125.
increase thereby the price the opposition can be requested to pay to world powers and to the major companies that stand behind them.”

Libyans on the frontline likewise alluded to sustained pressure from NATO allies to accept assistance in the form of ground troops. Among them, Abdul recounted repeated offers of such aid by British and US governments – proposals which he said continued as late into the campaign as July. As he explained, “the MoD didn’t have any people at the front line, and they were pressuring us for things to move in that direction, but we said no. We made a bold case, saying ‘we have people who are willing to die, we don’t need your people to die for us.’ We wanted military gear and technology. That was where we needed help.” Like others in the diaspora, Abdul was aware that extending the campaign to the ground would jeopardise Libyan autonomy while risking antagonism toward intervening forces as Iraq-style occupiers. There was, however, a recurrent need to reinforce this limitation to both British officials and elements of the opposition leadership, particularly ex-regime figures, as Abdul described:

We explained clearly to people of the highest rank - colonels and officials from the US, Britain and France – ‘if you put boots on the ground, we will turn our guns on you.’ Qadhafi did a very good job of influencing Libyan minds that the West is evil, so people were very on edge with knowledge of what happened in Afghanistan and Iraq, how those places are now completely messed up.

Libyans’ informed scepticism about Western motives thereby resonated throughout the campaign, on the ground and abroad. Indeed, Benghazi’s Tahrir Square within the first months of the revolt became the site of billboards declaring, “No to foreign intervention on our soil, yes to arming the rebels.” The relative expediency of rebel combat operations, which saw the regime collapse within five months of NATO engagement, averted confrontation over the necessity of a ground campaign and British-Libyan lobbyists continued to publicly endorse London’s strategy throughout. (As a July 2011 FCO memorandum from a meeting with the UK-based Libyan Solidarity Campaign noted, one representative told officials that “the PM and [Hague’s] statements on Libya

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166 Interview with Abdul, 2012.
However, as was reiterated by the diaspora opposition, the absence of foreign troops in
Libya was not seen to correlate with an absence of foreign interests. Buttressed by
NATO’s exceeded mandate, awareness of strategic agendas on the part of member-
states sustained criticisms of the campaign among both Libyans and non-Libyans,
particularly its detractors on the anti-imperial left. So too, the creep ensuing from the
ambiguous 1973 further discredited the mission among populations and foreign
governments customarily sceptical about Western imperialism.\textsuperscript{169} (The doubts
harboured by many UN member states were articulated at a Security Council meeting in
May by India’s ambassador, who posited, “who watches the guardians? There is a
considerable sense of unease about the manner in which the humanitarian imperative of
protecting civilians has been interpreted for actual action on the ground.”\textsuperscript{170}) And yet,
opposition to Western involvement in Qadhafi’s fall remained challenged by the fact of
overriding Libyan support for an intervention of widely-perceived urgency. This
problematic intersection of foreign interest and local autonomy, as evidenced in
Operation Unified Protector, was equally highlighted by many who argued in support of
the NATO mission, despite customary opposition to Western military ventures in the
region. Pointing to the palpable threat of violent atrocities being committed by Qadhafi
forces in April 2011, Achcar noted the paradox between the putative ethical merits of
intervention - averting catastrophe and facilitating the rebel ousting of Qadhafi - and the
more baneful reality of inevitable attempts by NATO to co-opt the campaign. In light of
this quandary, it was necessary to couple support for the Libya opposition with a
parallel sobriety to the dangers inherent in Western involvement in the struggle. As he
explained, “many sympathizers of the Libyan insurrection, while expressing
understanding for the fact that Benghazi had asked ‘the devil’ for help against a
massacre foretold, warned the rebels from day one against portraying this devil as an
angel on that occasion, and against fostering illusions about the Western powers’ real

\textsuperscript{168} Excerpt from note of meeting with the Libyan Solidarity Campaign, 8 July 2011, Foreign and
Commonwealth Office, unclassified.

\textsuperscript{169} Christian Kabati, “NATO Military Operations in Libya in Relation to International Humanitarian

\textsuperscript{170} United Nations Security Council, 6531\textsuperscript{st} Meeting, New York, 10 May 2011 at:
motives.”

Amid the heterogeneous Libyan opposition, in and outside the country, there appeared to be few who risked delusion about the purity of the humanitarian goals espoused by intervening parties in 2011. Yet, neither awareness of ulterior Western motives nor the practical conflicts they produced in the roll-out of the campaign appeared to have diminished a prevailing consensus on its necessity or moral rectitude, even after the fact. While most Libyans were cognisant of the ethical implications of Western involvement for both the country’s short and longer-term future, this did not ultimately seem to shift the moral balance away from the imperative of protecting revolutionary goals. As Khaled explained almost six months after the cessation of NATO operations:

Many people still say we were fooled by the Western agenda to take over the world, starting in Libya. But of course we did not go out on the street banking on Western support. Qadhafi did all the convincing for us, and even if the West did it for its own policy-motives, the side-effect was that they did a very good thing - the Libyan people were liberated, we got rid of one of the world’s major tyrants and there were no British troops. Libyan people got what they wanted and of course, the West will benefit.

Moreover, a number of British-Libyans expressed umbrage at inferences by the campaigns’ non-Libyan detractors. Where diaspora Libyans had sought to retain an emphasis on local sovereignty, adjudication about the morality of the intervention from foreign voices was perceived by some as ill-informed or indeed paternalistic. As one London-raised Tripolitanean remarked of the condemnation issuing from many Western liberals: “of course we were aware it was an alignment of interests, and one we actively requested to end Qadhafi’s slaughter. So who the hell are people in their newspaper offices in London to criticise the actions of the Libyan opposition, or to tell the Libyan people they do not have the right to invite foreign intervention into their country?”

Retrospective endorsements of the NATO campaign such as these were attended by neither blind optimism for Libya's future nor naïveté about continued British interests in

171 Achcar, “NATO's ‘Conspiracy’ against the Libyan Revolution”.
172 Interview with Khaled, 2012.
Rather, ongoing support for the intervention by the diaspora appeared to be informed by a brand of moral pragmatism which identified removal of Qadhafi as an overriding good (one not yet qualified by the play of successive events). Nor had the fact of Western involvement – the opposition’s wilful ‘asking the devil for help’ – seemingly tarnished a general sense of ownership of the revolution.

Despite Western attempts to engineer the timing and composition of regime-change, the ultimate manner of Qadhafi’s removal served in the eyes of many as corroboration of Libyan autonomy over the campaign. Western officials, as was noted, had from the outset been eager to impress upon the opposition the importance of avoiding the strategic pitfalls of Iraq’s 2003 regime-change, namely in the wholesale and catastrophic de-Baathification measures which followed Saddam’s fall. It was instead advocated that the Colonel’s exit could best be achieved through a form of negotiated settlement permitting his safe exit from Libya, as was reiterated by Hague during a visit to Benghazi at the height of the conflict in June 2011. (The apparent consensus achieved between the NTC and FCO that stability must be prioritised in Qadhafi’s removal was summarised by the Secretary as, “No de-Baathification. The rebels are certainly learning from that. They now need to publicize that more effectively, to be able to convince members of the current regime that that is something that would work.”) Simultaneously however, it became readily apparent that the removal of Qadhafi and his sons was a sine qua non in the eyes of the Libyan rebellion. Despite some internal dissent on the issue in NTC ranks, particularly among former exiles with Western affiliation, there was similar opposition to any form of amnesty for Qadhafi or his family. These local demands also appeared to assume precedence over the more tempered agendas of Libyans with allegiance to foreign governments - a supremacy which was confirmed on 20 October when NTC fighters captured Sirte, taking down the leader along with his last significant stronghold. NATO attempts to manufacture a more

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174 This precedent was heeded in Qadhafi’s aftermath. As MacQuinn notes, “transitional authorities chose not to purge the Libyan Army or its bureaucracy in an effort to avoid the anarchy which flowed from such measures in Iraq.” See “Assessing (In)security after the Arab Spring”, 718.
176 Cited in Graff, “Britain says rebels must plan for post-Gaddafi Libya”.
sanitary regime-change notwithstanding, the brutal execution of the deposed dictator signaled the limit of foreign control. Emphasising this in early 2012, Faraj recalled encountering the Foreign Secretary during a press appearance in London, only hours after Qadhafi’s execution. The historian congratulated him on their joint victory in the campaign, though Hague responded with an expression of horror at the bloody conclusion. As Faraj explained, “he said to me ‘this is awful, horrific’. But I told him this was the Libyan way. ‘This was a Libyan revolution, done the Libyan way. This is what we wanted.’”

Finishing the job: Britain and Libya after Qadhafi

Two years after the London Libya conference at which Cameron proclaimed that “a new beginning for Libya is within reach”, exile Hisham Ben Galbon noted that “regrettably, things are not as clear as they were.” In the light of the lawlessness, militia rivalry, political stalemates and violent intolerance that came to define events on the ground from 2011, the declarations of victory made by the allies in August 2011 appear if not premature, callow in their optimism. Despite early signs of learning from the Coalition’s offhand “stuff happens” approach in Iraq, events in Libya quickly underscored the difficulty of averting chaos – a reality driven home within a year of NATO ceasing its operations, with the murder of US ambassador Chris Stevens at the embassy in Benghazi. British officials swiftly condemned the atrocity, reiterating the “senseless and brutal” nature of the killing, while refuting its broader connotation of a general rise in anti-Western sentiment in Libya. So too, Cameron and Hague were emphatic that the incident had not lessened their commitment to the project of a stable, post-Qadhafi Libya. As the PM noted, “we look to the new Libyan authorities to do all in their power, as they have pledged to do, to bring the killers to justice. Britain stands

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178 Interview with Faraj, 2013.
179 Email exchange with Hisham, 29 March 2013.
180 As was noted, “the Libyan opposition appears to have studied this error closely and has been hard at work producing detailed plans for the postwar phase. It is trying to make sure that stuff doesn't just happen in Libya.” See, “How the Lessons of Iraq Paid Off In Libya,” TIME, 25 August 2011 at: http://fareedzakaria.com/2011/08/25/how-the-lessons-of-iraq-paid-off-in-libya [accessed 1 September 2011].

So too, the intervening governments’ response to unfolding chaos in post-revolution Libya was seen by many British-Libyans as a litmus test of any genuine commitment to the country’s democratic transformation in the face of mounting adversity. In his 5 September speech on NATO’s victory, Cameron had outlined the task ahead for its forces in Libya – namely, “finishing the job”.\footnote{“Prime Minister's statement on Libya”, September 2011.} Though the Colonel’s regime had fallen, he explained, “the job is not over... So let me be clear. We will not let up until the job is done.” The PM in turn identified associated goals of humanitarian relief, security provision and “supporting the Libyan people as they lead the longer-term process of reconstruction and political transition.”\footnote{Ibid.} The statement, however, when set against that which followed the embassy attack, implied a shift in emphasis from active NATO engagement to a Libyan onus of responsibility to ensure stability and order. Indeed, on the ground in the country, some were critical of this apparently now more equivocal British commitment. A professional raised in Britain, Jalal had returned to Libya during the uprisings to assume a representative role for the opposition camp and eventually became spokesman for the NTC’s media-coordination campaign. Despite his views having been widely cited across international press throughout the NATO operation, Jalal noted with regret that not a single British official had contacted him in the aftermath of the embassy events. Commending Hague's response to the attacks, he nonetheless suggested that economic and strategic considerations had engendered a more ‘hands-off’ approach to political stabilisation, with detrimental outcomes for Libya. As he explained, speaking from Tripoli in October 2012, “I don't think they are engaging sufficiently. There has been a real change since the intervention about the
manner of British engagement and after the initial operations were over, they became extremely aloof. However, it would be wisest to continue to try to engage with everybody." By contrast, Jalal observed indications of British interest behind London’s more active support for specific candidates in the country's first prime-ministerial elections taking place at that time. Such displays of political partiality, he noted, would best substituted for increased even-handedness in Britain’s approach to realising democratic principles in Libya, a task in which it was well-equipped to assume constructive leadership. As he explained:

Britain should identify Libyans who can do the job, irrespective of their background. They need to find those Libyans who know what liberal values are and to try to cooperate with these people because they will get the best possible outcome for both countries. At the same time, they should not throw themselves 100 per cent behind secularists like [former interim prime minister] Mahmoud Jibril because they were part and parcel of the previous regime. This reflects very badly with the population who will say ‘they couldn't care less about democracy, they removed the man but they reinstated the regime.’

Other diaspora activists perceived Britain's role in reconstruction as being curbed by an ongoing desire for autonomy on the part of Libyans themselves. As the British-Libyan businessman Abdulla noted in early 2013 with events inside Libya auguring ever-greater instability:

Britain would have liked to take a stronger role, but Libyans were saying 'we can take care of ourselves' – partly out of fear of outside influence and partly out of pride. It was a difficult position for Western governments – Britain is trying to determine their role and this is a new world order of intervention. They are aware that Libya was a test case, and that it has to go well. They would have offered more resources - technical, political, intelligence etc., but Libyans would not accept so much.

Diverging perspectives on the due scope of London’s influence in post-Qadhafi Libya replicate broader obscurity around the British charter in its purported humanitarian intervention - ambiguities extant from the inception of the campaign in North Africa.

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186 Interview with Jalal (via telephone), 2 October 2012.
188 Interview with Abdulla, 2013.
That these questions persisted across the campaign to resurface pointedly after the cessation of its military campaign indicates the continued irresolution of dilemmas raised by its much-decried Iraq operation. In the aftermath of the Libyan revolution, many thus pointed to the short-lived NATO campaign, not as a sign of innovation, but of the Western myopia and strategizing forecast earlier in 2011. As was noted by Gareth Stansfield shortly after the cessation of the NATO mission by UN vote: “in a very considerable way, the lessons of Iraq clearly have not been learned very well, to date. The [NTC] has proved to be unable to limit the worst excesses of its various militias, much as the Iraqi leadership failed to do which led to one of the most devastating civil wars seen in the region in recent years... the evidence of Iraq suggests that Libya’s trials may only just be beginning as the lessons of state-building in post-conflict situations are still being learned the hard way.”

So too, specific criticism was levelled at perceived patterns of continued didactic or ad hoc policy-making in Downing Street. As was noted in Michael Clarke’s appraisal of Britain's Libya strategy, “the impetus for the UK to intervene came very much from the top, with a hawkish prime minister pushing the operation despite private military warnings of the risks.” Thus, rather than any wholesale reassessment of foreign policymaking, the campaign was viewed by many as evidence of a mere coincidence of factors, among them “improvisation, innovation, and good luck.” That these elements could just as fluidly conspire against the Libyan opposition and intervening governments in a fulfillment of adverse prophecies, despite local and international support, may underscore what has been proposed as the sole binding precedent for such campaigns: that is, unpredictability. As Stewart notes, where countless other post-intervention scenarios have proved civilian-protection or democratic regime-change not mere matters of ousting intransigent leaders, but of sustained and often costly action, the guiding principal must be to anticipate chaos.

191 Clarke, “The Making of Britain’s Libya Strategy”.
The assumption of this risk by Western governments in Libya, in full knowledge of a more limited charter and under the banner of 'humanitarian intervention', suggests a further salient lesson about the very value of such precepts. As David Chandler noted shortly after NATO’s assumption of command in April 2001: “as much as we may wish for a return of the moral or ethical understandings of the humanitarian interventionist 1990s, this is not a possibility. NATO action in Libya may involve dropping ‘humanitarian’ bombs, but there will be no assumption of Western responsibility for their outcome. In this respect, the bombing campaign much more resembles those of Afghanistan and Iraq – where there was similarly little strategic concern with what happened afterwards.”

The fact that British officials had vested the campaign in the language of morality, despite paradoxical indicators of their lesser investment in Libya’s future, raises further questions about the integrity of an enduring argot of foreign policy values. As one commentator from the region noted of the credibility of Britain’s projected role in Libya in late 2011, “the rhetoric of humanitarian intervention may in time be shown to have been a pretext for the pursuit of neo-colonial economic interests”.

This fallibility was equally apparent to many in the diaspora from the inception of the campaign, if not over decades prior. Yet the revolution’s British-Libyan advocates remained as seemingly undeterred in their alliance with Britain as they were undiminished in their subjective moral regard for the cause. Unlike the alienation and resentment which characterised relations between policy-makers and elements of Iraq’s grass-roots diaspora after 2003, British-Libyan assessments of UK operations remained accompanied by expressions of gratitude toward their adopted country into 2013 (albeit set against an equally sound appreciation of realpolitik). Yet a generalised sense of fatigue and insecurity also prevailed among Libyans by this time, as signs of recourse to foreign assistance diminished further. Reflecting on how this inauspicious circumstance might be reconciled with policy-makers’ formerly-espoused enthusiasm for securing a democratic Libya, Jalal noted that:

Britain realised that this was a chance to remove a tyrant and have a good relationship with the future Libya. That does not mean that humanitarian considerations did not surface and that Libyans are not grateful to Britain. I know the affinity that Libyan people

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193 Chandler, “The End of Intervention”.
have for Britain and it has not been blemished, but now is the time for Britain to grab the chance back. There is still a unique opportunity to make things happen here. As simple as the people are here, they do understand that there is no friendship between countries, there is only interest. That is inherent.

Conclusion

The historic implications of his government's response to upheaval in the Arab region had been apparent to the PM from the outset of the Libyan campaign, resonating as Cameron concluded his earliest address to the Commons on events in North Africa in February 2011. As he announced: “what is happening in the wider Middle East is one of those once in a generation opportunities, a moment when history turns a page. That next page is not yet written. It falls to all of us to seize this chance to fashion a better future for this region, to build a better relationship between our peoples, to make a new start.”

Indeed, the longer-term outcomes of Libya’s transition in the aftermath of the NATO campaign have become increasingly linked to questions of legitimacy beyond the role of Britain and its Western and Arab allies (chiefly Qatar and UAE), to the very notion of intervention itself. As Dalton noted shortly after Qadhafi’s death in October 2011, “the future of the Libyan revolution will influence not just the future of the Libyan people, but the ability of future international action to forestall looming atrocities.” And yet, with few precedents established beyond the vagary of mandates and certainty of violence, the implications of the campaign in Libya remain hazardous at best. For a British government eager to shake off the baggage of Iraq, the operation appeared to present a low-risk and 'do-able' opportunity to flex foreign policy muscles on the international stage, while coming out decisively on the side of Arab democracy. Ultimately however, the campaign has amounted to little other than caprice for its allied

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195 Interview with Jalal, 2012.
196 “Prime Minister’s Statement on Libya”, 28 February 2011.
197 McQuinn, “Assessing (In)security after the Arab Spring”, 719.
parties, and for Libyans themselves.\textsuperscript{199}

With the architects of the campaign revealing a continued proclivity for declarations of premature success, many who opposed the intervention in Britain have claimed vindication in the years since. On a regional level, equal caution has been advocated against hubris at the ease with which Britain’s relations with local populations might be redeemed - that is, against any keen assumption that “Western intervention will buy favour with the wider Arab world.”\textsuperscript{200} Nor might ready endorsements for Britain’s role in the campaign by its diaspora advocates be taken as a proof that any such favourable sentiments are durable among their counterparts inside Libya. Like the fickle currents of official policy in London, the very fluidity of popular dynamics on the ground in the region - dynamics which produced the 2011 uprisings and manifold previous struggles against dictatorship and colonial oppression - seemingly harbor equal potential to turn against fledgling democratic movements and their purported foreign backers, however benevolent their origins. As Patrick Cockburn speculated in the days after the 2012 embassy attack in Benghazi, “the Arab Spring was never a collective vote in favour of Western states, but a series of real revolutions that have other good and nasty surprises in store.”\textsuperscript{201}

The following chapter will examine an ongoing British effort in the Gulf to erect a bulwark against any such nasty surprises, and thereby, against the harbingers of democratic change itself.

\textsuperscript{199}As RUSI concluded in its 2012 report on the campaign, “The assumptions of a previous intervention were never fully applicable in the next. So it will be with Libya – a proxy war fought on behalf of a broad rebel uprising, ended not by a mediated peace deal, but by an absolute rebel victory ... Libya provides little in the way of a widely applicable model. The Libyan campaign has indicated that concerned powers still have the capability to intervene effectively, it also demonstrates that the political circumstances that permitted it cannot be easily transposed.” See Clarke, “The Making of Britain’s Libya Strategy”.

\textsuperscript{200}Clarke, “The Making of Britain’s Libya Strategy”.

\textsuperscript{201}Patrick Cockburn, “The murder of US ambassador Christopher Stevens proves the Arab Spring was never what it seemed”, \textit{The Independent}, 12 September 2012 at: http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-murder-of-us-ambassador-christopher-stevens-proves-the-arab-spring-was-never-what-it-seemed-8130850.html [accessed 14 September 2012].
CHAPTER FOUR

On the side of decency and democracy: countering revolution in Bahrain

The argument went, countries like Britain faced a choice between our interests and our values… But I say that is a false choice. As recent events have confirmed, denying people their basic rights does not preserve stability – rather, the reverse.

David Cameron, Speech to the National Assembly of Kuwait, February 20111

The occasional presence of a warship in Bahrain harbour would do much to keep our prestige alive among a set of people who are only too apt to forget that the British Empire exists and does take an interest in Bahrain affairs.

Major Dickson, Political Agent Bahrain, March 19202

On 17 February 2011, as Benghazi erupted with the first sparks of the Libyan uprising, the Member for Rotherham Denis MacShane intervened in a Commons discussion on events in North Africa to address Foreign Secretary Hague on the subject of a different Arab nation then rebelling against authoritarian rule. The previous night, riot police had moved in on a camp of demonstrators of all ages at Pearl Roundabout in the centre of the Bahraini capital, Manama. Two deaths had been reported in the crush, with dozens more trampled, beaten and asphyxiated in tear-gassing by state security.3 The Member for Rotherham wanted to know how Hague’s office would respond to these developments, and his questions to the Secretary came amid a rustle of jeers:

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Does he agree that a wind of change is blowing through the Arab world – first Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, and now Libya, Algeria and the terrible news of deaths and hospitals filled with the wounded as the autocrats of Bahrain seek to crush their people's hopes?... Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that late last year, his FCO ministerial colleagues signed off on exports to Bahrain of tear gas, irritant ammunition, riot control equipment and other matériel used to crush democracy?... Does the Foreign Secretary agree that almost a century of British policy, supported by Governments of all parties, based on turning a blind eye to the repression and corruption of regimes in this region may be coming to an end?\(^4\)

In turn, Hague evoked Britain’s historic affinity with rulers of the absolutist monarchy, headed by PM Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, the uncle of Bahrain’s King Hamad and the world’s longest-serving prime minister - “a long friendship for the past 40 years, felt strongly in that country,” as Hague described it.\(^5\) It was thus necessary, according to the Secretary, to impress on Britain’s ally the importance of conceding to popular aspirations via “appropriate” reform, while respecting cultural differences in governing styles:

> Britain is of course on the side of decency and democracy everywhere in the world, including in the Middle East and the Gulf states… Among the leadership in Bahrain, there is the appetite and determination to carry out those reforms. There is no doubt about the sincerity of the King of Bahrain and the leaders of the country about that. We will therefore continue to give our advice and to deplore situations where violence arises and lives are lost.\(^6\)

Yet in spite of Hague’s assurances of due censure, tension between Bahrain’s demonstrators and its increasingly vicious authorities amplified over coming weeks. The confrontations peaked on 14 March when a procession of Saudi tanks converged on the capital as part of a thousands-strong deployment of troops from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, called on by Bahrain’s rulers to restore order among their 800,000 citizens.\(^7\) Over the coming years, violence and loss of life would become

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\(^4\) United Kingdom, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, Col. 1136, 17 February 2011.


\(^6\) United Kingdom, *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, House of Commons, Col. 1136, 17 February 2011.

\(^7\) The population of Bahrain has been cited at approximately 1.3 million, but foreign residents are estimated to make up at least one-quarter of this figure. See: Bahrain Ministry of Information Affairs,
a persistent, if less visible, feature of governance in Bahrain. Against this current, Bahrainis, most of them from the country’s two-thirds Shi’a majority, persevered with their democratic demands in what has been deemed the most peaceful and enduring campaign of the Arab uprisings. Calls for reform simultaneously became a mainstay of British discourse on the Gulf’s smallest, most densely-populated nation. Yet neither Bahrain’s official reform programme nor Britain’s counsel to the Al Khalifa regime, as pledged by the Foreign Secretary, has dulled the opposition or its caustic reception by authorities. As was noted more than two years after the seminal events at Pearl Roundabout, not only had Bahrain failed to advance on reforms, the regime had effectively turned the clock back to a state of political hostility akin to past confrontations of the 1980s.

The endurance of this repressive status quo after 2011 reflected one of the greatest foreign policy predicaments for the UK government, in a decade already fraught with geopolitical quandaries. And yet, the concerns embodied in British-Bahraini relations at that time - Western access and influence, regional power dynamics, Sunni-Shi’ite schisms and Bahraini good governance – were not the idiosyncratic outcomes of a temporal ‘Arab spring’. Rather, such dilemmas reflected the continuum of a long-standing paradigm of politics in Bahrain and in its alliance with Britain. This chapter first details key aspects of this relationship and its connotations for Britain’s response to the evermore indelible crimes of Bahrain’s rulers from 2011. Having magnified these diplomatic machinations, it then documents the perspectives of Bahraini exiles and expatriates in Britain, whose own actions trace an ongoing pattern of struggle and estrangement in both countries. The augmentation of Bahrain’s transnational political struggle as one against local and international adversaries is hence highlighted to argue for the persistence of actively anti-democratic practices in British foreign policymaking.


A long friendship: Britain in Bahrain

Although never officially a British colony, Bahrain was drawn into the informal Empire alongside other Gulf states during the imperial climax of the early nineteenth century, when Pax Britannica emanated from its oriental headquarters in India. The waters of the Persian Gulf, encompassing a Bahrain then thriving from lucrative pearl trading, had long since been beset by naval feuds—a scourge of instability that rulers of local territories or ‘sheikhdoms’ denounced. A treaty or ‘truce’ agreement was thus established between the latter parties and British officials in 1820, affording imperial protection in exchange for cooperation in combatting piracy. Among the heads of these so-called ‘Trucial States’ (now comprising the nations of UAE, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain) was the Sunni Sheikh Al Khalifa whose forebears had arrived in Bahrain the previous century, driving out the ruling Persians in 1782. A series of contracts henceforth established the respective rights and obligations of the British Crown vis-à-vis Bahrain’s rulers, territories and citizens. Among them were the stipulations that “the British government has the right to establish an agent or broker at Bahrain” and “the Ruler of Bahrain must always be at peace with the British Government.”

Though such agreements by no means eliminated the threat of external aggression, particularly from Persia (or more local appetites for political, tribal or territorial feuds), British entry into the Gulf amid such disorder assumed all the resonances of imperial pacification and protection – a narrative of responsibility and benevolent authority in the

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12 British authorities deemed this hazard “piracy” and saw grounds for combating it in defence of their trade routes. However, a number of historians have argued that the phenomenon deemed ‘piracy’ by the British in fact reflected a local campaign to resist its colonial presence in the Gulf. See, for example: Khaldoun Hasan al Naqeed, Society and State in the Gulf and Arab Peninsula: a Different Perspective (Oxon: Routledge, 1990) 49-50.
14 The tribe’s ascendency had itself been subject to multiple challenges, but after Wahhabi support was enlisted from the mainland in 1802, the family remained in ascendancy – a position cemented by the Trucial agreement of 1820. See David Commins, The Gulf States – A Modern History (London: Tauris, 2012).
15 It was further decreed that “the British government has the right to intervene in cases of piracy and acts of aggression committed by or against Bahrainis at sea” and that “the British government must permit Bahrainis to visit and trade in ports in India.” Cited in James Onley, The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj. Merchants, Rulers and British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 282.
region which endured into the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{16} Having superseded Dutch and Portuguese prospectors at the end of the eighteenth century, Britain had by the 1900s secured a position in the Persian Gulf to which none of its rivals could lay claim.\textsuperscript{17} The significance, both strategic and symbolic, of the region for the prestige of the British Empire (most especially in the ‘Great Game’ of Anglo-Russian rivalry) was confirmed by its envoys of the time, including then Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon. In a 1903 speech to the Trucial Chiefs, he described the hybrid of interest and paternalism that characterised Britain’s engagement in their territories:

\begin{quote}
We were here before any other Power, in modern times, had shown its face in these waters. We found strife and we have created order. It was our commerce as well as your security that was threatened and called for protection…We saved you from extinction at the hands of your neighbours… We have not seized or held your territory. We have not destroyed your independence, but have preserved it… We shall not wipe out the most unselfish page in history. The peace of these waters must still be maintained; your independence will continue to be upheld.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

The speech served not only as a bond between Empire and Gulf, but also an unambiguous signal to rival powers in the region, intended for audiences from Berlin to Teheran.\textsuperscript{19} Britain’s determination to retain this position was confirmed the same year by Curzon’s predecessor and Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lord Lansdowne, in the most decisive declaration of British foreign policy of the century thus far. As he explained to the House of Lords: “firstly, we should protect and promote British trade in the Gulf. Secondly, we should not exclude the legitimate trade of others. Thirdly, we should regard the establishment of a naval base or a fortified port in the Gulf by any

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{16}{Geoffrey Nash, \textit{From Empire to Orient: travellers to the Middle East 1830-1924}, (London: Tauris, 2005), 131.}
\footnotetext{17}{Arnold T. Wilson, \textit{The Persian Gulf: an historical sketch from the earliest times to the beginning of the twentieth century} (London: Allen & Unwin, 1928), 179.}
\footnotetext{18}{Thomas Raleigh, \textit{Lord Curzon in India: being a selection from his speeches as Viceroy & Governor-General of India, 1898-1905} (London: MacMillan, 1906), 501.}
\footnotetext{19}{Adolphus William Ward and G. P Gooch, \textit{The Cambridge History of British Foreign Policy 1783-1919} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 21.}
\end{footnotes}
other power as a very grave menace to British interests, and we should certainly resist it by all means at our disposal.”  

These tenets had in effect informed Britain’s agreement with Bahrain’s rulers since 1820, as later confirmed by the 1861 ‘Perpetual Truce of Peace and Friendship’. Likewise, they underpinned those which flowed from Ottoman renunciation of claims to the territory in the prelude to WWI, when Bahrain was recognised as an independent nation under the protection of Britain via the 1913 Order of Bahrain. With the post-war decline of British influence in Persia and ensuing heightened impetus to protect oil supplies, Bahrain assumed manifold strategic significance. Yet attempts to administer *de facto* British rule through the designated ‘Political Agent’ also revealed the inherent difficulties of a system which sought to simultaneously exert influence, extract interest and create a semblance of independence in Bahrain. The implementation of the Order (suspended during the war) from 1919 underscored the vagaries – and at times, elasticity - surrounding Bahrain’s protected status and the terms of British dominion over its internal affairs.  

Specifically, the encroachment of British jurisdiction on matters including Bahrain’s judicial system, parliament and relations with other Arab sheikhs inspired resentment among the Al Khalifa and their tribal allies, and in turn antagonism toward the Agent. Where a nascent Arab nationalism saw Bahrain’s neighbours aspiring to self-rule, the enshrining of a British role in Bahrain precluded any such ambitions on the island. Although the Order had been intended to safeguard against Britain’s abuse of power, its outcomes indicated the contrary. Indeed, the resulting hostility – an alleged “anti-English” sentiment - was noted widely by British envoys at the time. In a 1919 letter, the Agent Major Dickson spoke with acrimony about the aspirations – or “wild political ideas” – sparked among local leaders by an international trend for supporting democratic statehood; an ethos emblematised by Woodrow Wilson’s famed treatise the previous year. As Dickson noted: “the recent world talk of the ‘rights of small nations’ and President Wilson’s utterances…would  

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21 James Onley notes that while states under British protection had in theory only ceded control over their “external affairs” to the Crown, the flexible manner in which British authorities approached issues of local politics meant that the distinction between protected states and British colonies was often merely legal and psychological. See James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers and British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007), 24.  
 Relations, already strained by such interference, were soon made visibly fraught by disputes over the treatment of Bahrain’s Shi’ite majority population, whose grievances were becoming increasingly difficult to ignore for both Britain and the Sunni Al Khalifa monarchy. As noted in a 1921 correspondence by the Agent, abuses “too numerous to quote” by Bahrain’s governing classes against the Shi’a were then customary. Among them, British authorities noted the illegal seizure of property, political murder, detention without trial, discriminatory taxation and wrongful imprisonment. Though the Agent on occasion intervened in protection at the request of victims, Shi’ite unrest around these injustices saw pressure mount for more determined British action against misrule. Envoys were petitioned directly by Shi’ite groups keen to recall Britain’s official duties of protection towards the subjects of Bahrain’s monarchy, as well as its reigning elite. As was observed by one Foreign Office representative in response to an aggrieved Shi’a campaign in 1921: “it is obviously not desirable to make the Agency into a Court of Appeal against decisions of the Shaikh, but on the other hand…Bahrain subjects are afraid to take the law into their own hands as the Shaikh is under our protection, and they urge with some reason that we ought to prevent the Shaikh from abusing his authority.”

Officials of the time likewise questioned the efficacy of Britain’s habitual appeasement of the Sheikh in such instances of abuse. Yet any immediate shift in tact that might aggravate hostility with the Sheikh, and thus threaten Britain’s position in Bahrain, was ruled out. As was confirmed by the Colonial Office, Britain was “not prepared to consider drastic action against Bahrain misrule” until all more benign means of coercion...
had been eliminated. Officials were instead instructed to “impress your personal influence on Shaikh and his family and restore prestige of Agency.”\textsuperscript{28} Representatives were, however, also encouraged to impress upon the Sheikh the conditionality of British endorsement – namely, that “if misrule leads to uprising the Government will find it difficult to render him any support whatsoever.”

The following decades thus saw British authorities attempt to orchestrate governance amongst the island’s Bahraini rulers (reportedly oblivious to the fact of their “sitting on a volcano”\textsuperscript{29}) in such a manner as to neither alienate “influential opinion on the island” with any suggestion of diminishing Sunni privilege, nor give the appearance to international observers that Britain was “acquiescing to misrule in Bahrain”.

Concurrently, British investment in the island as a stable and resourceful regional ally was strengthened when in 1932 Bahrain became the first of the Gulf states to discover oil in its territories. Two years later, the UK’s combined air and naval base was withdrawn from Iran and re-established on the island.\textsuperscript{30} Yet neither Bahrain’s nascent oil wealth nor the cosmetic ministrations of reform under Britain’s ‘advisor’ to the country, Sir Charles Belgrave, could remedy the tangible problems of divisive Al Khalifa governance. Alienated from oil revenues and the Sunni beneficiaries of British patronage, Bahrain’s marginalised majority became in equal parts resentful of their local rulers and the perceived opportunism of their imperial custodians.\textsuperscript{31} Accordingly, popular campaigns for justice became evermore anti-British and anti-colonial in tenor. While Belgrave dismissed protest leaders as opportunists appealing to the “illiterate element in the population”, opposition was soon realised in mass strikes and demonstrations explicitly calling for the Adviser’s departure.\textsuperscript{32} Similarly, a 1956 stopover in Manama by the Foreign Secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, saw the Minister’s car stoned by protestors insisting on Belgrave’s removal. Officials in Manama and

\textsuperscript{28}Cited in Saeed Al Shehabi, \textit{Bahrain 1920–1971}, 49.
\textsuperscript{29} ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Onley, \textit{The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj}, 25.
\textsuperscript{31} As the Lebanese nationalist intellectual Ameen Rihani wrote scathingly in 1930: “security and peace, England has brought to the Arabs of the Gulf… But what is it costing the Arabs? The Gulf should be renamed: it is neither Persian nor Arabian, it is British.” See Ameen F. Rihani, \textit{Around the Coasts of Arabia} (Constable: London, 1930), 300.
\textsuperscript{32} During the foment of 1954, Belgrave characterised protest slogans as “anti-British, anti-Sheikh and anti-me” in an interview with a BBC journalist covering the events. See Woodrow Wyatt, “Special Advisers in Bahrain,” \textit{BBC Panorama}, 1960.
surrounding villages meanwhile reported the daily dawn patrol by officers to erase “subversive” nationalist slogans that appeared across towns overnight. The ensuing alarm about preserving British authority in Bahrain (and by extension, in the Gulf), permeated to the highest levels in London. Indeed, PM Anthony Eden himself briefly floated a military incursion into the island to restore order, or “show them we are still alive and kicking” as he explained. The mounting dilemma was characterised aptly by Lloyd who, while acknowledging the plausibility of weighing-in on behalf of the Al Khalifas, advised against armed measures, explaining that: “it would be likely to lead to a popular uprising in favour of reform and before long, British troops would be shooting down people whose claims are in accord with our own proclaimed beliefs and practices.”

However, the arrest of three popular opposition leaders in 1956 provided a timely occasion for Britain to cooperate with the Sheikh to combat disorder through a more discreet betrayal of London’s espoused principles. The activists, of mixed ethnic and Bahraini origins, were all members of the Committee of National Union, a nationalist democratic organisation with an anti-colonial and anti-sectarian political charter. British officials agreed via a court decision to transport the alleged “Nasser-inspired forces” to the remote South Atlantic Island of St Helena on the pretext that they had participated in a plot to assassinate both Belgrave and the Sheikh. The joint action was met with some objection from commentators and politicians in Britain, as reflected in newspaper columns expressing concern for the possible mistreatment of the prisoners, as well as their peers detained in Bahrain. Such grievances were dismissed by the Adviser as “ill-informed”, though British participation in the perceived injustice remained a source of some embarrassment to the UK government, with one of the deported activists attributing his exile directly to Britain’s complicity. (As he described

35 Cited in Smith, Britain's revival and fall in the Gulf, 11.
it, Bahrain was in a “state of feudalism” being sustained by Britain. Soon after the transportation, Belgrave was retired on the grounds of illness, and British involvement in local security and intelligence was enhanced with the desired stabilising effect. Yet awareness of the growing tide of Arab nationalism, narrowly averted in Bahrain, precipitated the following decade in Britain’s resolve to withdraw from its territories “East of Suez”. Despite warnings that the move might open a power vacuum in the region, it was determined by the Labour government of 1967 that Britain’s future strategic and political interests in the Gulf would be best served by timely withdrawal. As one official noted, to leave amid an atmosphere of political amity was calculably preferable to “outstaying our welcome”. A far-sighted decision to depart in 1971 was thus attended by rigorous efforts to “tidy-up” Britain’s future position in advance of withdrawal. Chief among the associated tasks was that of securing a stable long-term political environment in Bahrain by insulating its monarchy against the more palpable, immediate threats of popular revolt and international censure. As one Agency official noted in a 1966 letter to the FCO:

> We must clearly not be deceived by improvements into thinking that everything in the garden is lovely… There may be no tension at the moment… but no significant political or social action has been taken by the ruler to remove the deep-rooted causes of discontent and frustration among the mass of the educated and semi-educated population. If he signed and implemented the admin reform…this would be quite a different matter.

Officials were nonetheless reluctant to push more forcefully for equitable reform, lest such unwelcome pressure give “the boat of Anglo-Bahraini relations a rock”. So too, envoys feared that any more substantial intervention might undermine the objective of their pre-departure designs – namely, “the appearance of autonomy and independence of British influence which the Bahrain Public Security Department and State Police should be anxious to preserve.”

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38 Cited in Joyce, “The Bahraini Three on St Helena,” 620.
39 Cited in Smith, Britain's revival and fall in the Gulf, 36.
40 Cited in Smith, Britain's revival and fall in the Gulf, 36.
42 Burdett, Records of Bahrain, 89.
more clandestine forms of British cooperation in domestic security: a strategy which nonetheless reflected one of its most flagrant incursions into Bahrain’s internal politics. It was thus through the stationing of Colonel Ian Henderson – a former envoy to Kenya who was later convicted of egregious abuses in the suppression of the country’s Mau Mau rebellion – that the “the long arm of the British” was henceforth felt in Bahrain. Henderson (the so-called ‘Butcher of Bahrain’ in local parlance) was tasked with co-ordinating an efficient and modern system of covert surveillance to intercept “subversive groups” and other would-be agitators among the island’s restive population – in effect, an "anti-terrorist" force. Although the colonel’s first initiatives, including an amnesty for political prisoners, projected an air of liberalising reform, it quickly became apparent that his mechanisms were as repressive and forceful as those previously meted out by the Sheikh. Officials were nonetheless satisfied that Henderson’s Bahrain was “in a good position to intercept trouble” in the prelude to independence and beyond. So productive was the alliance between Henderson’s security apparatus – that “efficient and repressive instrument of the Al Khalifah” – and the ruling monarchs, that his services were retained for a further twenty years after independence as a new marker of the symbiosis that would continue to characterise British-Bahraini relations.

For where the defence of *pax Britannica* in the Gulf had proved mutually beneficial, its core tenets would be sustained long after a formal British departure. So too, London’s concurrent military withdrawal in 1971 (against economic incentives from Bahrain’s

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44 Smith, *Britain's revival and fall in the Gulf*, 57.
46 Wyatt, “Special Advisers in Bahrain.”
47 The year prior to withdrawal, an FCO Memorandum confirmed the official view on detention practices by the Bahraini security forces that “Henderson is quite right in carrying them out in the first place to give [opposition groups] and anybody, else a sharp lesson.” Cited in Wyatt, “Special Advisers in Bahrain.”
49 The FCO has continued to refuse to reveal communications between officials relating to policies implemented by Ian Henderson during this time, despite a partial release being ordered in 2015 by the High Court following a legal challenge of some eighteen months. See “Judge Orders Further Partial Release Of Henderson Files,” *Bahrain Watch*, 17 May 2015 at: https://bahrainwatch.org/blog/2015/05/17/judge-orders-further-partial-release-of-henderson-files/ [accessed 18 May 2015].
rulers, evermore anxious about aggression from Iran\textsuperscript{50}) was mitigated by America’s assumption of its Bahraini Royal Navy bases, later to become The Fifth Fleet. The superpower’s arrival on the island was accompanied by its expressions of enthusiasm for maintaining Britain’s role in the Gulf.\textsuperscript{51} Thus, the spectre of British influence continued to be felt in the presence of its diplomatic staff, business advisers, private mercenaries, expatriates and civil servant classes across Bahrain’s police force, hospitals and ministries. Indeed, so conspicuous was the enduring British-Bahraini affinity post-independence, that when asked in 1999 how Britain’s withdrawal from the Gulf had altered the region, a long-serving British advisor to the Emir of Bahrain replied, “British withdrawal? What withdrawal? We’re still here!”\textsuperscript{52}

**An appetite and determination for reform: opposition and exile in Bahrain**

The democratic experiment in fledging independent Bahrain was, however, less enduring. Within two years of the inaugural elections to the Constituent Assembly (the only democratic election to take place under Bahrain’s constitution), disputes over proposed legislation, including the presence of US navy bases and Henderson’s proposed “State Security Law”, led the body to be dissolved by the Emir. The first (and current) Prime Minister Bin-Salman meanwhile claimed that the assembly was obstructing the work of the government and citing “a threat to the national unity and the security of the country”, the Emir suspended the constitution in favour of monarchical rule-by-decree.\textsuperscript{53}

Emergency laws henceforth remained the source of governance in Bahrain until 2002, when the country was nominally transformed into a constitutional monarchy as part of reformist gestures by the country’s new ruler, King Hamad. A new National Action Charter for political reform was also born in response to opposition resurgence during

\textsuperscript{50} Smith, *Britain’s revival and fall in the Gulf*, 77.
\textsuperscript{53} Curtis, “If you take my advice.”
the 1990s, which was resoundingly endorsed by Bahrainis in a popular referendum,\textsuperscript{54} inscribing Bahrain as a “democracy where all powers vest with the people”\textsuperscript{55}. The charter was also welcomed in London by Blair’s then New Labour government. As the then FCO under-secretary told the House of Commons in advance of the Al Khalifa monarch’s visit in 2002, “human rights have indeed improved dramatically in Bahrain in recent years…Bahrain is in many ways providing a lead to show that it is possible to create a more democratic state in the Middle East that can participate in the international community with its head held high.”\textsuperscript{56}

Yet the resurrection of the Bahraini constitution in 2002 brought neither an end to autocratic rule nor to its opposition, which had seen campaigners for democratic reform exiled from the country for almost a century. Consistent with the reciprocal dynamics of the states’ relationship, Bahrainis had travelled to Britain for education purposes since the founding of the Trucial Agreement (all current office-holding members of the Al Khalifa family underwent university or military training in England). Many subsequently resettled in England to capitalise on economic or vocational opportunities, forming the UK base of a community of supporters and beneficiaries of the Bahraini ruling class. However, this presence was paralleled by a class of exiles and activists which took shape in Britain.\textsuperscript{57} Contrary to common perceptions of the Gulf as devoid of civil society activity, this sphere remained vibrant in Bahrain throughout the twentieth century (as Bahrainis commonly joke, every ideological or intellectual current in the Arab world has been represented in Bahrain, “even if it in just one guy”).\textsuperscript{58}

This mobility and diversity have likewise been reflected in the civil society activities of its diaspora since Bahrain’s principal waves of exile, engendered by crackdowns on the


\textsuperscript{55} Different clauses of the Charter enshrined the guarantees that: “all citizens are equal before the law in terms of rights and duties, without distinction of race, origin, language, religion, or belief” and “Bahrain shall be a constitutional monarchy”. See text of Charter at \textit{Bahrain Monitor}: http://www.bahrainmonitor.org/views/w-002-01.html [accessed 4 April 2014].

\textsuperscript{56} United Kingdom, \textit{Hansard Parliamentary Debates}, House of Commons, Col. 834, 23 July 2002.

\textsuperscript{57} Prior to Britain’s collaboration in the removal of Committee dissidents to St Helena in 1953, leaders of protests against unequal working conditions in Bahrain had been banished to India as early as 1938. See, Joyce, “The Bahraini Three on St Helena,” 620.

\textsuperscript{58} As noted at Chatham House research event “Bahrain: Civil Society and Political Imagination,” Chatham House, London, 30 October 2014.
burgeoning communist and Arab nationalist campaigns in the years around independence. The majority of these activists were members of the underground labour movement or student unions and found refuge in Yemen, or in Ba’athist pre-Saddam Iraq and Syria, owing to the then sympathetic, pro-communist policies that granted asylum to any Gulf dissidents.\textsuperscript{59} The following decade saw a second wave of, predominantly Shi’ite Islamist, opposition activists exiled from Bahrain to the West. With the wane of the communist movement and simultaneous upsurge in Islamist sentiment around the Iranian Revolution of 1979, opposition protest in Bahrain was imbued with some features of Shi’a Islamism. The region-wide Islamist revival in Bahrain manifested in two main political strands: the Shiraziyyin who supported more radical forms of confrontation with the Bahraini regime, including armed opposition, and the affiliates of the Al Dawa party, who remained committed to progressive action through legal channels and whose MPs constituted part of the parliamentary ‘Religious Bloc’ during Bahrain’s brief democratic interlude of 1973 to 1975.\textsuperscript{60} The latter group, who continued to leave Bahrain for Europe and North America throughout the 1980s, formed the backbone of the “diaspora” exile community in London.\textsuperscript{61} There, a number a key exiles established the Bahrain Freedom Movement (BFM), and later its main mouthpiece, the ‘Voice of Bahrain’ website.\textsuperscript{62} Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the London dissident cohort was joined by Islamist exiles from a range of political and religious allegiances, among them the prominent Shi’a Cleric Sheikh Ali Salman of Al Wefaq who was granted asylum in Britain following uprisings in 1995. The persistent transnational nature of opposition protest (and its suppression) after 1975 also meant that for many politicised Bahrainis and their families who emigrated for study or work, temporary departure effectively became exile.

Despite often diverging ideological positions, these London-based exiles were able to cohere into a relatively unified front around key claims and political agendas. Where revolutionary leftists affirmed their commitment to a reformist programme, Islamists too endorsed the tenets and practices of liberal democracy over any notion of

\textsuperscript{59} Beaugrand, “The Return of the Bahraini Exiles (2001-2006).”
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} While the more diminutive scale of the Bahraini population abroad may exempt it from some formal definitions of a “diaspora”, the term will be applied here to refer to the UK-based Bahraini community which for qualitative purposes is considered to be a distinct diasporic entity.
\textsuperscript{62} Voice of Bahrain website at: http://www.vob.org/
implementing religious law. The exiled opposition consolidated four central demands: the restoration of the 1973 Constitution, the election of a national parliament, the lifting of the governing 1975 State Security Law and the release of political detainees with an amnesty for political prisoners and exiles. Similarly, diaspora opposition forces successfully adopted the language and means of their Western host countries in support of these localised political ends. They emphasised human rights and other violations by the Bahraini state through organised demonstrations, petitions, newsletters and other bilingual media - campaigns which were fortified by links to NGOs including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Labour Organisation which generated publicity and thereby pressure on the Bahraini regime. Collaborative working relationships were also established between exiles and elements within British government, including a number of MPs and Lords, most prominent among them Lord Avebury, a determined public critic of the Bahraini regime and its Westminster alliance. This coalescing transnational campaign of the 1990s was thereby situated by its advocates, the exiled opposition at the helm, within a broader global discourse of human rights: a strategy which reflected an emerging ‘post-Islamist’ ethos in the region and has since come to characterise Bahrain’s opposition movement. Such a framework for opposition demands also aligned with the central tenets of progressive internationalism being articulated with reformulations of a so-called “ethical foreign policy” by Blair’s New Labour of the time.

Differences over questions of tactic and principle, however, became more pronounced with the concession by Bahraini authorities to a long-sought political amnesty in 2001. Initiated by King Hamad, the decree granted the release of hundreds of political prisoners, including key opposition leaders, detained on “terrorism” and other political charges during uprisings of the 1990s. So too, those exiled abroad were sanctioned to return to the country to participate as full citizens “within the framework of law and

65 This strategy has been defined by Asef Bayat as “a conscious attempt to conceptualise and strategize the rationale and modalities of transcending Islamism in social, political and intellectual domains.” See Asef Bayat, Islam and Democracy: What Is the Real Question? (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 19.
order”. Though looking upon the terms of the pardon (and genuine prospects for democratisation) with scepticism, many seized the opportunity to repatriate and engage with possible new avenues for reform. Indeed, for many in Britain at the time, such a prospect was without question. As one Cambridge academic later explained, the question of repatriation “should not be asked in terms of it being worthwhile or not: you have to go back to your country. Nobody wants to stay abroad.” However, other long-term exiles, particularly those with families settled in the UK, were compelled otherwise by practical or political considerations. A young British-born activist whose exile father chose to remain in Britain described the subsequent flux in London’s Bahraini community at the time of the amnesty:

There were some ideological considerations by those that had chosen to move and those that stayed. Some applauded the amnesty gratefully. Some made a move but were hesitant of what was to come. Some continued to distrust the government and did not make the move. Some applauded it but stayed in exile. But whether people stayed or moved, this didn't necessarily always reflect ideological convictions.

The caution with which many exiles nonetheless approached regime claims of liberalisation, as signposted by the amnesty, echoed in a prevalent refusal to sign official letters of apology on repatriation. Similarly, most resumed their former oppositional activities in the fields of journalism, trade unionism or civil society after return. A number of key rights organisations were founded during this window of relative liberty, including the internationally prominent Bahrain Centre for Human Rights (BCHR), established in 2002 by Abdulhadi Al Khawaja who returned to the country from Britain after twelve years of activism in exile. So too, pardoned opposition members coordinated to found authorised political organisations (registered parties were at that time illegal in Bahrain, and remain so). Among them, the Shi’ite Islamist Al Wefaq society was established by Ali Salman and quickly became the country’s largest

68 Interview with Fatima, 25 April 2012, London.
political group in terms of membership and polling. However, the scope of permissible political opposition was soon made clear to those inside the country by the announcement of the terms of the 2002 Constitution, which among other caveats, held that the legislative chamber must be appointed exclusively by the King and granted powers equal to those of an elected house. Dissatisfied that any tangible political change had taken place, the majority of opposition candidates boycotted the new document and the attendant parliamentary elections. The routine gerrymandering, arrest, detention without trial, intimidation, vote-rigging, censorship and other abuses by the ruling authorities meanwhile continued to obstruct the acquisition of concrete political influence by the opposition over the following decade. By 2011, international human rights indexes unanimously refuted that Bahrain was an electoral democracy. Rather, repressive practices by the monarchy were condemned and the country classified decisively as “not free”.

Likewise, the experience of returned political exiles after 2001 confirmed the doubts of Bahrainis who chose on principle to remain in Britain, rejecting the amnesty and cursory reform process. Many in the opposition perceived the post-2001 amendments (among which was enshrining the country’s name as “The Kingdom of Bahrain”) as official gestures aimed at preserving the long-term security of Bahrain’s monarchy over the rights of its people. As one dissenting commentary of the time noted, “the liberalization package was formulated as part of a pre-emptive strategy to provide the regime with stability - only as much political reform measure as necessary to appease opposition groups, without alienating the ruling family or any of the pillars of his power.” Despite concessions to human rights and freedom of expression by the more liberally-posturing King, the mechanisms established to suppress the opposition in the mid-1990s remained intact under the new constitution, as administered by the anti-

71 This protest tactic was later reversed by Al Wefaq, who later contested and won a number of seats in the national parliament. For more on the organisation’s activities, see the website of al Wefaq National Islamic Society at: http://alwefaq.net/cmsen/our-work.
reform hardliner PM. In the light of these constraints, some exiles resolved that the most authentic, constructive form of opposition they could pose was from outside Bahrain. The question of engagement with what many viewed as a circumscribed reform process, inimical to democratic progress, thus subtly differentiated the opposition, locally and abroad. As one young activist and daughter of a London-based exile explained:

Some went back, thinking that they would be able to participate in the reform process. We don’t discuss this, and there is not any hostility between families who left and stayed. We would still talk to them and gather socially, like Labour and Conservative voters would in Britain. But since 2002, there has been an awareness of who has done what. It is understood.74

The social fluidity between the different facets of the diaspora opposition in Britain stands in marked contrast to the gulf dividing them from their regime-supporting counterparts. Activists from the opposition community in London, almost without exception reported having no social contact with the latter elements, the majority of them Sunni and often students on government-sponsored scholarships. The groups’ respective political activities had engendered occasional communication, most frequently with hostile connotations, beyond which there appeared to be a self-enforcing divide. As one British-born activist explained, “we don’t talk to the pro-government side. We know who they are, they know who we are and we know where each other lives, but we don’t talk.”75 Similarly, another young Shi’ite activist noted the distinction between his more diverse social sphere in Bahrain and the stark ideological divides of the Bahraini diaspora in Britain. As he explained, “when I was in Bahrain, I maintained good relations with Sunni friends, though many of them were regime supporters. But in London it's different - I have no personal communication with any of them.”

The antagonisms animating political conflict inside Bahrain were thus magnified among the diaspora in Britain, whose political segregation was as apparent, if not as violent. So too, the threat posed to the regime by more radical forms of contestation from abroad was confirmed by the continued persecution of diaspora figures, underscored in the initial period of purported reform post-2002. Many of those exiles accused of terrorist

74Interview with Fatima, 2012.
75Interview with Fatima, 2012.
activities by the monarchy in the decades after independence, found the same charges mounted against them under the new constitution. Naming on official lists of terror-cells, *in absentia* trials for plotting to overthrow the government, and the threat of Interpol arrest warrants became fixtures of their demonisation and denunciation by local authorities in Bahrain. Some also encountered physical intimidation in England, with the London home of the BFM founder Saeed Shehabi attacked by arsonists in 2009 in what was interpreted as a political threat. The ongoing use of such trademark tools of authoritarianism served to cement opposition beliefs in the regime’s illegitimacy, and in turn, a commitment to undermining the government’s repression through transnational contestation. Shortly after another terror-related charge by the regime in 2010, Saeed Shehabi explained to a London press conference:

> [Since 1975] we suffered immensely under the state security court and state security law. Then in 2000 this man came and promised he would create a Plato’s republic in Bahrain. But now we can only see a hell on earth… I was implicated in 1980, 1984, 1988, 1996, 2007, 2009 and this time… We know they have been recruiting agents inside and outside, some in this room. For years we know that they are planning to undermine our cause.77

This long reach of the Bahraini regime, ever vigilant in policing its subjects and defending its interests abroad, in many respects fortified the connection between exiles and oppositional politics inside Bahrain. The issuing of active legal charges and threats across borders gave added currency to opposition activities, reifying the place of exiled activists on the expanding stage of Bahraini national politics. Similarly, the presence of family members in Bahrain, combined with the island’s small population, enabled activists in London to retain close ties to local politics via regular communication and coordination with those active on the ground. Such channels were strengthened by the movement of opposition figures between Britain and Bahrain in the form of exiles who chose to return to the country following the amnesty of 2001-2, among them Abdulhadi Al Khawaja who repatriated from Britain after twelve years of activism abroad. As such, the UK-based Bahraini opposition remained outside the country, but “inside the

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people”. Contrary to the experience of some other diaspora communities, exile in many respects enhanced the local profile of Bahrain’s opposition abroad, now able to seize the instruments of democratic civil society to adopt a more vocal and visible international stance against the regime. So too, assistance rendered to new exiles by those already established in Britain helped to cement London as a base for the Bahraini opposition abroad during the decades post-independence. As Al Khawaja’s prominent, young Europe-based activist and daughter Maryam, explained, “we’ve had a Bahraini opposition living and operating from London for a long time. They’ve played a strong role in advocacy and in helping those who need to get out, which is why most Bahrainis come to London. Like the rest of the country, the diaspora is tiny, but it has a strong connection with those inside Bahrain.”

Thus when pro-democracy campaigners turned out at Pearl Roundabout in Manama and Bahrain’s London embassy in Belgravia for the scheduled “Day of Rage” protests in February 2011, their demands came not only with a sense of continuity across time, but also across borders. The date of the protests was elected to coincide with the anniversary of the referendum for the National Action Charter on 14 February 2001, and to highlight that its democratic ‘guarantees’ remained unrealised. Inside Bahrain, both established opposition figures and younger activists, including those who would later call themselves the “February 14 Youth Coalition”, turned out across the country to denounce the failed accord and demand a return to the terms of the 1971 constitution. As the then President of the Bahrain Youth Society for Human Rights explained, “we have been in revolt for more than a century… This uprising marks the death of the national charter a decade later.” Diaspora activists too, were acutely aware that although inspired by events in Egypt and Tunisia, the campaign which surfaced in Bahrain from February 2011 was not a nascent product of the so-called “Arab Spring”. As one young British-Bahraini explained in June 2014, “in terms of uprisings, this is nothing new to Bahrain. Every decade there is an uprising just like this one – these have


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been our demands since the British left in 1971. So now we are just trying to get back that broken promise.”

Many of Bahrain’s veteran dissidents, inside the country and abroad, were therefore at the forefront of the 2011 uprising, reiterating their unmet demands of old within a new, vastly augmented protest movement. Established opposition activists and MPs were joined by demonstrators from across the demographic spectrum, many of them politicised by security forces’ ruthless violence, as well as local and international voices from Bahrain’s vibrant blogging sphere. Links between protestors on the ground and the transnational opposition were likewise galvanised by the regime’s renewed attacks on exiles as well as protest leaders. In what Bahrainis refer to as “the case of icons”, twenty-one opposition figures, including politicians, rights activists, bloggers, Shi’ite clerics and exiles, some already detained in Bahrain, were named by authorities from March 2011 in relation to their role in the unrest. Following a series of arrests, the group were tried (some in absentia) and convicted of “setting up terror groups to topple the royal regime and change the constitution”. While the seven exiles among them were beyond the reach of physical harm, the detention and mistreatment of the remaining thirteen prisoners, routinely subjected to torture and injustices, became a pivotal rallying point for the Bahraini uprising and a major focus of international attention.

The enthusiastic repression of protests by Bahrain’s security forces – what the NGO Reporters without Borders described as the “perfect example of successful crackdowns” – thus quickly altered the dynamics of the uprising both in and outside Bahrain. The severity with which the government sought to counter protest in its earliest months meant that the axis of visible opposition began to shift away from Bahrain. Newly-exiled and settled diaspora activists with the means to give expression to

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80 Interview with Thaer, London, 7 December 2012.
81 The group included Al Khawaja and secular liberals like Ibrahim Sharif, as well as the Al Haq and Al Wefaq leaders, Abduljalil AlSingace and Hasan Mushaima. The term ‘Bahrain 13’ was coined by Amnesty International to refer to the detainees and later adopted by media sources.

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rebellion became coordinators, advocates and media spokespeople for those stifled by
the local crackdown. Many young British-Bahrainis assumed roles at the forefront of
the international campaign, providing information and publicity to activists on the
ground as regime violence escalated. As one young woman described her early
experiences of the uprising from abroad:

> At the time of the massacre on February 17 at Pearl roundabout, Bahraini TV was airing
  a cooking programme. It was so sad to see intelligent people unable to express what was
  going on in their minds and on their streets. The revolution was still there, inside
  people, but it had been gagged. I felt a responsibility on my part to continue what they
  started because I am lucky enough to be in England. Of course I have received
  numerous death threats, or people calling me a ‘dirty Iranian, but here I have the luxury
  of freedom.84

Attempts to eliminate opposition inside Bahrain thus served instead to propagate
dissident activity amongst a new generation of Bahrainis. The prominence of social
media in 2011 helped catalyse revolutionary sentiment amongst young Bahrainis, one of
the Gulf’s most technologically-literate demographics85, and their mobilisation in turn
reflected a continuum of the previous century’s campaign. However, youth activism
also signified an elaboration on these demands, with the new movement coalescing into
what were often more radical forms of protest with a more subversive agenda. As the
London-based activist and son of prominent political detainee, Ali, described of the
shifting dynamics in the opposition since 2011:

> Now there are many new youth leaders who are able to mobilise in ways that parties
  like Al Wefaq could not do, for example, the February 14 Movement. They have a huge
  amount of belief and faith and an ability to get people out on the street. Of course we
  wouldn’t just line-up behind anyone who promises to help us, but it is necessary to
  continue our protest with new leaders, especially with old ones like my father in
  prison.86

84 Interview with Fatima, 2012.
85 Zahera Harb, “Arab Revolutions and the social media effect,” Media Culture Journal 14(2) (2011) at:
2012].
Indeed, the influence of fresh leadership from abroad could be discerned in burgeoning youth protest activities on the ground, frequently employing (or espousing) an element of force in their tactics, for example, the “Bahrain Fist” movement.

Other new activists recounted becoming politicised by the ongoing and increasingly visible social inequities of present-day Bahrain. As Sunni authorities continued to buttress their minority rule through judicial discrimination and demographic engineering projects, including the mass ‘naturalisation’ of immigrants from Sunni Muslim countries, the magnitude of the system of repression became evermore apparent to young Bahrainis in their encounters with the state.87 Indeed, these ‘new’ Bahrainis, many of whom are originally from Yemen, Pakistan and Syria, have become a pillar of the Bahraini Defence Force – an institution from which Shi’ite Bahrainis are officially excluded.88 One young, British-educated activist, now a refugee in London, described how he was drawn into opposition activism after returning to Bahrain from England, inspired by the uprisings of 2011. Like so many others, he was subsequently imprisoned and tortured for his activities and returned to the UK as a political refugee in 2012. As he recounted:

It is amazing how the demands the political leaders expressed in the 1950s are the very same demands the people have right now… But before I was not fully aware of these political injustices. It is only when you go home to Bahrain and everywhere you see these people who don’t even speak Arabic – working in banks and hospitals and government offices - who are simply mercenaries. Only when you see how the regime is actually trying to change the demography of the country by naturalising citizens, do you really understand.89

This new wave of activist exiles in Britain expanded the Bahraini opposition base in London exponentially, with vibrant campaigns now coordinated from the community

centre hub in Euston – the de facto “embassy for the revolution”. This re- animated, transnational opposition thus provided an “international front” for the uprisings, overlaying past grievances with the resolve of a new generation of dissidents. As the 24-year old Fatima explained of the broadened UK opposition sphere after 2011, “there is a new scene happening now that is not about the old guard. Before, political activism was something my dad and his friends did. But now it is inclusive of a much wider sphere. The fuel has completely changed.”

**The right way to frame things: Britain and reform in Bahrain**

As the properties of this new fuel were being tested on 17 February at Pearl Roundabout, where three days of brutal siege by the Bahraini Defence Force (BDF) had failed to drive out demonstrators, MP MacShane continued his line of questioning to the Foreign Secretary. The mounting security presence in downtown Manama saw police and army officers, many of them mercenaries, storming campsites with clubs and knives to destroy tents, amid proliferating teargas and birdshot. Ambulances attempting to assist the wounded were blockaded from the square at gunpoint. On the outskirts of the capital, a number of Shi’a villages were meanwhile overrun with police raids combing for protest organisers. Continuing his line of questioning, the Member for Rotherham proposed that London might be helping to sustain the escalating crackdown:

> Why is there no statement on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website with even the tiniest hint from the Foreign Secretary to the rulers of Bahrain that they must move with the times?...Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that late last year, his FCO ministerial colleagues signed off on exports to Bahrain of tear gas, irritant ammunition, riot control equipment and other matériel used to crush democracy? Does he agree that it would be better if the financial links between Bahrain and Members of this House were now suspended? Does the Foreign Secretary agree that almost a century of British

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90 Interview with Ala’a, London, 19 May 2012.
92 Interview with Fatima, 2012.
policy...based on turning a blind eye to the repression and corruption of the regimes in this region may be coming to an end?94

Once more at pains to emphasise the shared British-Bahraini determination for reform, Hague in turn stressed “a right way to frame those things - with a deeper understanding of what is happening in those societies.” Sensitivity to the political context in Bahrain, he claimed, entailed recognition of the unique tensions there, in particular those exacerbated by Iran. Where each country had a “different pace of reforms”95, diplomacy proceeding from this understanding would produce the most effective outcomes.

Indeed, Bahrain’s rulers were quick to integrate, rhetorically at least, the message of reform being echoed by Europe and the US. Claiming that it had “successfully completed its mission”, Bahrain’s military withdrew from Pearl Roundabout on 20 February.96 Crown Prince Salman publicly reassured citizens and international observers that demonstrators could remain at the site without fear of violence, promising an official investigation into the killings. Bahrain’s monarchy, he claimed, had “decided that the best way to handle the situation without any further loss of life or injuries is through dialogue” – an initiative which he was delegated to lead. In a rare Western media interview on CNN, the Prince lamented in flawless English the loss of life and divisive sectarianism of previous weeks. Comparing the violence at Pearl Roundabout to the conflict in Northern Ireland, he told reporters, “this is our tragedy... and we almost lost our soul.”97 Accordingly, he offered guarantees of a return to “normal” through inclusive dialogue. As he explained, “what happened today is the first step in rebuilding trust...What we must do is extend our hand to all of those who would like to reach out across the aisle, from all sects and all political ideologies and say ‘enough’.”98 In a substantiating gesture, King Hamad ordered the release of a number of key Shi’ite prisoners under royal pardon, among them the leader of the opposition Al

94 United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1136, 17 February 2011.
95 United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1137, 17 February 2011.
98 Interview with CNN News, 2011.
Haq party, Hassan Mushaima, who has been arrested en route from Britain to Manama the previous week.

Demonstrators and political opposition members, however, were not satisfied by these concessions. The military’s patent brutality had seen protestors’ demands mount across a week from reform to an outright call for the end of the Al Khalifa monarchy – a demand in which there remained scant patience for dialogue. As a large banner hanging between two palm trees at the tent city announced, "whoever thinks they can liquidate our cause by suggesting dialogue is under illusion." The official opposition, comprising a coalition of the kingdom's largest Shi’ite group, the Islamic National Accord Association (INAA), and six other Shi’ite, liberal, leftist and Arab nationalist groups, stopped short of this platform, rejecting dialogue until a number of preconditions had been met. An opposition statement claimed that any process of dialogue must be “built on clear foundations”, primarily the resignation of the government headed by PM bin Salman and establishment of a “real” constitutional monarchy.

British leaders nonetheless appeared more contented with the monarchs’ reformist offerings. Only hours before Salman’s announcement, a hurried review into UK export provisions to Bahrain, including tear gas canisters and riot prevention equipment, had resulted in the revoking of some British fifty licences on the advice of the FCO. The Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, Alistair Burt, claimed that the review had been inspired by the “changing situation in Bahrain”, and that Britain would not tolerate its products being used to "facilitate internal repression". With surface calm restored by the crackdown on the ground, Cameron thus addressed Gulf leaders in the Kuwaiti parliament with an air of confidence, if not genuine conviction, on events in Bahrain. The PM’s treatise did not airbrush the spectre of violence from Bahrain, but

100 “Bahrain protestors show no sign of retreat,” Al Arabiya News.
rather endorsed Salman’s pledges of a revised and restrained approach. As he explained, "using force cannot resolve grievances, only multiply and deepen them. We condemned the violence in Bahrain, and welcome the fact that the military has now been withdrawn from the streets and His Royal Highness the Crown Prince has embarked on a broad national dialogue."\(^{103}\)

Hopes for a return to normalcy on the part of either Bahrain’s or Britain’s leadership, however, proved short-lived. With the opposition divided over preconditions for dialogue, and talks between the Crown Prince and opposition at a standstill, violent confrontation re-escalated to critical levels within weeks. An urgent request to the GCC from Bahraini authorities on March 14 saw 120 Saudi armoured vehicles cross the sixteen-kilometre causeway between the two kingdoms to the Bahraini capital, where they were met by protestors offering flowers and chants of “peaceful”. In what Bahraini authorities swiftly deemed a “showing of solidarity among the GCC”,\(^{104}\) some 1,000 troops and 500 police officers from the UAE stationed themselves around key facilities, including oil and gas installations and financial institutions, while the BDF moved in to clear protestors.\(^{105}\) Demonstrators, meanwhile, denounced the invasion as a declaration of war. As an opposition statement claimed, "we consider the arrival of any soldier, or military vehicle, into Bahraini territory... an overt occupation of the kingdom of Bahrain and a conspiracy against the unarmed people of Bahrain."\(^{106}\) A three-month state of emergency was in turn announced by King Hamad, authorising the armed forces to take all necessary measures to "protect the safety of the country and its citizens".\(^{107}\)

When called on in the Commons to address the actions of the monarchy days later, the Foreign Secretary was more grave. The situation, he acknowledged, was “serious and deteriorating.” As he noted, “the whole House will deplore the loss of life and the

\(^{103}\) Prime Minister’s speech to the National Assembly, Kuwait, 2011.


\(^{106}\) “Gulf states send forces to Bahrain following protests,” *BBC News*.

escalation of violence. The Prime Minister spoke to the King of Bahrain two evenings ago to emphasise that violence is unacceptable and counter-productive—whether it be from protesters, vigilante groups or the security forces.”108 Yet when questioned about the possibility of intervention to stall the violence in Bahrain, through measures akin to those currently being devised by the international community on Libya, Hague was careful to distinguish the two instances. As he explained, “it is important not to think about the issue…in terms of western intervention; it is about the responsibilities of the wider world, including the Arab world…Any action that appeared to be ‘the west’ trying to impose itself on these countries would be counter-productive” Hague emphasised that, unlike in Libya, “many positive attempts at reform”, including dialogue and a referendum on a new constitution, were underway in the Kingdom. The two circumstances must not be viewed “as analogous”. The Secretary concluded with an appraisal of his office’s goals in the region, namely, to sponsor the hopes and aspirations of millions seeking change; to deter a nuclear Iran; “to encourage dialogue in very troubled countries such as Bahrain and Yemen; and now—today—to seek international agreement on protection and support for the people of Libya”.109

While international attention and political energies were consumed with the latter more pressing and large-scale objective in North Africa, events on the ground in Bahrain served in themselves as a riposte to Hague’s claims. Shrouded by near-complete media opacity and bolstered by the presence of GCC troops and a retinue of foreign mercenaries, the worst regime atrocities unfolded - a bloody siege emblematised by the BDF assault on Salmaniya Medical Complex from 17 March.110 With the square cleared of protestors, hundreds of them in the hands of security forces, Bahraini authorities several days later moved in to bulldoze Pearl Roundabout itself. The monument was levelled and replaced by a freeway in what state media justified as a “facelift” to boost traffic flow.111 Protest was nonetheless unrelenting and by June, King Hamad announced a new investigative panel, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry

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110 As a US Congressman commented after his contact with one of the hospital’s assaulted staff, “when you lose medical neutrality, as Bahrain has done, the civility of society is lost.” For more on the assault at the Sulmaniya Complex, see “World Report 2012: Bahrain,” *Human Rights Watch* at: http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-bahrain [accessed 12 August 2012].
(BICI), to investigate the unrest of past months. The BICI (known locally as the “Bassiouni Commission”), was established following consultation with global bodies including the UN Commission of Human Rights and constituted by five esteemed international experts, with the Egyptian former UN war-crimes sage Sherif Bassiouni at its head. A novel initiative for any government in the region, varnished by a slick publicity apparatus, the Commission was hailed by NGOs and international leaders (Britain among them) as “an unprecedented and positive response to the unrest”.112

However, the fresh enterprise did little to sow expectation among Bahrain’s local or international opposition that old precedents of ruling oppression or international exoneration would be shifted. Rather, more telling in effect and enduring in impact was the lingering image of Saudi troops closing in on the island in February: a coordinated international response that confirmed beyond any formal inquiry the geopolitical framework shaping governance in Bahrain. Commentators likewise observed the magnitude of Gulf influence in the muted international response to the coordinated crackdown.113 The fuller extent of British cooperation in the Saudi-let operation would later come to light with gradual revelations of assistance in the form of military provisions in training recruits from the Saudi Arabian National Guard by the British Armed Forces.114 Yet the trajectory of British official commentary on events in Bahrain was in itself sufficient testament to an unyielding diplomatic support from the outset. Maryam, whose father was arrested within weeks of the Saudi invasion and later handed a life-sentence, characterised opposition perceptions of this alliance in her account of London’s response. As she explained:


113 As Toby Matthiesen recounted of events, “apart from the security aspect, the enormous economic and political power built up by the wealthy Gulf states was put into effect to ensure that few in the Arab world or the West would dare to denounce the repression in Bahrain.” See Toby Matthiesen, “(No) Dialogue in Bahrain,” Middle East Research and Information Project, 13 February 2011 at: http://www.merip.org/mero/mero021314 [accessed 15 February 2011].

The way it worked in the beginning was that there was some kind of attempt by the UK government to a minor degree to try and pretend that they sort of cared about human rights and democracy in Bahrain. But of course this was totally messed up when the Saudis came in. There was absolutely no condemnation by anyone, whether from the perspective of human rights, international law or otherwise. It simply didn't happen. That the British are actually playing a role in this is something that is understood by a lot of Bahrainis – the UK has been one of the leading forces in helping this regime stay in power. And this is not something that started in 2011, it goes back way beyond that.115

Where British officials had in the past selectively intervened to temper extreme instances of violence or injustice by Bahrain’s rulers prior to independence – or as one former ambassador recently stated, “when the regime got too firm with the stick” – it now however appeared that Bahrain was beyond reprimand in Britain. This was confirmed for many by Cameron’s reception of the Crown Prince in May 2011 as the crackdown continued unchecked. (Salman had diplomatically declined to attend the Royal Wedding the previous month after his invitation provoked censure in the British press.116) His visit was nonetheless met with outcry from opposition supporters, including from MP MacShane who deplored the PM for “rolling out the red carpet for… the real-life, real-time crushing of the human spirit”.117 Downing Street’s photocall with the monarch likewise served as a stark contrast to a coinciding speech by Obama in which the President praised the “Arab spring” and castigated its repression by Bahrain’s rulers. The PM was unapologetic, reportedly emphasising the Crown Prince’s “long-standing work to achieve political and economic progress” and giving further guarantees of British support for the reform process.118

The aftermath of the BICI from November 2011 thus served as a vindication of the depth of this support for the Bahraini opposition. The commission’s 513-page report

115 Interview with Maryam Al Khawaja (via Skype), 11 July 2013.
118 Watt, “Anger as Cameron invites Bahrain crown prince to No 10.”
laid out in unadorned language the “unnecessary and excessive force”, systematic mistreatment and culture of unaccountability with which the Bahraini government had responded to popular challenges since February 2011. Likewise, it found no evidence to substantiate government propaganda alleging Iranian involvement in the protests. The detailed catalogue of reform recommendations, from security protocols to Bahrain’s penal code, state media practices and reparation for victims of government abuse, were accepted wholesale by King Hamad, who established a National Commission to monitor their implementation. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon firmly encouraged the Bahraini regime to adhere, while Hague welcomed the findings and urged “all opposition groups to act on the report’s recommendations, demonstrating their commitment to reconciliation and contributing to the process of renewal.”

Yet the report’s real merit was as a remedy for international censure, not local injustice. While some recommendations had resulted in tangible change by the March 2012 implementation deadline, the key mechanisms and actors in Bahrain’s autocratic government remained in place (indeed, some figures such as the Head of Security in February 2011, had been awarded promotions since the BICI findings.) Those reforms which had been realised overwhelmingly aimed to rectifying single, high-profile instances of abuse, rather than addressing the vast structural inequities in political and economic power. So too, a long-deferred visit by the UN Special Rapporteur for torture was once again cancelled and NGOs, including Human Rights Watch, universally indicated that the regime had taken a “step backwards” in abuses. Counter to these concerns, the FCO fluidly seized BICI recommendations as evidence of progress, with UK officials favourably appraising the reform programme. As Foreign Minister Alistair Burt commented in February 2012, “we welcome the steady progress

on…the Commission's recommendations, and efforts to ensure that Bahrain's policing meets international standards and has at its centre a respect for human rights.”

Observing the outcomes of the report in a brief interlude between prison spells (for among other charges, “publically insulting residents of a Sunni neighbourhood”), the president of the Bahrain Centre for Human Rights, Nabeel Rajab, noted that:

It sounds good and it looks good. But when someone accused of crimes forms a commission to investigate itself, that is not called ‘independent’… Do you think there is any way the commission will say that the King, the one who founded it, is the bad guy? When you judge from the practice, and you see criminals still in their jobs, and no effort to bring torturers to justice, there is no change.

(Indeed, a former British diplomat in Bahrain later more broadly compared the prospect of Bahrain’s royals consenting to reforms to that of “asking turkeys to vote for Christmas.”) Diaspora activists in Britain likewise noted the efficacy with which BICI could be deployed to abrogate the need for criticism by the regime’s Western allies. As Sayed noted:

Bassiouni is the best PR game the Bahraini regime could play, and Britain has been the report’s biggest advocate. It has allowed them to say ‘Bahrain is the only regime who has done this’. It has documented what we all know and all agree on: that there is systematic torture. But we don’t need an investigation to show us this: what we need is for someone to be named who is responsible for the killing.

British energies nonetheless continued to be channelled into efforts to dilute the appearance of regime culpability. Within weeks of the BICI release, former Assistant Metropolitan Police Commissioner, John Yates, was hired as an advisor to the Bahrain Ministry of Interior (MOI) to assist in reforming the “culture of impunity” that had reportedly produced the security forces’ 2011 response. Indeed, this counsel from Yates

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124 United Kingdom, Hansard, Written Answers to Questions, House of Commons, Col. 799W, 22 February 2012
126 Rajab interview with BBC Hardtalk, 2012.
(who had publically resigned in Britain months earlier around the phone-hacking controversy) consolidated to intercept protests marking the anniversary of events at Pearl Roundabout in February 2012 - dissent which the Commissioner dismissed as “just vandalism, rioting on the streets.” While British officials denied any formal connection with Yates’ service in Bahrain, developments which attended his appointment were commended by the Foreign Office. Likewise, the apparent relationship between Whitehall and the Bahraini MOI was underscored when Yates accompanied the Bahraini Minister of the Interior to London for meetings with the Director General of MI5 and other officials, from whom he was reportedly “keen to learn”. The liaisons in turn raised questions around his role in facilitating surveillance of Bahraini dissidents in Britain, especially those being tried in absentia. Few Bahrainis could therefore overlook the striking analogy between Yates and the regime’s former security adviser, Henderson, who had so efficiently orchestrated the repression of dissent in the previous century. Like others, Sayed, who was himself detained and tortured by the regime before being granted asylum in the UK, described how Yates personified a long line of British security assistance to stabilise Bahrain’s internal affairs under the rubric of reform. As he explained:

Just like under Henderson, since Yates arrived, arrests and violations have actually gotten worse. But this time they have taught the police in Bahrain how to keep your violations and crimes hidden. You can do the same things, but there will be no more of those stupid, messy crimes the regime committed in public in early 2011. Now it is all about the ‘intelligent’ crackdown.

The rising toll of casualties - in particular from torture in detention and the highest per capita use or teargas in the world - did little to generate credible impressions of human rights based reform. Despite this, simultaneous and extensive public-relations resources seconded from the UK suggested that British interests lay in sanitising, rather

130 Lubbock and Horne, “Policing Bahrain.”
131 Interview with Sayed, 2013.
than solving, the more unpalatable aspects of governance in Bahrain. Over the two years from February 2011, its rulers are estimated to have spent or allocated some £19 million for services from at least seven different London-based ‘PR’ companies. As (albeit limited) international press coverage of Bahrain continued to catalogue instances of abuse and sectarian discrimination, PR companies from Britain and the US were enlisted to stem the tide of criticism. Thus, while the UK-based Bahraini opposition and its allies worked strenuously to expose regime atrocities abroad through petitions, direct lobbying, public events and weekly protests at the Saudi and Bahraini embassies in London, there was a sense that their efforts were being countered by Western campaigns to bolster Bahrain’s image. As was explained by one activist who had lobbied the FCO and Downing Street extensively around the issue of reform, “in Bahrainis’ long-standing struggle for liberation and democracy, the international legitimacy of the regime is what is stopping us achieving our demands. This legitimacy is conferred by the UK and US and achieved through PR companies cementing a narrative, and spending millions trying to delegitimise the opposition.”

Indeed, the narrative employed to scaffold the practical assistance rendered by British PR and security experts to Bahrain served to confirm in principle London’s agenda. As in the past, official recognition of the violent reality of events in Bahrain was largely elided from public commentary on the country. Instead, abuses were once again masked by a false paradigm of reform, packaged in language which sought to diminish its scale or create parity with opposition violence. Many Bahrainis noted the recurrence of key Al Khalifa tropes in official British statements, from an emphasis on sectarian tensions to condemnations of violence “on both sides” and calls for opposition engagement in national dialogue. The regime’s resurrection of conspiratorial accounts of dissent from 2011, namely “violence and terrorism” by local and foreign enemy agents, were coupled with thinly-veiled, or often direct, references to the age-old threat of Shi’a extremism.

133 As documented in “PR Watch,” Bahrain Watch, 23 November 2012 at: https://bahrainwatch.org/pr/[accessed 30 November 2012].
134 See “PR Watch,” Bahrain Watch.
135 The reach of Gulf leverage has been noted by a number of academics who have been discouraged from speaking out on Bahrain by their universities, or actively barred from visiting Gulf countries, as well as the self-censorship of Western media outlets with high-level pressure from investors and advertisers. As detailed in email exchange with anonymous academic, 5 August 2013.
136 Interview with Ala’a, 2012.
from Iran. Such well-worn tropes once more afforded justification for the employment of appropriately harsh counter-extremist measures by the regime, devices which were all too familiar to dissident targets in Britain over previous decade. Their banality did not however preclude their re-use to vilify opposition inside and beyond Bahrain’s borders into the twenty-first century. As Saeed Shehabi noted wearily of his recurrent indictment as a terror suspect in the national press at the time:

Terrorism did not exist in Bahrain and it does not exist. It is only in the minds of the royal family. Terrorism is when you speak your mind and oppose the regime… I have been implicated in every single ‘terror’ cell since 2001, with people I have never met, and never heard of. I am always the mastermind of the plot, named at the top of some fictional organisational structure, of course aligned with Hezbollah and supported by Iran, and always with all the headlines ‘MoI has uncovered cell’.137

Not only did this language, as noted by the BICI itself, serve to correlate internal dissent with terrorism,138 it also re-cast opposition to the regime along sectarian lines in what many regarded as a far more damaging false paradigm of political contest in Bahrain. From their inception, the mass demonstrations at Pearl Roundabout and across Manama were attended by aggrieved Bahrainis of Shi’a, Sunni and other denominational backgrounds. Although the rekindled uprising, like the Bahraini political opposition itself, drew its base from the country’s subordinated Shi’a majority, protestors were rigorous in emphasising a unified, cross-sect campaign: an ethos which echoed that of Bahrain’s progressive political movements since prior to independence. These anti-sectarian sentiments were reflected in common chants of “No Sunni, no Shi’a” and banners proclaiming “We are one”. Members of the diaspora too, were emphatic that the opposition campaign was inspired by a democratic, not ideological, spirit. As Hussein explained, “the tension is not between Shi’a and Sunni in Bahrain. It is more about a divide between those who call for democracy and change and those who cannot imagine any change.”139 Corroborating this empirical experience, Christopher Davidson has noted that an enduring sectarian narrative was employed more vociferously by the Bahraini regime after 2011. As he observes:

139 Interview with Hussein, London, 15 June 2012.
The Al Khalifa’s government has enjoyed some success in persuading the west that the opposition they face is some kind of fifth column serving the interests of Shi’a Iran. There is a lack of evidence for this view, yet it is a convenient explanation for the west to accept; for it allows policy-makers to avoid the truth that Bahrain’s unrest is also a part of the Arab spring and… is primarily a contest between those who seek reform and democracy, and those who seek to maintain autocratic control over power and resources.  

Outside of the country, the subtle currency given to this narrative by the regime’s Western allies was seen by Bahrainis as equally destructive. In its 2011 annual report on “Human Rights and Democracy”, the FCO referred to an opposition campaign in Bahrain which was increasingly “militant and sectarian”.  

A later address on the subject of sectarian politics by the Foreign Secretary at the high-profile 2012 “Manama Dialogue” conference qualified this terminology by condemning attempts to inflame tension, with Hague advocating a “move away from political structures that favour the rule of one sect over another” towards citizenship based on policy, not identity.  

However, to many Bahrainis, such claims were undercut by London’s longer-standing use of language that aggravated a ‘divide-and-rule’ tactic by the monarchy, while undermining the opposition on an international scale. Such discursive frameworks were widely noted in official statements which emphasised opposition extremism, as well as in reductive media coverage by outlets like the BBC. As Hussein observed, British institutions had thereby helped “fuel the counter-revolution by using phrases like sectarianism, giving the impression to the world that it is not about democracy and human rights in Bahrain - it is about the Shi’a who are influenced by Iran.”  

London’s references to the rare instances of force among opposition demonstrators were

143 Interview with Sayed, 2013.
likewise seen to have created a semblance of parity between the abuses of the regime and its opponents. Thaer, who had been heavily engaged in media relations on the part of the Bahraini opposition in Britain, described what he considered to be the typical practice of British officials on Bahrain. As he noted:

> There is only one language – that of concern. ‘We are concerned about X, Y, Z acts by the ruling family, but we condemn the violence by the opposition. Regardless of the kind of crime the regime is committing – torture, killing, demolition – when it comes to protestors, they always condemn any hint of violence. This totally reflects the attitude of the FCO: when it comes to human rights abuse in Bahrain, there is only concern.\(^ {144}\)

Similarly, Maryam pointed to a popular protest slogan which reflected an acute awareness of British double-standards among the local opposition: “you say violence on both sides needs to stop. Then you continue selling arms to one.” As she noted, “there is no comparison, no measurement for the imbalance in violence on the two sides. But people recognise the support that is coming from places like the UK, both military and political.”\(^ {145}\)

This ostensibly licensed abuse in Bahrain was likewise magnified in the context of Britain’s simultaneous confrontation of neighbouring dictatorships. While NATO attempted to edge its military campaign ever-deeper into Libya, and Whitehall echoed with sabre-rattling over Assad’s bloody crackdown in Syria, the assault against Bahraini citizens was by all appearances of only passing consequence in London. This contrast was perhaps rendered most patent with the Coalition government’s rejection of calls for the cancellation of the Formula One Grand Prix in April 2012 – what the opposition deemed as “sportswash” of the atrocities on the island.\(^ {146}\) While Amnesty International warned that "no-one should be under any illusions" that the country’s crisis has ameliorated, British Formula One CEO Bernie Ecclestone disparaged the proposed boycott of the event as “a lot of nonsense” (instead instructing journalists to “go to Syria

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\(^ {144}\) Interview with Thaer, 2012.

\(^ {145}\) Interview with Maryam, 2013.

\(^ {146}\) Cameron’s government was put on the backfoot in the prelude to the race after Labour leader Ed Miliband and his shadow home secretary Yvette Cooper decided to boycott the event on human rights grounds, as requested by Bahraini protestors.
and write about those things”.

Crown Prince Salman was similarly defensive, arguing that “cancelling the race would just empower extremists”. Rather, the monarch projected the event as a “force for good…[uniting] many people from many different religious backgrounds, sects and ethnicities”. When pressed for a more detailed defence of his government’s stance in favour of the event, Cameron lucidly confirmed the official narrative that the violence in Bahrain was relative. As he told BBC news reporters, “let me be clear, we always stand up for human rights and it's important that peaceful protests are allowed to go ahead. But I think we should be clear: Bahrain is not Syria. There is a process of reform under way and this government backs that reform.”

The comparison quickly sparked umbrage amongst the Bahraini opposition and its advocates abroad, as reflected in Tweets commenting that “The PM should spend a night in a tear-gassed village”; “DC is right, Bahrain has the money to buy his goodwill” and “by 'reform', does he mean inbound foreign direct investment?”

Similarly, for activists in Britain, the PM’s argument confirmed suspicions that in Westminster the Bahraini struggle, like Bahraini lives, were only as valuable as their political cache. As Hussein, who had also experienced brutality at the hands of Bahrain’s security forces, commented:

So the message is that there needs to be more bloodshed to make self-determination worthwhile? It has to be more brutal and violent to show that people are struggling? In Syria you have a situation where there is clearly violence and extremism on the part of rebels, and the West is providing weapons, while in Bahrain you have a peaceful

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147 Cited in “What they have said about the Formula One Bahrain Grand Prix,” The Guardian, 22 April 2012 at: http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2012/apr/22/formula-one-grand-prix-bahrain [accessed 23 April 2012].

148 These claims were somewhat undermined just days before the event by the security forces’ killing of a young protestor, whose bullet-strewn body was found on a rooftop of a Shi’a village. Hague was swift to respond – telephoning his Bahraini counterpart to express his “concern” and urge “restraint” by the security forces. See, “What they have said about the Formula One Bahrain Grand Prix,” The Guardian.


150 See responses on Twitter feed at: https://twitter.com/search?q=david%20cameron%20bahrain%20not%20syria&src=typd [accessed 21 April 2012].
democratic protest being crushed, and where are they, the world’s democratic champions? For them, this is about a different kind of struggle.151

Discrepancies in the PM’s stance likewise became the object of official rebuke when the all-party parliamentary committee for the FCO issued sharp criticism of Downing Street’s refusal to boycott the race. Noting the government’s decision not to attend other sporting events on grounds of political conscience, including the UEFA Football Championship 2012 in Ukraine only months earlier, the committee noted that: “we find it difficult to discern any consistency of logic behind the Government’s policy in not taking a public stance on the Bahrain Grand Prix.”152

For Bahrainis, however, there was a more readily-discernible coherence to the Coalition’s policy - namely, that of an undeviating support for repressive Gulf rule in the service of British interests in regional stability. Indeed, such was the ostensible durability of this policy that few anticipated that the events of 2011 would see Britain diverge from this course. Accordingly, Ali gave his own appraisal of a British strategy which continued to set a premium on human rights in the region:

Bahrain is the place where the West fights Iran and we are the victims. It is only through its relationship with Saudi that the Al Khalifa regime has remained in place. So while ‘Bashar must leave’, they can reform. But what is the difference between Bashar and Al Khalifa? What is the difference between women and children killed by the regime in Syria and in Bahrain?153

A veteran observer of UK policy over his thirty-year exile, Saeed likewise echoed a characteristic scepticism that London would ever, as another activist described, “utter the ‘D-word’” in relation to Gulf monarchies: “British interests lie with the dictatorships in the region. While the West’s condemnation of Iran is amongst the greatest in the world, do we ever see any pressure on Saudi? No – instead, the Saudis are reforming.

151 Interview with Sayed, 2013.
152 16 October 2012.
153 Interview with Ali, 2012.
But when it comes to other countries with which Britain disagrees, then you will see all the criticisms flow. This is what we call hypocrisy.”

Britain’s pervasive agenda in the region appeared in turn to have bred aversion among its policy-makers to those advocating any more fundamental change in the Gulf. Noting the history of BFM campaigns in Britain, Saeed related how official dealings with the Bahraini opposition were typically limited to members of recognised political societies – that is, those willing to work within a system prescribed and moderated by the ruling family. Political activists who boycotted Bahrain’s governing institutions or challenged the sectarian hierarchy they enshrined, were by contrast generally perceived as ‘radicals’ and kept at arms-length. As he explained:

There are two categories in the opposition in Bahrain: the political parties representing the parliament, and then all the other leaders who have called for reform and who are behind bars - the ‘extremists’. But British policy-makers will not see people representing that group, people like me, because they consider us radicals – radical because we want change, because we want people to be held to account for their promises.

This experience was reiterated by those from a newer generation of Bahraini dissidents who had assumed the opposition legacy and encountered similar resistance in London. Maryam, whose father undertook a near fatal 110-day hunger strike against the detention of his fellow “icons” in 2012, became one of Bahrain’s most high-profile international campaigners following February 2011 and recounted receiving support from individual MPs and Lords in Britain. She was however unequivocal about the prevailing disinterest with which she was regarded by government officials – a reception reportedly far more hostile than that in Washington. Despite engaging with high-ranking representatives in the US, Maryam was not granted a single meeting with either Secretary Hague or Minister Burt. (Her mother, Khadija Almousawi did eventually meet with the Foreign Minister shortly before he left office in 2013, in what was perceived as a perfunctory meeting to detract from this record.) As she noted:

It has been a lot more difficult in the UK where they are not at all happy to hear about the human rights situation in Bahrain… In the US, through constant lobbying and

154 Interview with Saeed, 2013.
155 Interview with Saeed, 2013.
contact with officials we were actually able to stop an arms sale. In the UK you can barely make a difference; we have not even succeeded in stopping Alistair Burt making patently untrue and illogical statements!

Common views of the US as the most stalwart supporter of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, were hence widely undercut by the case of British-Bahraini relations. Rather, opposition activists recounted that Britain far exceeded its Atlantic counterpart in allegiance to the Bahraini regime after 2011, with its policy seen to have regressed from mild criticism of ruling violence to galvanised support for the Al Khalifas.\textsuperscript{156} To the surprise of many activists, Britain had thus emerged as the most vocal Western champion of, and indeed apologist for, Bahrain’s rulers. As Hussein explained of his observations in 2013:

We are walking backwards. Since 2011, King Hamad has not once visited the US, but he has been to the UK more than three times. This is his favourite Western country, where he is welcomed and invited to meet the PM, where he knows he will be received as an ally and given the cover and the legitimacy which he seeks from the government. And to be honest, I think they are doing a good job.\textsuperscript{157}

The only way forward: reform and uprising in Bahrain

Under further scrutiny from MP MacShane over his party’s record in the Middle-East shortly after NATO forces declared their 2011 victory in Libya, Secretary Hague offered a more decisive articulation of British policy on governing abuses in Bahrain. As he explained: “I do not think that the Bahraini Government are in any doubt about our views on these issues; I expressed them forcefully to the Bahraini ambassador last week… The difference between Bahrain and Libya is that a political process is alive in

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\textsuperscript{156} After the Saudi-led occupation of the country in February, Obama ventured to make a number of critical statements about the practices of the ruling-family, including the allegation that “meaningful dialogue” was not possible while the majority of the opposition remained “behind bars”. See “President Obama Calls for ‘Meaningful dialogue’ and ‘Peaceful change’ for Bahrain,” Bahrain Justice and Development Movement, 21 September 2011 at: http://bahrainjdm.hopto.org/2011/09/21/president-obama-calls-for-meaningful-dialogue-and-peaceful-change-for-bahrain/ [accessed 12 April 2012].

\textsuperscript{157}Interview with Sayed, 2013.
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Bahrain. The only way forward for Bahrain is for that political process to succeed and for an accommodation to be reached between its Shi’a and Sunni communities.”

Yet with the FCO’s ‘forceful’ advice to the Al Khalifas proving largely impotent by late 2012, pragmatism began to assume greater prominence in the Secretary’s remarks on repressive regimes, or those governments who “don’t fully live up to our standards”. Addressing the Royal United Services Institute on the subject of combating extremism abroad, Hague claimed that in order to guarantee its national security, Britain must "approach the world as it is, rather than as we would like it to be." The UK would continue to uphold the highest standards by pursuing "justice and human rights partnerships" with governments with poor records. However, since terrorism prevailed in countries with the weakest “human rights and the rule of law”, cooperation to counter extremism would inevitably present some “extremely difficult ethical and political decisions”. The speech coincided with clashes taking place across Bahrain, as protestors commemorated the second anniversary of the uprising, with one teenage protestor shot dead by security forces. And although it did not directly reference Bahrain, which Hague had visited the previous week to convey his “concern for freedom of expression”, the country’s opposition readily noted its inferences. Many continued to propose that Western governments could use their leverage in bilateral relations to goad more genuine reform and broker dialogue. As former MP, Ali Aswad, who was exiled to Britain after 2011, wrote in *The Guardian* at the time: “without international pressure it will be nothing more than a PR exercise…The government needs to engage directly with the opposition, and the international community needs to see this as one last chance to avoid a real catastrophe in Bahrain”.

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official opposition were more disparaging of the touted reform and Britain’s role therein. As Ala’a opined shortly after Hague’s speech: “So Britain’s policy is now that ‘we don’t negotiate with terrorists, but we do negotiate with tyrants’? Dialogue is just a talking shop – the regime will throw something out that looks like negotiation, but is devoid of sincerity and does not deliver any of its promises.”

The doubtful sincerity of Bahrain’s rulers notwithstanding, the renewed reform programme in turn prompted questions about the real limits of British influence in the Gulf monarchy: that is, whether Hague’s advocated “partnership” and firm-but-fair push for reform might reflect the only way forward for British strategy in Bahrain. Counter to criticisms levelled at Cameron’s government, some observers of London’s approach in Bahrain argued that the gravity of British pressure among its leaders has been underestimated. Those defending the diplomatic route pointed to outcomes of prior instances of censure from British officials, such as that expressed publicly by MPs from Blair’s Labour government shortly after Cook’s formative “ethical foreign policy” speech of 1997. Where any more antagonistic stance might prove alienating to Bahrain’s ruling elite, the historic British alliance was simultaneously identified as an asset, rather than anchor, in escalating diplomatic pressure on Bahrain. As was noted in a RUSI analysis in October 2012, shortly after the PM’s parliamentary rebuke over F1:

> By expressing its opposition publicly – not privately, which is the common practice – the UK also attempted to dissuade its ally from succumbing to its worst and most authoritarian instincts. To achieve its aims the British government relied primarily on its moral authority and persuasion, to which its considerable soft power and historical connections with Bahrain gave real potency.

Many in the Bahraini opposition concurred on the subject of Britain’s unique standing among the island’s rulers. However, it was also widely perceived that the defence of UK strategy on the basis of these relations obscured Britain’s substantive role in Bahrain alongside the related demands of the opposition. Rather than any form of armed

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165 See address by MP George Galloway in United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 298-310, 3 June 1997.
166 Willis, “Britain in Bahrain in 2011.”
intervention in the cast of the Libya campaign, opposition members were emphatic that their requests to Bahrain’s Western allies amounted to no more than that governments refrain from obstructing their campaign – that is, a call for non-interference. Having witnessed the inertia of British policy after 2011, Maryam described how the demands and expectations of the Bahraini opposition had been distilled to this more singular agenda in the years since. As she explained:

At first, we were hoping that the worst case scenario was that Britain decided not to get involved and the best, that they supported the call for human rights and democracy. Bahrainis were basically saying that if you are not going to support the protestors’ call for freedom, at least don’t support the regime crackdown – don’t stand in our way. But this is what they did – going beyond our worst expectation. Currently, we can say that the UK has the worst policy towards Bahrain of any country in the world after Saudi.167

The primacy of British support for the course of Bahrain’s uprising has been noted by observers beyond the diaspora. Among them, one opposition advocate and resident in Bahrain in February 2011 described that, “if it weren’t for the Saudi military and strong political support that the FCO lent the regime – were it simply an internal question – the Al Khalifa regime would have been the third Arab dictatorship to fall.”168 Far from subtle diplomatic backing, it was thus as an active barrier to political progress that many Bahrainis perceived Britain’s role. Ala’a, who participated in the mass rally at the Royal Palace in February 2011, described the feeling this had inspired among many Bahrainis at that time, some quarter of whom turned out in the country’s largest ever demonstration:

To be so close to a break-through and see an entire foreign army crossing the bridge, you feel not only that you are fighting the royal family, but the rest of the world. We were never asking for intervention - for tanks, guns and removal of Bahraini regime, or for some imperial power to come and save us. We are saying stop conferring the legitimacy that you have been providing cost-free for the past one-hundred years, every

167 Interview with Maryam, 2013.
time Bahrainis have risen up. We are saying that as powers you, Britain and the US, are standing in our way.\textsuperscript{169}

Not only was Britain therefore declining to exert genuine diplomatic pressure to reform, as advocated by commentators, it was seen to be wilfully exonerating abuses on an international scale: a key determinant in the “repressive potential” of the Bahraini regime.\textsuperscript{170} Just as imperial protection was lent to fledging rulers over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Britain now buttressed a Bahraini government that would be otherwise unable to sustain itself, either internally or as an independent international actor, without recourse to foreign support.\textsuperscript{171}

These efforts to shield the regime, and indeed downplay London’s own leverage, have been elucidated in British political forums themselves, for example with the 2012 official inquiry by Foreign Affairs Committee into UK relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.\textsuperscript{172} Among other foreign policy goals, the inquiry sought to investigate how the government “balanced UK interests in defence, commerce, energy security, counter-terrorism, and human rights” in the two kingdoms and how it might best encourage “democratic and liberalising reforms”. The commission accepted evidentiary submissions from a range of sources, including Bahraini activist and human rights groups, selecting a number of parties to testify alongside FCO representatives in hearings throughout 2013. Minister Burt was himself widely questioned by the cross-party panel, including on issues relating to human rights records, UK arms export licenses, the “case of the icons” and the provision of expert advisers to the Bahraini family. So too, queries were raised about the possible damage to Britain’s reputation or relations among the Bahraini opposition as a result of the latter services. Conservative MP Sir John Stanley concluded the examination by addressing Britain’s role in the crackdown of February 2011. The Minister confirmed Stanley’s suggestions that British

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{169}Interview with Ala’a, 2012.
  \item \textsuperscript{171}Emile A. Nakhleh, \textit{Bahrain: political development in a modernizing society} (New York, Lexington Books, 2011).
  \item \textsuperscript{172}See the report and hearing transcripts in “The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain,” House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 22 November 2013 at: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmfaff/88/88.pdf [accessed 4 January 2014].
\end{itemize}
armoured vehicles had been used in the Saudi incursion and that his office might regard the conduct of Bahraini security forces, including “mowing down demonstrators”, detention, torture and rape, as “totally unacceptable” by international benchmarks. In light of this, it was proposed that the Minister seize “this opportunity to offer an expression of regret that British armoured vehicles did indirectly facilitate extreme violence against peaceful civilian demonstrators and very serious human rights abuses in Bahrain”. Thrice pressed on the subject, Burt declined to acknowledge either any material connection or personal remorse. Magnifying this official resistance, Bahraini opposition members in the UK readily observed that although many among them had provided lengthy written submissions, only one activist and an exiled former MP were selected to testify: the sole Bahraini witnesses in proceedings. As one campaigner who submitted evidence noted, “they only invited those who were encouraged to come by the Bahraini government - PR agencies, ambassadors to Bahrain and businessmen. They dismissed all the opposition from Bahrain”.

Such calculated official machinations, as evident in efforts to project morality while negating responsibility, have become paradigmatic of British policy-making for the Bahraini opposition. So too, the paradoxical practice of granting asylum to so many victims of the Bahraini regime since 2011, while simultaneously lending support to their persecutors, has afforded further evidence of British duplicity. Indeed, many more recent arrivals to the UK perceived their asylum status there as tacit vindication of their political claims – that is, a back-handed, bureaucratic acknowledgement of the violence so rigorously elided from Britain’s broader public discourse on Bahrain. Charges of hypocrisy were therefore manifold among those who had experienced first-hand the effects of its policy, both in Bahrain and the UK. And while policy-makers continued to claim that “Bahrain is not Syria”, Britain’s perceived anti-democratic machinations in Bahrain had by mid-2013 drawn an analogy among some in the opposition, between enduring British support for the Al Khalifa regime and Russia’s commitment to sponsoring Syria’s blood-stained and embattled Assad. One asylum-seeker articulated

173 Evidence given in hearing of Fifth Session, 18 June 2012, cited in “The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain,” House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.

174Fifth Session, “The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain,” House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.
this widespread sense of umbrage shortly after the Al Khalifas were received as VIP guests at the prestigious Royal Windsor Horse Show in May 2013. As he explained:

To me, one of the worst, the most insulting images, I ever saw was the torturer King Hamad and his brother sitting in the VIP section at Windsor. There are people who are oppressed and tortured in Bahrain, I am one of them, and the UK government is granting me protection from an oppressive regime. And yet we also receive this oppressor at the highest levels and greet them as VIP. This is the saddest part of the story.\(^{175}\)

For those still challenging the regime inside Bahrain, it appeared that this sense of treachery might have manifold ramifications. The determinedly non-violent character of the Bahraini struggle – personified in images of Bahraini protestors kneeling before tanks and the hunger-striking al Khawaja on life-support – had been tested over years among opposition activists. Yet in the face of international indifference, some suggested that this strategy may have a limited life-span among elements of the opposition on the ground, with local disaffection beginning to take on new incarnations.\(^{176}\) As Fatima explained:

This [peaceful protest] will change, because people’s patience will run out. People are already starting to use violent tactics, and since Western media and governments seem so enthralled by the idea of an armed resistance, then why not? It is coming to that stage now - Al Khawaja’s hunger strike is the emblem of peaceful resistance. If they are going to let him be killed, it will be the death of peaceful resistance.\(^{177}\)

The Bahraini opposition’s rejection of force was not wholesale and like others in the diaspora, Maryam expressed concern that extremism may come to be seen as a more viable avenue for unaddressed grievances, particularly among disaffected youth. As she recounted, similar cautions had been proffered to officials in the UK:

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\(^{175}\) Interview with Sayed, 2013.  
\(^{176}\) This risk was underscored by a rare car-bomb explosion near the hotel of F1 drivers in the lead-up to the event in April 2013. The opposition group “February 14 movement” claimed it was behind the blast, though this was not independently verified.  
\(^{177}\) Interview with Fatima, 2013.
I told them early on that the Bahraini movement is 99.9% peaceful. They are being shot at, beaten, and killed on the street, and in response they are raising roses. But I also said, if you guys do not support this - if people see that you are defending the Libyans who are carrying machine guns and when they are carrying flowers you turn your backs on them, or worse - people will give up on the idea of peaceful demonstration as a means of protest.178

As the uprising entered its third year, emergent hints of opposition violence, primarily in the small-scale use of Molotov cocktails and endorsements of police-beatings, were routinely seized by the ruling family as affirmation of its ‘terrorism’ paradigm.179 In turn, Bahrainis observing these developments from Britain expressed anxiety that this sub-plot might come to dominate international discourse on the uprisings, as dejected protestors looked away from the West to other foreign backers for their cause. Among them, Ali suggested that governments like Britain’s may have missed their opportunity to forge any productive allegiance with these opposition forces - that the moment to forestall "real catastrophe in Bahrain” may have passed. As he explained:

If the US and UK had pressured from the beginning for real reform we would not be in this situation – we could have retained the regime, while giving power to the people. But now the centre has shifted and peaceful protestors have become more radicalised by what the regime has done. Now the standard view of the UK is of its hypocrisy, people are turning elsewhere for support. This is normal when you put a cat in a corner.180

Conclusion

A November 2013 photograph on the FCO website shows the UK ambassador in Manama posed with Bahraini officials against a backdrop of Union Jack-emblazoned Rolls Royces, Morris Minors and a gleaming double-decker bus: a lurid tableau assembled to promote the island’s inaugural ‘Great British Week’.181 Patronised by King Hamad and attended by the Duke of York, the event aimed “to emphasise the

178 Interview with Maryam, 2013.
180 Interview with Ali, 2012.
friendship and strong bilateral relationship” between the two kingdoms through a range of cultural and business activities.182 Throughout the week, a red “Boris bus” toured the streets of the capital promoting local investment by UK companies, including BAE Systems, Ernst & Young and Standard Chartered, while families played rugby and celebrated with ice-cream and bunting at the British Club. Elsewhere in the capital, billboards proclaimed “Welcome. You are GREAT Britain”, as Bahrain commenced official preparations for festivities to mark the 2016 bicentenary of bilateral relations between the nations.

Indeed, as this chapter has highlighted, Britain has given Bahrain’s rulers much to celebrate since it established formal dealings with the Al Khalifa royal family in 1816. The UK’s enduring diplomatic, political and practical support over two centuries remained unrivalled by any Western power – a “long friendship” which has since been reaffirmed in the aftermath of 2011. Where the King himself in 2012 lauded the supporter who had “stood head and shoulders above others”, so too Britain has been recognised by scholars, activists and officials themselves as Bahrain’s closest non-Arab ally throughout the rigorously-sanitised conflict.183 Just kilometres from Manama, however, Shi’a villages where tyre-burning protests and teargas have become fixtures of daily life give a different account of politics in Bahrain. Graffiti lines the streets of Sitra, the so-called “headquarters” of the uprising, which has seen at least fourteen people killed. And just as under Belgrave, the police headquarters is repainted daily to mask the vandalism that appears each night.184 Slogans such as "Down with the king" and "Here lie the martyrs" have gradually being replaced with more extreme calls for the death of the monarchy and boycott of mainstream opposition parties like Al Wefaq. Against this persisting dissent, rulers of the island nation nonetheless appear to have retained faith in the endurance of British cover. Addressing guests at the inauguration of the Endurance Ride at Windsor in June 2013, King Hamad happily proclaimed to attendees that the British-Bahraini relationship was as strong, if not stronger, than ever. As he explained:

182 “British Embassy in Bahrain Launches GREAT British Week 2014,” British Embassy Manama.
183 Speech by Crown Prince Salman at the Manama Dialogue, Manama, 7 December 2012 cited in “The UK’s relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain,” 76.
I see the cooperation and friendship we have met here as symbolising the relationship between our two countries. The first Treaty of Friendship was signed in 1820... and it remained until replaced by a new one in 1971 on Britain’s withdrawal from the Gulf – a unilateral decision of which my father said – ‘Why? No one asked you to go!’ In fact for all practical and strategic purposes the British presence has not changed and it remains such that we believe we shall never be without it.185

Nor has the resilience of the alliance gone unnoticed among Bahrain’s opposition over this period. Rather, the perceived stasis of British policy in Bahrain has more recently seen the transnational opposition turn toward other institutions and platforms as potential avenues to change. Beyond the unreceptive halls of Whitehall and Downing Street, recent campaigns have seen the opposition in Britain secure victories through the UK’s own justice mechanisms. An October 2014 decision by the UK High Court to quash the diplomatic immunity of Bahrain’s Prince Nasser in the face of attempted prosecution for torture in Bahrain - including of an activist later granted asylum in Britain – reflected this potential.186 Yet equally, such instances have underscored doubts about the impunity of Bahrain’s rulers in the light of British diplomacy.187 The appearance of Nasser himself as a guest of honour at the Savoy Hotel the same week spoke unequivocally of the confidence among Bahrain’s rulers on British soil. Among the Bahraini opposition in Britain (who were paradoxically targeted by Scotland Yard when attempting to protest Nasser’s visit), these dynamics have become enshrined as doctrine. Speaking during a visit to London, days before he was re-arrested on return to Bahrain in 2014, Nabeel Rajab articulated this view with reference to his reception at Heathrow airport. As he explained:

187 Within a fortnight of the High Court Nasser decision, a source leaked from the UK government claimed via Twitter that Gulf states had been in touch regarding the matter to “say such cases must not be allowed again.” See Twitter feed at: https://twitter.com/4HumanRightsNow/status/527066781626949632 [accessed 28 October 2014].
British authorities detained me and all my family members for questioning and held my passport. For what? Why are they treating us like criminals? They are making our activities as human rights activists extremely difficult. Not only are they holding back on criticism, but they are attempting to mislead the parliament and the public. Claims about improvements and reform in Bahrain are just a big lie. Why are they against our struggle for democracy?\textsuperscript{188}

Drawing on these perspectives, this chapter has argued that Bahrain’s enduring status as part of a “distinct political entity” in the Gulf,\textsuperscript{189} has seen it long exempt in Britain from any serious penalty for ongoing and systemic human rights abuses. This continued resistance to any \textit{bona fide} recognition of popular demands among British policymakers, as documented here, has in turn drawn London directly into the ambit of opposition contestation: a challenge to British authority which echoes former struggles against malign imperial interference.

Against this picture of abiding interest and strategic inflexibility, the following chapter will document British attempts to exhibit political learning and evolution in its engagement in the region – efforts which would hold equally little promise for their recipients.

\textsuperscript{188} Interview with Nabeel Rajab, London, 2 September 2014.
\textsuperscript{189} As the region was described by Lord Curzon in a 1903 speech to rulers of “Trucial States” in Sharjah, cited in Raleigh, \textit{Lord Curzon in India}, 501.
CHAPTER FIVE

A choice with consequences: Britain and war in Syria

The salient point undoubtedly was the presence for the first time of arms received from the Soviet Bloc. Although they are not yet numerous, they are a foretaste of what it to come… It is doubtful if we shall have the same British preponderance next year...

Ambassador to Syria, Sir John Gardener, 26 April 1956

Our country is greatly diminished. MPs cheered last night but the people who will be cheering this morning are President Putin and President Assad… The little Englanders of our time believe we can just pull back and become Switzerland.

Lord Paddy Ashdown, 29 August 2013

Observing a commemorative parade for the tenth anniversary of Syria’s 1946 independence from France, the British Ambassador in Damascus, John Gardener, remarked with pleasure on the display of Spitfires and other British aircraft in the flypast. Yet this “most satisfactory” phenomenon was likely in abeyance, as he noted in a letter to Foreign Minister Selwyn Lloyd, given “continual rumours of the imminent delivery” of Russian substitutes. On the eve of the Suez Crisis of October 1956, Gardener’s observation signposted what was already stark to those in London: that British influence in the region was being eclipsed by the forces of Arab nationalism, pioneered by Egypt’s Gamal Abdul Nasser and backed by the ascendant Soviet Union. As aversion to Britain’s de facto ruler in Bahrain, Charles Belgrave, was culminating on the other side of Mesopotamia, the Levant was becoming another pivot in a fierce East-

1 Sir John Gardener, letter to Mr Selwyn Lloyd, 26 April 1956 in Paul Preston, Michael Partridge and Benedict G robber, eds., British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print (Bethesda: LexisNexis, 2005), 290.

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West contest, and an epicentre of anti-colonial agitation. Indeed, within months of Gardener’s dispatch from the Syrian capital, the perceived “strong anti-Western feeling... both among the public and in the controlling clique in the army”, consolidated in a formal defence pact between the veteran nationalist Syrian President Shukri Al Quwatli and the Soviet Union. The same week, Al Quwatli’s tumultuous government unilaterally severed relations with Britain and France (as Gardener noted, the development was broadcast on Damascus Radio before he was personally notified). Diplomatic staff at the British Consulate in Aleppo were given 24 hours to leave the country, with London’s administrative interests in Syria formally reassigned to the jurisdiction of the Swiss embassy. Swiss consular officials were in turn advised that diplomatic relations with Britain would not be restored until Egypt had given authorisation.

The following year, in the aftermath of the Suez crisis, throughout which Syria had vociferously supported Egypt against the Anglo-French incursion, American and British officials identified Damascus as the “focal point” of Soviet contest in the Middle East, with transatlantic coordination intensified in an attempt to stall Syria’s drift (chiefly through Britain’s proxy influence in Iraq). The convergence of energies in Washington and London signified a reconciliation of post-Suez hostility and while views diverged on the question of method, there was a consensus that the powers “must be ready to act

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3 As Patrick Seale notes of Syria at the time of the ascent of the Assad regime: “the Syrian state had never felt secure. Quite apart from the threat of Israel, it had since independence been bullied, courted and pushed this way and that by rival Hashemite, Saudi and Egyptian designs... dwarfed by the East-West struggle in which [Syria] found itself caught up.” See Patrick Seale, *Assad of Syria: the Struggle for the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 1995), 55.
5 Ibid.
10 The Prime Minister felt that the Washington talks had dispelled the shadow of Suez and that the “tactical defeat” of Suez was “beginning to be vindicated strategically” in American eyes. See Stephen Blackwell, “Britain, the United States and the Syrian crisis, 1957,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 11(3) (2000): 141.
overtly, as well as covertly, to avoid a failure” on Syria.\textsuperscript{11} But despite this close cooperation, (and efforts including a foiled CIA-coup plot against Damascus in late 1957), the Suez crisis had made the question of direct military intervention in the region moribund; Syria’s drift signaled the limits of Western power to combat the Arab nationalist offensive.\textsuperscript{12} In 1958, President al-Quwatli announced the merging of Syria with Egypt (though geographically ruptured by Israel) to create the United Arab Republic (UAR), with the new UAR President Nasser claiming that “today Arab nationalism is not just a matter of slogans and shouts, it has become an actual reality.”\textsuperscript{13} Closely followed by the bloody coup against the British-backed Nouri government in Iraq in July that year,\textsuperscript{14} the advent of the UAR reflected a final, profound disruption of the colonial power system in the region. While Foreign Minister Lloyd continued to propose measures to “oppose [the union] tooth and nail… or work for its ultimate destruction”, the complex reality of Arab allegiances soon revealed that Britain had no easy options to regain its footing in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{15}

As London debated schemes to stymie its Cold War rival, a young Syrian air force lieutenant and supporter of the influential Arab Socialist Baath Party\textsuperscript{16}, Hafez Al Assad was at the same time making his first tour of the Soviet capital and his country’s most stalwart supporter. And where Syria’s union with its Nasserite neighbour proved short-lived,\textsuperscript{17} it was this alliance which would endure to frustrate British influence well into the next century. This chapter will trace the trajectory of British relations with Assad and his heir Bashar into the 21st century, culminating in Cameron’s call for the President to step-down in 2011. Through accounts of this period by regime opponents in the Syrian diaspora, it illuminates Britain’s characteristic neglect of the country’s more

\textsuperscript{12}Blackwell, “Britain, the United States and the Syrian crisis,” 154.
\textsuperscript{15}Cited in McNamara, \textit{Britain, Nasser and the balance of power in the Middle East}, 120.
\textsuperscript{16}The Arab Socialist Baath Party was in 1954 the second largest party in the Syrian parliament.
\textsuperscript{17}Syrian national independence was reclaimed in a Ba’athist coup three years later. See McNamara, \textit{Britain, Nasser and the balance of power in the Middle East}, 119.
genuine democratic forces in favour of an attempted allegiance with its reform-posturing President. Likewise, in employing dissident perspectives, it argues that Cameron’s failure to enact measures toward Assad’s departure or indeed, to mitigate a humanitarian catastrophe, sign-posted anew the diminishment of Britain’s international role alongside the values it claimed to promote.

**Issues of judgement: Britain and the Assad regime**

When PM Cameron addressed the British parliament on a renewed question of action against recalcitrant Damascus in August 2013, he was astute about the strategic potency of allegiances forged in Syria a half-century ago. Likewise, the measures advocated by Cameron recalled many of the associated dilemmas of transatlantic cooperation, encroaching Russian influence and an over-zealous British appetite for military intervention. Mindful of these associations, the PM limited his proposals to the specific. The previous week, President Bashar Al Assad had been accused of unleashing chemical weapons on civilians in the town of Ghouta outside Damascus, killing as many as 1,500 in the most recent and most gruesome development of the country’s two and half-year conflict. The PM, who had cut short his holiday in Cornwall, wanted to see Assad’s regime punished for what his peers in the US were already calling a “moral obscenity”.18 Opening the six-hour debate on a possible British military response, Cameron noted that in the absence of any definitive evidence of Assad’s culpability, MPs must refer to their critical as well as their moral faculties:

I think […] Assad has been testing the boundaries… But in the end we cannot know the mind of this brutal dictator; all we can do is make a judgment about whether it is better to act or not to act and whether he is responsible or not responsible. In the end, these are all issues of judgment and as Members of Parliament, we all have to make them.19

The PM emphasised the gravity of the government’s decision - be it intervention or inaction – around interfering in another state’s affairs. Britain’s response to Syria, he noted, held implications vaster than the humanitarian crisis that had already reached

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catastrophic proportions. As he stated: “doing nothing is a choice—it is a choice with consequences. These consequences would not just be about President Assad and his future use of chemical weapons; decades of painstaking work to construct an international system of rules and checks […] will be undone.”

Indeed, Cameron had been actively proposing coordinated, punitive measures against Damascus for over two years prior to the Ghouta attack. In August 2011, five months and some 2,000 deaths into Syria’s popular uprising, the PM issued a joint statement with President Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel calling on the Ba’athist leader to step down. Condemning the crackdown, the heads stated their collective view that President Assad “who is resorting to brutal military force against his own people has lost all legitimacy and can no longer claim to lead the country... We call on him to face the reality of the complete rejection of his regime by the Syrian people and to step aside in the best interests of Syria and the unity of its people.

The statement came only days before the declaration of NATO’s victory in Libya and had been carefully syndicated with a similar policy announcement from the White House. Earlier in the day, President Barack Obama had called on Assad to “lead a democratic transition or get out of the way”, concurrently ordering the freeze of all Syrian assets in American jurisdiction and a ban on imports of Syrian oil. While Obama’s European allies stopped short of identifying specific measures, the twenty-seven EU member states threatened to extend the union’s standing sanctions, later imposing a visa ban and assets-freeze on more than a dozen individuals linked

20 Ibid.
22 He also barred American citizens from having any business dealings with the Syrian government – ties which the administration once courted in the hopes of improving relations. See “President Obama: ‘The future of Syria must be determined by its people’,” The White House Blog, 18 August 2011.
To many international commentators, the Assad regime had never looked so diplomatically isolated in its 41-year history. Yet Cameron’s tough words and hardening efforts to alienate the regime (in April the Foreign Office also revoked the Syrian ambassador’s invite to the Royal Wedding), belied London’s more conciliatory approach to the country’s ruling dynasty over preceding decades. Despite the mass scale of the conflict sparked in 2011, this was not the first time the nominally-socialist Ba’athist state had found itself declared a pariah amongst Western nations. Indeed, Britain’s ambassadorial ousting from Damascus in 1956 prefigured diplomatic trysts which defined Syria’s relations with Britain in the coming years of Assad rule. The country’s staunch defence of the Palestinian cause – from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War through to its loss of the Golan Heights to Israel in the Six Day War of 1967 - saw the republic emerge as Israel’s prime antagonist, and by default, that of the Jewish state’s Western backers. At that time, then Minister of Defence, Hafez Al Assad, was also sewing local enmity. A heightening power struggle between the military and civilian factions of the party had precipitated a 1966 coup which saw the removal, and subsequent exile to Iraq, of the party’s founders, including Michel Aflaq who was subsequently sentenced to death in absentia. Over the border, the reconstituted Iraqi Ba’ath party reclaimed power under its new breakaway leadership, which included Aflaq and the young Saddam Hussein, instating as doctrine animosity toward its former Syrian counterparts. (The potency of mutual hostility between national Ba’athist groupings later inspired Syria to defy its fellow Arab states as the sole backer of the Islamic Republic in the protracted Iran-Iraq war.)

Hafez’s early militancy proved costly, militarily and diplomatically, but also yielded lessons that inspired his own leadership offensive, and in 1970 Syrian heads were arrested and removed from office by forces loyal to the Minister of Defence (who emphasised that the development was not a coup). The Ba’ath party announced that the

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26 Seale, Assad of Syria, 147.
government had undergone “a correction movement” and Assad pronounced himself Prime Minister of Syria and Secretary General of the Ba’ath Party, in addition to his post at the head of defence.\textsuperscript{27} March 1971 saw him assume the role of president, consummating his de facto absolute control of the government and its armed forces. With his origins in a poor, rural family from the Levant’s Alawi sect, the President set about embedding protections against persecution or challenge into the state architecture. Myths around the persecution and heresy of Syria’s Alawi, a community constituting around 12 per cent of the population, chiefly in the coastal and mountainous Northern region, stretched as far back as the first Crusades\textsuperscript{28}. And although the community had lived alongside a Sunni majority and other minorities since its French colonisers abandoned plans for an independent Alawi state in 1948, its characteristic poverty and segregation meant that it was drawn to the Ba’athist secular and egalitarian creed. Alawites populated security posts following Syria’s independence\textsuperscript{29} and by 1955, were estimated to make up some 65 per cent of army officers.\textsuperscript{30} This trend was escalated following Assad’s seizure of power, as the President wove loyalty into the regime by recruiting fellow Alawites to key government and military posts, while reaching out to other minorities (namely Christians, Druze and tribal elements) to offer protection against Sunni dominance.\textsuperscript{31} This structure of fidelity was buttressed by indispensable ties with Syria’s Sunni elite, whose affluent business and trading families were offered generous economic concessions and a share in political influence and regime interests, thereby coming to increasingly reflect the dominance of Syria’s bourgeoisie over the economy.\textsuperscript{32} Yet consolidation of minority power also took place under an equally calculated rubric of secular Arab nationalism in the form of Ba’athist emphasis on an

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Seale, \textit{Assad of Syria}, 162.
\item \textsuperscript{28} In 1328, the orthodox Muslim scholar and founder of Wahhabism, Ibn Taimiya issued a \textit{fatwa} deeming Alawis, ”greater infidels than the Christians and Jews…greater even than idolators” and authorising Jihad against them for, among other deeds, their collaboration with French Crusaders. See Nikolaos van Dam, \textit{The struggle for power in Syria: sectarianism, regionalism and tribalism in politics, 1961-1978} (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 21.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Malik Abdeh, “Syria’s Brotherhood: Doomed to Repeat the Past,” \textit{Al Majalla}, 2 December 2013 at: http://www.majalla.com/eng/2013/12/article55247119 [accessed 20 December 2013].
\item \textsuperscript{31} David Lesch, \textit{Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad} (Yale: Yale University Press, 2012), 8.
\end{itemize}
inclusive, socialism-infused Syrian identity. No references to the Alawite faith appeared in the country’s textbooks or religious addresses and the President and his family publicly observed the doctrine and practices of its majority Sunni Muslim sect.\(^3\)

While the new ruler promptly re-ingratiated himself with Nasser in Egypt, joining Libya and later Sudan in an alliance against Israel, there was little to suggest diplomatic redress with the West. As a ministerial correspondence in the FCO noted several months after Assad seized power, Syria gave no occasion to anticipate that relations with Britain would be resumed.\(^3\) Nonetheless, diplomacy between the two countries was re-established by 1973, and survived Syria’s Yom Kippur war with Israel. However, Assad’s incursion into the decade-long Lebanese civil war from 1976 confirmed his nation's geopolitical role as the champion of resistance to the US-Israeli front, as signified by the enduring presence of Syrian troops in Lebanon over the next quarter-century.\(^3\) Although Thatcher’s Conservative government maintained contact with the Assad regime throughout the conflict (counter to the US), British relations with Damascus soon reached their own nadir, when in 1986 explosives were found in the bag of an Irish chambermaid at Heathrow airport boarding a plane bound for Tel Aviv. Syrian complicity was quickly established (including through a confession by the suspect Nizar Hindawi who was given refuge at the Syrian embassy in London) and although there was ultimately no proof of the President’s knowledge of the plot, Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe quickly stated that Syrian involvement was "conclusive". Assad's mounting reputation as a recalcitrant exporter of “monstrous and inhumane” acts of state-sponsored terror was later sealed with Hindawi’s trial at the Old Bailey, when the convicted suspect was handed the longest sentence in British criminal history - 45-years imprisonment.\(^3\) No sooner had the verdict been delivered than Thatcher officially severed diplomatic relations with Damascus, with the Reagan administration

\(^3\)It has been reported that when Hafez Al Assad’s mother Naasa died, the president of the Supreme Islamic Shi’ite Council wanted to lead the funeral prayer, but Hafez told him that his mother was a Sunni Shafi. See, “Syria's Alawites Torn Between Regime, Opposition,” Al Monitor, 19 August 2013 at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/08/alawites-syria-split-between-regime-opposition.html# [accessed 6 September 2013].

\(^3\)As noted by Anthony Kershaw, United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Vol. 810 Col. 12, 25 January 1971.

\(^3\) For more on Syria’s continuing involvement in Lebanon, see Rola El-Husseini, Pax Syriana: Elite Politics in Postwar Lebanon (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

withdrawing ambassadors within hours. Assad in turn, deflected transatlantic indictments with a narrative of global conspiracy and Israeli sedition – a theme which henceforth became a regime mantle.

Where Thatcher’s tough action signaled the political capital, domestic and international, to be derived for Western governments by making an example of Syria, Assad’s demonization also provided fuel for the myth of anti-imperial resistance that came to justify his regime's existence, with its increasingly “fascist” tendencies and stringent grip on internal security. As the President claimed shortly after international charges of state-sponsored terror were levelled:

"They plotted against us in Lebanon, they plotted against us in an economic siege, and they plotted against us through the Muslim Brotherhood... Finally, they came to us with the idea of terrorism... Do we surrender - do these big powers frighten us? They do not."

Despite this rhetoric, Assad was a shrewd politician and nonetheless recognised the importance of retaining influential ties. Propelled by the 1990 collapse of the Soviet Union and evermore superior military and economic might of Israel, Assad embarked on a significant policy turn. Hopes of winning back the prized Golan Heights through negotiated settlement saw his regime re-emerge as a mainstay of the peace-process in the region and granted credibility by Washington and London. The 1991 commission of Syrian troops to an allied force in Iraq against his Ba’athist nemesis, Saddam Hussein, further lubricated Assad’s traction in the West. By 1999, the US was canvassing talks between Syria and Israel to discuss the prospects of peace, the first meeting of its kind between the two nations, then still officially at war.

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37 Later evidence confirmed that her decision to break with Syria had been taken three days before the court ruling in meetings with senior ministers. Critiquing this punitive excess, one former British ambassador to Syria publically censured the PM's instinct for retribution over negotiation – calling the break with Damascus “exactly the wrong way” to deal with the Assad in a statement which reflected much of the prevailing Foreign Office sentiment of the time. See, Roger Scruton, “The Meaning of Margaret Thatcher,” *The Times*, 18 April 2013.

38 Describing this period, Yassin al Haj Saleh notes that, “before 1980 one could hardly speak of a political life in Syria. There was an alliance of seven parties, including the official Communist Party (who relied heavily on the Soviets). The alliance, the National Progressive Front (NPF), was under the leadership of the Ba’ath Party, and it was supposedly the frame for political life in Syria. Actually it was the frame for political death.” See Yassin al Saleh, Danny Postel and Nader Hashemi, “The conscience of Syria,” *Boston Review*, 12 March 2014 at: http://bostonreview.net/world/postel-hashemi-interview-syrian-activist-intellectual-yassin-al-haj-saleh [accessed 20 March 2014].

This rebranding of Syria as a lynchpin of any peace agreement and gatekeeper of regional stability was nonetheless anchored in the regime’s unyielding grip on national government. It was thus not without optimism that President Hafez, as hard-nosed in the face of domestic challenge as international opposition, was succeeded by his more cosmopolitan son, Bashar, following the sudden death of the President’s eldest son and anticipated successor, Bassel, in a 1994 road accident. The more unlikely heir to presidency of a police-state, Bashar was compelled to return from London to Syria to be groomed for leadership – a stark contrast with his late brother, the Commander of the Republican Guard and popular “golden knight” of Syria. Bashar had relocated to the United Kingdom in 1992 to complete a residency at St Mary’s Hospital in the capital, where his air of Western assimilation was finished with an interest in photography, English “pop music” and the internet – then widely blocked in Hafez’s Syria. In the middle-class suburbs of West London he also met his future wife, the British-born Asma from a well-regarded Sunni Syrian family (her mother was an employee of the UK-Syrian embassy). On return to Syria, Bashar was re-schooled at Homs military academy, handed important portfolios, trialled for effect on the Syrian public and political elite and insinuated with Arab and international allies. Hafez’s own legacy was meanwhile embellished with an anti-corruption campaign to flush-out notoriously venal practices at the highest levels of government. (Though as has been noted, it was only the well-known opponents of Bashar’s succession who were found guilty in the clean-up.40) Despite residual ranks of the ‘old-guard’ of military generals with strong business ties, by the time of Hafez’s death in 2000, the regime veneer had been sanitised to a level befitting its new, modern custodian. Syria’s new President was also offered condolences by European and American heads, who praised Hafez’s “immense and great” contributions.41 Among them, Blair lamented the passing of a “figure of stability in the Middle East”.42

42 “Blair pays tribute to Assad,” BBC News, 10 June 2000. Interestingly, a number of Arab news websites reported the PM’s descriptor as “the factor for stability in the Middle East.”
Hafez’s own proposed epithet for his presidency, “the struggle continues”, nonetheless appeared to inform the key tenets of his heir’s rule, albeit varnished with Westernization. Fresh liberalising reforms to Syria’s economy to encourage private business and foreign investment were accelerated by Bashar, acutely aware of the threat posed to regime stability by the everyday hardships of Syrian citizens. This new brand of neoliberalism thereby sought to enhance the private sector while retaining the state firmly in the reins of the country’s economy - a marketization and consumerism which some foreign observers perceived as enhanced legitimacy. At the same time, Bashar made it readily apparent to international parties that he was unwilling to concede ground on core foreign policy doctrines, primarily Syria’s ideological crusade against Israel. This included the non-negotiable return of the Golan Heights – an issue which he claimed “connote dignity and honour” - and where his father had toyed with the notion of US-led peace talks with Israel, Bashar did away with any such pretence.

However genuine his reformist aspirations, within a year of the new President’s rule the geopolitical currents flowing from 9/11 saw Damascus engulfed by Washington’s ‘War on Terror’. Assad’s strategic support for so-called ‘resistance’ groups like Hezbollah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad positioned his government firmly within the enemy camp of Bush’s oppositional “with us or against us” international-relations paradigm. Neoconservative agendas quickly extended the counter-terror campaign to states sponsoring extremism, while many in Washington hopefully speculated that war in Iraq would provoke turmoil in Syria and thereby concurrently bring down the Assad leadership. This hawkishness did not, however, consume London’s relations with Damascus and Blair was undeterred by Assad’s refusal to abandon his anti-Israel

44 As has been noted, authoritarian power was now used to pursue economic liberalisation and privatisation, and in the process, shifting public assets to crony capitalist “networks of privilege”. See, Raymond Hinnesbusch, “Syria: from ‘authoritarian upgrading’ to revolution?” *International Affairs* 88(1) (2012).
45 This shift has been described as one from “authoritarian statism” to “authoritarian neoliberalism”. See Larbi Sadiki, Heiko Wimmen and Layla Al-Zubaidi, eds., *Democratic transition in the Middle East: unmaking power* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
47 By contrast, some leading US officials recognised the heightened incentive to engage Syria in combatting terrorism, but Bush’s 2002 doctrine of preventative war left little scope for nuance or negotiation. See David Lesch, *The New Lion of Damascus: A Social Transformation* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2005), 114.
platform, now deemed ‘terror’ by some Western leaders. As was also advocated by a minority of officials in Washington, the PM instead attempted to foster a spirit of cooperation with Assad. Only months after 9/11, Blair embarked on Britain’s first official visit to Syria since the inception of Assad rule in 1970, with the PM proposing to air concerns over regime support for extremism in the region, which had recently seen a string of assassinations of Israeli officials. (Blair insisted he would not ‘harangue’ the President over the subject.) Indirect aspirations of reviving the peace process were also expressed by the PM who called for a “period of calm” amid a climate of heightened geopolitical tensions. By contrast, it was an air of antagonism and humiliation that defined the meeting with Assad, which saw Blair berated over the “killing of innocent civilians” in Afghanistan during the first joint press conference. Assad likewise refuted Blair’s inferences of his support for extremism with well-worn regime claims that "resisting occupation is an international right”, and “resistance is different from an act of terrorism”.

Nonetheless, Blair persisted in his efforts to “rein-in” Assad, staking much of his political prestige on courting Damascus against Washington’s evermore polarising rhetoric. The PM’s seminal speech at the Presidential Library in April 2002 advocated for the potential of the Levantine state to reinvent its role vis-à-vis global terrorism and the West. Juxtaposed with the “detestable” regime of Saddam Hussein, Blair suggested that other countries “engaged in terror or WMD business” might be offered a chance at restitution – a fast-track “route to respectability”. As he explained, “I hope in time that Syria, Iran and even North Korea can accept the need to change their relations dramatically with the outside world. A new relationship is on offer. But they must know that sponsoring terrorism or WMD is not acceptable.” Similarly, Assad’s 2002 invitation to London – the first visit by any Syrian head of state to Britain – amid

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51Ibid.
52Blair, speech at the George Bush Senior Presidential Library.
mounting pressure for an attack on the Iraqi dictator, signified the extent of Downing Street’s belief in this conciliatory engagement. Indeed, FCO officials reiterated the expectation that the President and First Lady would be received in their former hometown with "as much pomp and ceremony as possible"53, extending to favourable media campaigns and some canvassing royal honours for the President (the proposal was declined “in view of Syria's human rights record”).54 The British ambassador in Damascus at the same time noted the need to pre-empt any public-relations unpleasantries that might flow from London’s apparent “cosying up to this nasty dictatorship that locks up its own MPs”.55 While FCO officials gave guarantees that any “home truths” would be discussed behind closed doors, the Syrian President was liberal with his own public comments on sensitive diplomatic issues, cautioning Blair against a military campaign in Iraq. As he stated in an interview with The Times, any armed conflict there risked escalating terror and regional spillover56:

The consequences (of war on Iraq) are not going to be contained within Iraq. The entire region will enter into the unknown… We are a better judge of this because we live in the region. I think the bigger problem is that any country should interfere in the internal affairs of another.57

Nonetheless, the leaders’ customary “politics of politeness” trumped58, with both emphasising cooperation and Assad reflecting nostalgically on his “bonds of friendship and respect” with Britain.59 Blair likewise concluded that a "process of engagement… is the right way forward", irrespective of differences in “views and

53 “Assad close to being knighted under Blair,” The Sunday Times, 1 July 2012.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
emphasis”. Concurrently, EU initiatives in the form of regional trade agreements, notably the Barcelona Declaration and later Union for the Mediterranean, were also attempting to draw countries like Syria into productive economic partnerships which claimed to promote “democratic reform” and security cooperation through “shared prosperity”.

(Assad was received with similar ardour by President Sarkozy when he attended the Paris launch of the latter in 2008.) FCO officials too expressed optimism that alliance, not alienation, might eventually soften Damascus’ more austere policies. As one official claimed, refuting charges of double-standards after Downing Street’s hearty reception of the known repressor: "we do not pretend to agree on every issue, but there is much we can, and do, achieve together. A candid dialogue is better than no dialogue at all."

On a domestic level, however, the Syrian leader was less interested in dialogue or seeking common ground with those expressing divergent views, increasing numbers of whom were being compelled abroad to pursue liberty or the right to resist.

Testing the boundaries: the Syrian diaspora and democracy

The positive expectations which attended Bashar’s rule abroad were matched by high-hopes for liberalising reform inside Syria, the new President’s modern air seemingly less congruent with the unyielding police-state presided over by his father. Indeed, the junior Assad had already proclaimed-himself a “believer in democracy…[who] respects others’ opinions”, and liberal catch-phrases of “democratic thinking”, “openness”, “reform”, “logic of cooperation” and “constructive criticism” were woven into his 2001 inaugural presidential address to the nation.

The limits of this vocabulary, however, were more quickly established in practice.

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60 Analyst Rime Allaf told the BBC that the UK had done well to keep dialogue open with Syria, despite the hostility of the last meeting between the two leaders. As she noted, "what did happen behind closed doors is that there are a lot of points in common between Syria and Britain about the Middle East which are points of view that differ from the US." See, “Assad optimistic after Iraq talk,” BBC News, 16 December 2002.


62 “Syrian President warns don’t attack Iraq,” MailOnline.

63 Owen, The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life, 79.

64 Cited in Owen, The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life, 81.

Within months of taking office, Assad released some 600 political prisoners - many of them members of the country’s long-persecuted Muslim Brotherhood - to mark the anniversary of the purge that had brought his father Hafez to power thirty years earlier. So too, Bashar’s apparent relative weakness against the charisma of his militant father fuelled perceptions of an imminent opening for political challenge to the regime. As early as May 2000, political societies and discussion ‘salons’ were established in contravention of the Emergency Laws which had prescribed Syria’s civil society activity since 1963. Centring around Damascus, the trend brought together long-standing opponents of the regime (many former political prisoners), like the veteran Ba’athist Jamal al-Atassi and members of the outlawed 1980s Committee for the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights (CDF), alongside nominally apolitical intellectuals and newer dissidents, notably the business-man turned oppositionist, Riad Saif. A number of formal societies were established to debate issues from education, press freedom and Palestine to the position of women, alongside newer human rights focused activist coalitions. Expatriate and exiled Syrian dissidents likewise amplified calls for reform, with some returning to the country to help foment opposition. Similarly, members of Syria’s largest ethnic minority, the Kurds, cautiously coalesced into their own organised fronts to agitate around their perceived marginalisation by Syria’s Arab majority. Openings meanwhile emerged in the country’s tightly-regulated state-media landscape, through which opposition publications reiterated a political charter of “bread and freedom.” Among these, the satirical newspaper Al Doumari (‘The Lamplighter’) was founded by Syria’s renowned

69 Among them was the France-based academic Burhan Ghalioun who would later become the first chairman of the Syrian opposition Transitional National Council. See, “Burhan Ghalioun: Opposition from Exile or at Home?” Al Ahkbar, 13 September 2011 at: http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/burhan-ghalioun-opposition-exile-or-home [accessed 10 September 2013].
70 Kurds make up an estimated 9 per cent of the Syrian population and reside mostly in the Northern region, near the borders with Iraq, Iran and Turkey. For more on the culture and politics of Kurds in Syria, see for example, Jordi Tejel, Syria’s Kurds: History, Politics and Society (London: Routledge, 2009).
71 Alan George, cited in Wieland, “Missed Opportunity.”
political cartoonist Ali Ferzat, who had long been a thorn in the side of Bashar’s father. Indeed, Ferzat himself later recalled meeting the President at an exhibition shortly after his election in 2000, and when prompted for his advice for gauging public opinion, urged Bashar to simply “talk to the people”. Shortly afterwards, he received a call from Assad to inform him that he was “having a Pepsi with ordinary folk in the street.”

This posturing came to epitomise the populist endeavours of the President and his wife, who quickly became known for their unassuming public conduct and regular ‘grass-roots’ engagements with local communities across the country.

Accordingly, democracy and human rights campaigners sought the President’s ear through releasing a unified charter of reforms and aspirations for what many hoped was a nascent liberalisation. The ‘Manifesto of the 99’, published in September 2000 in the London and Beirut-circulated newspaper, *Al Hayat*, was signed by a range of largely secular activists and intellectuals, including Syria’s renowned poet, Adonis, and encompassed demands for the cancellation of emergency laws; release of all political prisoners; pardon and return of political exiles; the right to form political parties and civil organizations, and other general demands for civic freedoms. As the document claimed;

> Democracy and human rights today constitute a common humanitarian language, gathering and uniting peoples' hopes in seeking a better future. Even if some countries are using our [current] predicament in order to pass along their political views, ideas and interests, interaction among nations need not result in domination and political dictation. It was allowed for our people in the past and they will be allowed in the future to be influenced by the experiences of others and at the same time add their own input, thereby developing their own distinctiveness with openness.

The manifesto made no mention of regime change or dismantling the Ba’athist state, but several months later, a pool of some 1,000 claimants, including exiles, went beyond the terms of the statement, advocating the abolition of discrimination against women and of

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74 Ibid.
the very “idea of a ruling ‘front’ and a ruling party”. The more expansive charter also garnered the support of Syria’s principal religious opposition front, the Muslim Brotherhood (then headquartered in exile in London) which had been formally outlawed in 1980 following armed attacks on the military by its extremist splinter groups. Regime hostility toward the Sunni Islamist group later culminated in the notorious and brutal 1982 ‘Hama Massacre’ in which an estimated 10,000 to 25,000 of the city’s residents were killed. Bouyed by what now in 2001 was deemed a ‘Damascus Spring’, the group launched its own National Charter from London, calling for a modern and democratic state and rejecting political violence. However, a subsequent declaration by Riad Saif of the intention to found a secular political party elicited the end-point of the regime’s espoused openness. In March 2001, the Ba’ath Party published a memorandum accusing activists of propagating a “neo-colonialist movement”, accompanied by a country-wide campaign to prosecute those “harming the stability and unity of Syria” or “collaborating with [its] enemies”. The movement’s leaders were arrested, imprisoned or fined for contravening newly-enacted and restrictive laws to intercept threats to Syria’s “stability and unity”. The renewed crackdown, meted out by regime officials and Syria’s famed mukhabarat secret-police, was consolidated in official rhetoric which promptly doused expectations of democratisation, both locally and abroad. When asked in May 2001 for his assessment of events in Syria by the Spanish newspaper El País, the President explained:

I have noticed that many articles… appearing in the Arab and Western press, have used the term ‘spring’. However, I am not convinced that spring is indeed the preferred season of the year. There are also those who prefer the winter or the summer. Therefore the use of the term in the context of what is happening in Syria is mistaken… It totally

78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
80 Carmeli and Feldner, “The Battle for Reforms and Civil Society in Syria.”
contradicts the term [which I have chosen to use]... ‘development’. We do not wish to say where we are today.81

By 2003, this spring had been effectively chilled, with reform and anti-discrimination proposals shelved, NGO activity prohibited and opposition press halted (Ferzat himself was targeted with two assassination attempts by this time.82) Many of those who had been at the vanguard of the movement were driven abroad, joining previous waves of exiles, Islamist and secular, in the Middle East and Europe. As the residual power of Hafez’s moniker “Our Leader into Eternal Security” became palpable over the next decade, many more chose to flee the repressive stability of Assad’s Syria. Indeed, one imprisoned writer described at the time “nothing is going to change here, anything is better than dying here the way they please… The country has become like…a nice hell.”83 Where some 25,000 Syrians were estimated to have left the country in the 1980s, this figure reportedly increased to 250,000 over the subsequent thirty years84. With routine practices of detention, torture and ‘disappearances’ enduring from Hafez’s rule into the twenty-first century to combat even the mildest forms of dissent85, despite Syria’s formally-enshrined human rights protections, democratic or civil society activity inside Syria was viewed by many as futile, if not impossible. As the exiled French-Syrian professor Burhan Ghalioun wrote in 2003, the result was a continuum of Hafez’s “empty... torn apart [and] demoralised” landscape, over which the Assad regime presided as monolithic “arbiter and saviour.”86

84 Interview with Obeida, London, 9 July 2013.
85 The procedural nature of violent repression in Assad’s Syria was embodied in a popular joke related by one dissident: A general asks for the best high school math teacher in Syria. He dispatches his men to apprehend the teacher. They detain him for a week, where the teacher is beaten and asked about who else he knows before being tortured to death. The general asks his men about the teacher, to which the officers proudly respond that ‘he’s been taken care of and has been in our custody for a week!’ Unfortunately, the general wanted the man alive to tutor his son in math.” See, Mehrunisa Qayyum, “Syrian Diaspora: Cultivating a New Public Space Consciousness,” Middle East Institute, Policy Brief No. 35, August 2011 at: http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/2011.08.Syrian%20Diaspora.pdf. [accessed 6 December 2013].
The exodus of persecuted dissidents, intellectuals and minorities, was accompanied by a documented ‘brain drain’ of educated, middle-class Syrians, propelled by the relentless monitoring and quotidian intimidation by the state. Not all political emigrants were explicitly banned from Syria and others were born into de facto exile. Accordingly, many second-generation children of dissidents were unable to visit the country without first attending to the bureaucratically-arduous and ideologically-demeaning process of repentance, or ‘status neutralisation’, as it was deemed by regime officialdom. The Syrian diaspora subsequently evolved into a geographically-dispersed entity, variegated by often subtle but weighty cultural and political differences. In Britain, where the estimated Syrian population of around 10-20,000 is smaller but more concentrated than in the US, the Assad regime’s exiles joined migrants from nominally apolitical backgrounds as well as its express loyalists and beneficiaries. Divisions within Syrian society were thereby reproduced within the British-Syrian diaspora, rendering it less cohesive, and less mobile, relative to other British Arab communities. Nonetheless, the local opposition ‘Spring’ that attended Assad’s rise to power was paralleled in the UK by a surge of optimism (and later disillusion) among a hitherto lower-profile exile community. The echoes of Syrian national politics abroad often bred overt antagonism or reticent disassociation across various facets of the diaspora. For others, the continued threat of informing from fellow expatriates via the fluid channels linking regime and diaspora served as sufficient deterrent to political mobilisation in Britain. As an international NGO noted matter-of-factly a decade into Bashar’s presidency of the vicarious surveillance carried out by Damascus’ embassies, “opposition is tolerated neither within nor outside of Syria”. Through continued threats from expatriates’ political activity to family, friends and associates inside Syria, the same red-lines – or

87 Cooke, Dissident Syria, 55.
88 Interview with Malik, London, 1 November 2012.
so-called ‘holy trinity’ of taboos - that governed everyday public (and often private) life in the country, thus also came to regulate that of the diaspora.

Despite these risks, contentious politics continued to be practised amongst Syrians, locally and internationally, in particular by first and second-generation exiles in Britain. The 2003 collapse of Saddam Hussein, whose regime had come to emblematise the endurance of Arab authoritarianism, likewise inspired Syrians to issue calls for united action against their own Ba’athist dictator. As one prominent Syrian dissident noted at the time, “after Iraq, the ordinary Syrian citizen expects a change… The authoritarian regime in Syria died with the U.S.’s victory in Iraq. Since that time, one can sense a growing politicisation of Syrian society and a genuine desire to have a role in public life.” Indeed, this momentum manifested locally in the northeast of the country, where rioting broke out amongst Kurds after an Arab guest football team raised pictures of the recently-thwarted Saddam in early 2004, inspiring the torching of the local Ba’ath party office and toppling of a Hafez statue. At least 30 Kurds were massacred as security forces restored order. Broader opposition challenges to the regime were nonetheless coupled with a resolute denunciation of the US invasion and of Israeli aggression against Syria – both of which were perceived to have unleashed forces hostile to democratisation in the country. Cautious to distance themselves from any government accusation of foreign conspiracy, opposition activists emphasised the need for a domestic movement precisely in order to avoid an Iraq-style, foreign-backed regime-change in Syria. As one prominent Paris-based exile told an Arab news outlet in 2003, the Syrian opposition had no intention of challenging the regime “on the back of an American tank.” Local opposition members and exiles therefore called for a broad-based and unified national movement to obviate the chaos of either exogenous regime-

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93 This common expression refers to the established taboo around public discussion of the three themes of religion, sex and politics. More recently, Syrians noted that the former two prohibitions had begun to break down, while the third remained firmly in place.
94 As Wassim explained, this “mental taboo” is something every Syrian has had to grow up with. Interview with Wassim, London, 23 April 2012.
95 Gani, “Contentious Politics.”
96 Cited in Syria Under Bashar, 9.
overthrow or enduring Ba’athist repression.99 As a veteran activist explained in a
Lebanese newspaper:

Today, we are facing a dilemma: either the dictatorship continues indefinitely, or we go
down the Iraqi road with the risk of chaos and long-term foreign occupation…. It is
important for me that [Syria] not collapse into a cycle of violence, vengeance and pillage.
The only wise course is for everyone to take his responsibility and work for a change that
is not accompanied by a national catastrophe.100

With international opprobrium mounting around Assad’s ostensible role in the 2005
assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the ensuing ‘Cedar
Revolution’ against his forces still occupying that country, perceptions of regime
fragility were stoked among Syrians, locally and abroad. As one second-generation
British-Syrian from an established dissident family explained, “anything was on the
cards at that time. People inside Syria thought that the US-UK invasion of Iraq heralded
the downfall of Bashar Assad in one way or another - it was the Siamese twins
principle. We looked at Iraq, and then… Lebanon and thought Bashar was on his way
down.”101 This fresh momentum was however once again met with crackdown by
Assad, the biggest since 2001, in turn spurring dissidents to rally around a broad-based
denunciation of the regime. The most cohesive opposition challenge yet seen, the
coalition encompassed groups from the Muslim Brotherhood to Kurdish parties and
Marxists, as well as the mainstays of the secular opposition. In 2005, the resulting
umbrella-alliance ‘The Damascus Declaration’102, issued an eponymous statement
calling for “radical change” alongside a “the rejection of all forms of cosmetic, partial,
or circumspection reform”. As the document noted, only a broad-based, unified
movement could “stop the deterioration and the potential collapse and anarchy which
could be brought upon the country by a mentality of fanaticism, revenge, extremism,

99 “The Damascus Declaration… Can it offer a gateway for change in Syria?” The Cairo Institute for
December 2013].
100 Cited in Syria Under Bashar, 10.
101 Interview with Malik, 2012.
102 “The Damascus Declaration,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1 March 2012 at:
http://m.ceip.org/2012/03/01/damascus-declaration/evpg [accessed 14 December 2013].
and objection to democratic change.”\textsuperscript{103} In Britain, where many of the declaration’s signatories then resided, opposition organisations sprung-up in support of these ends, with the fragmentation of the Muslim Brotherhood diverting energies into newer groups with more secular, democratic platforms. A number of first and second-generation oppositionists founded the ‘Movement for Justice and Development in Syria’ (MJD) in 2006, describing themselves as “committed to peaceful, democratic change in Syria, and the creation of a modern state which respects human rights and promotes economic and social development”\textsuperscript{104} To its founders, many of them with links to the Damascus Declaration and Muslim Brotherhood, the MJD represented a more action-based initiative – a break with dominant dissident traditions of Islamism and intelligentsia, now seen as outmoded. Among them, Malik recounted his aspiration when pioneering the group as a university student:

We were very disillusioned with the Muslim Brotherhood – they were the only semi-organised opposition, but the leadership appeared out of touch. The only other big players were the Damascus Declaration group: a not-very-glamourous bunch of intellectuals hanging around a café talking about Sartre. In a way that was what we were rebelling against: a stuffy intellectual tradition… We had in mind to re-invigorate the opposition. We saw it as our duty, living abroad with greater freedoms, to keep the hope alive.\textsuperscript{105}

The same year, the Sunni businessman and established dissident Rami Abdulrahman who fled to Britain in 2000 after three prison terms in Syria, founded the ‘Syrian Observatory for Human Rights’\textsuperscript{106}(SOHR) from his home in Coventry, collating and reporting regime abuses in conjunction with activists on the ground.\textsuperscript{107} Simultaneously, a news website created in 2001 by another London-based former Muslim Brotherhood exile as an Arabic-language source for Syrians, expanded into the ‘Levant Institute’,


Similarly, another London-based opposition member described at the time that the alliance “…all have a shared vision. It [is] a way of showing that the secular and religious of Syria can unite.” Cited in “Syria: In exile, opposition groups unite against Damascus,” The Christian Science Monitor, 1 November 2005.

\textsuperscript{104} See Movement for Justice and Development website at: http://www.forsyria.org/

\textsuperscript{105}Interview with Malik, 2012.


providing an English-language forum for international researchers and policy-makers to engage with Syrian politics.\(^{108}\) As its founder Obeida, explained:

> Being based in London made us a reference point for think-tanks and government agencies in the West. We had connections with officials, politicians and researchers, in the UK and US, as well as EU. Even back then, we used to rally for freedom and democracy in Syria and came up with many policy papers and suggestions on how to deal with the situation.\(^{109}\)

The perspectives and agendas advanced by these new enterprises signified a counter-narrative to that projected by the British Syrian Society\(^{110}\) (BSS) – a longer-standing expatriate organisation widely regarded in the diaspora as a proxy for regime interests. Founded in 2003 by Bashar’s socially-prominent father-in-law, Fawaz Akhras, who had himself come to Britain under Hafez to pursue greater opportunity, the BSS initially posited itself as a platform for expatriates to re engages with development inside Syria through the First Lady’s myriad philanthropic projects. With support enlisted from a host of British establishment figures (including the former Liberal Party leader and ambassador to Syria), and regular delegation visits to encourage British business and diplomatic ties with Syria, the society quickly developed into a fulcrum for UK-Syrian relations.\(^{111}\) Accordingly, among the country’s democratic opposition abroad, the BSS also became an emblem of governing corruption, vice and nepotism. And despite diaspora efforts to highlight regime abuses to international audiences, UK policy-makers among them, dissidents achieved little of the group’s same status or influence in Britain.

Rather, opposition activists described a prevailing mood of disinterest in their claims in Downing Street and Whitehall. Although some found sporadic support from MPs and NGOs, and piqued the interest of Scotland Yard (especially as anti-extremism came to dominate the domestic agenda), policy-makers reportedly gave little weight to the

\(^{108}\) See Levant News website at: www.thisissyria.net/english/about.html

\(^{109}\) Interview with Obeida, 2013.

\(^{110}\) See British Syrian Society website at: www.britishsyriansociety.org

opposition’s anti-regime machinations. As one first-generation activist explained, “the problem was that nobody took the opposition seriously back then. [Policy-makers] used to look upon us pathetically, as if to say ‘you can carry on with your activities and rallies but nothing is really going to happen’.”

By contrast, regime opponents were keenly aware of the official enthusiasm for Assad as a potential reformist ally, reflected in Blair’s courting efforts around the Iraq war. Noting this, Obeida explained that:

> They wanted to rein in Bashar and thought engagement was the best way of reaching reform in Syria. We had a big disagreement on this point with the UK government, who preferred a palace-led revolution. They invested heavily in Assad, trying to assist with modernising the state. They were taken in by him.

Similarly, other activists recounted being obstructed in official lobbying by a prevailing commitment to regime-led change in Syria. While not altogether disregarding prospective reform by Assad, many argued that the British government needed to put greater economic and/or diplomatic pressure on the President – “to push him for a hard bargain and hold him to his claims” – to compel concrete progress. In this vein, MJD leader Malik recalled being contacted by the FCO in 2008 following his publication of a *Guardian* opinion piece calling for more conditionality in bargaining with Assad.

Officials sought his input on possibilities for a Whitehall-funded initiative inside Syria, but after correspondence ceased abruptly, it became apparent that the resources had instead been channeled into a Chatham House conference on the subject of reform in Syria, which included policy-makers, BSS members and representatives from the Assad government itself. No opposition representatives were invited. Two days before the event, Baathist delegates were withdrawn by Damascus and the event was cancelled. As Malik explained, “it was a bridge too far. The regime got paranoid, thinking they might lose control of their officials… The policy of isolating Bashar had failed so FCO super-pragmatists were trying to engage, but the whole thing proved a total waste of time.”

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112 Interview with Walid (via telephone), 30 August 2013.
113 Interview with Obeida, 2013.
114 Interview with Malik, 2012.
116 Interview with Malik, 2012.
Simultaneously, diaspora opposition agitation toward regime-change was stepped-up, as was reflected in the founding of the London-based ‘Barada TV’ – a satellite station which broadcast a daily programme of reportage and discussion on Syria back into the country from its studios in Fitzrovia. With its unambiguously anti-regime coverage, the enterprise soon became one a number of opposition initiatives to receive covert funding from the US State Department. (Unlike Blair’s Labour government, the Bush administration had adopted a tentative policy of regime-change in Syria and after breaking off diplomacy with Damascus in 2005, formalised US funding to groups hostile to Assad.117) As the second-generation Barada TV founder Ausama, explained frankly of his former links with Washington:

the Bush government was taking all measures to offer any kind of help and assistance to opposition groups, so of course we received indirect support… Encouraging civil society on the ground was a key way of undermining the regime. At that time there was not a single Republican who believed in Assad as a possible reformer.118

London, by contrast, was seemingly resistant to sponsoring democratic or human rights initiatives outside the aegis of regime control. Where UK funding to progressive groups inside Syria had habitually taken place via third-party organisations due to stringent prohibitions on NGO activity inside the country, Assad’s espoused reform programme saw a nominal licensing of the latter organisations. Resources aimed at civil society-development were thus redirected through legitimatated channels, namely the miscellany of charities founded by the first lady (including training schemes for journalists working on the country’s notoriously polemic state-controlled media). In characterising this carefully-orchestrated charade, a prominent British-Syrian journalist later noted that “there was never a reform programme in Syria – it was change tailored towards

117 According to communications from US embassy officials in Damascus leaked by the online whistle-blower Wikileaks, the State Department provided financial-backing in excess of US$6 million to opposition groups and related projects operating in Syria and abroad since as early as 2006. These mechanisms survived into Obama’s presidency, despite the Democrats’ official efforts to restore diplomacy with Damascus. For more details see: Craig Whitlock, “U.S. secretly backed Syrian opposition groups, cables released by WikiLeaks show;” The Washington Post, 17 April 2011 at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-secretly-backed-syrian-opposition-groups-cables-released-by-wikileaks-show/2011/04/14/AF1p9hwD_story.html [accessed 20 August 2011].

118 Interview with Ausama, London, 6 August 2011.
advancing the position of the 2 per cent elite ruling population.” Echoing this view, Obeida spoke of his frustration at the time as British officials sought advice on spending development grants, yet insisted that they were unable to fund any project without regime endorsement. As he explained:

The regime convinced them that they had started licensing NGOs and was sucking the money that was supposed to be spent on civil society… We repeatedly asked them ‘what are you doing, guys?!’, but it was a clear indication that the UK was more interested in helping the strong, not the weak. Unfortunately, they were therefore seen as hypocrites by many Syrians - instead of supporting us, the democrats, they were supporting the brutal dictator.  

Not standing idly by: atrocity and intervention

After more than a decade of Britain’s endorsing the authoritarian chicanery of Assad junior, Cameron in August 2013 appeared to spell a resolute end to London’s tacit support. The Commons motion of 29 August, drafted in the PM’s name, noted the failure of the UNSC to take action in response to the Syrian crisis over the preceding two and half years and deplored the regime’s attack on Ghouta as tantamount to a “war crime”. It advocated a strong humanitarian response from the international community, measures which “may, if necessary, require military action that is legal, proportionate and focused on saving lives by preventing and deterring further use of Syria’s chemical weapons.” Speaking in support of the motion, the PM considered Assad’s use of chemical weapons against the backdrop of prohibitions adopted almost a century ago in the 1925 Geneva Protocol. As he explained:

Whatever disagreements there are over the complex situation in Syria, I believe that there should be no disagreement that the use of chemical weapons is wrong…

120 Interview with Obeida, 2013.
121 Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to Syria and the Use of Chemical Weapons, United Kingdom, House of Commons, Session 2013-2014, Business Papers, 29 August 2013 at: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmagenda/ob130829.htm [accessed 20 August 2013].
122 Ibid.
International law since that time has reflected a determination that the events of that war should never be repeated. It put a line in the sand... President Assad has, in my view, crossed that line and there should now be consequences... Is it not in the British national interest that rules about chemical weapons are upheld? In my view, of course it is, and that is why I believe we should not stand idly by.123

Cameron’s entreaty echoed the “red-line” touted a year earlier in Obama’s claim that a use of chemical weapons would change his administration’s calculation on intervention in Syria.124 Despite both leaders’ forthright withdrawal of support for Assad in 2011, two summers later, little action had transpired to either compel his departure or forestall the escalation of full-scale armed conflict.125

Yet to many Syrians in and outside the country, Assad had divested himself of legitimacy long prior to his transatlantic repudiation. Rather, it was with his first public address on the burgeoning protests in April 2011 that Assad was seen to have secured his ideological flag to the mast of authoritarianism. Delivered to the Syrian parliament and broadcast on state television, the much-anticipated speech emphasised Syria’s pivotal role in furthering “core” Arab concerns, primarily the Palestinian campaign and struggle against foreign interference. So too, Assad disparaged the “new fashion” for the so-called “revolutions” in the region, claiming that legitimate demands around reform and quality of life had been hijacked by sedition under a revolutionary banner – or as he described it, “a great conspiracy whose tentacles extend to some nearby countries and far-away countries, with some inside the country. This conspiracy depends, in its timing not in its form, on what is happening in other Arab countries.”126 Unlike in the tumult of other regional countries, however, the President confirmed that the campaign in Syria

123 United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1345, 29 August 2013.
would precipitate neither revolution nor hurried promises of reform. The latter, he claimed, had long-since been underway and no signs of “weakness” would be conceded in succumbing to popular pressure.  

His government’s priorities would instead be maintaining stability and security. To the thousands of Syrians participating in peaceful protests (by then a daily occurrence) across the country and abroad, however, Assad’s firm line against dissent signified the antithesis of these aims. As one Syrian activist noted in the prominent *Syria Comment* blog after Assad’s address, “somebody has decided that either all Syrians are dumb and [the regime] can continue to trick them forever or that civil war is much better than giving the people more power.”

Observing from London, another young Syrian activist identified the address as a turning-point in shifting popular allegiance away from the regime to the opposition. The Syria-born student and social-media activist, Amjad, pointed to slogans chanted at protestors’ funerals, overnight inverting from the staple “we protect Bashar with our blood and our souls” to “we protect the martyrs with our blood and our souls”. As he explained shortly before returning to Damascus to help train digital activists, “this was the moment when Assad really lost support. His patronising speech, when he refused reforms and talked to Syrians as if they were slaves working for him, completely robbed us of any dignity.”

Weeks later, while attempting to return to the UK from Syria, Amjad was arrested at Damascus airport and detained incommunicado under conditions of torture for more than two months.

This swift and enthusiastic unleashing of mass-incarceration, torture and armed assault by Assad’s notoriously-efficient security forces thus quickly compelled many Syrians to a non-negotiable platform of regime-change. Where the sluggish, inchoate Arab League mustered a plan for ceasefire and dialogue in November 2011 (a programme accepted by Assad), few protestors in and outside the country shared the delusion that such measures would satisfy either the regime or opposition goals. Noting the belligerence of the crackdown on early strongholds of opposition in Syria’s north, one local activist

127 Ibid.
129 Interview with Amjad Baiazy, London, 2 August 2011.
130 Ibid.
observed at the time that, “in places like Homs, there is a martyr or two from every home. The people from Hama and Homs will not stop until they hang Bashar after what he has done to us.” With varied claims to meanwhile be representing local protestors, opposition groups abroad were similarly uncompromising. Ausama, who had then assumed the post of media representative of the quasi-official Syrian National Council (SNC) foreign opposition bloc, explained his organisation’s platform in late 2011:

There is no room for negotiations with the regime and this will never change. We will never compromise on the thousands of deaths we have seen at the hands of the security forces. [The SNC] is… representing all those people who have seen their children tortured, the streets fill with mutilated bodies and families go missing. There is no question of asking these people to negotiate with the regime that has done this. The only question that we will be asking Assad is which cell number he wants in prison.

Despite this resolve, both policy-makers and opposition leaders in the UK floundered in their efforts to manifest a coherent programme to oust Assad. The SNC, founded in mid-2011 by a geographically and politically-disparate range of Syrian activists and exiles in Europe and the US, including a number from the vanguard of the ‘Damascus Spring’, soon became the country’s largest international opposition coalition. Short of claiming the status of a government-in-exile, the body purported to represent some 60 per cent of the anti-Assad uprising on the ground. On this basis, it called for official recognition by international governments within months of formation – a request which was granted by the UK (shortly after the US and France) in February 2012. Following Russia and China’s veto of the UNSC resolution condemning the Syrian regime in October 2011, an official umbrella alliance of organisations and governments convened as the ‘Friends of Syria’, with Western and regional governments of Jordan,

133 Interview with Ausama, 2011.
Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, among its affiliates. At the group’s February 2012 meeting in Tunis, Secretary Hague endorsed the SNC as official representatives – a role which he juxtaposed with an incumbent regime which was “miring itself in bloodshed.” As he explained, “today we must show that we will not abandon the Syrian people in their darkest hour.”

However, amid a darkening military and humanitarian reality inside Syria, the SNC over subsequent months remained paralysed by incessant feuding and successive leadership trysts. Politically and tactically-delegitimised by activists inside Syria and abroad, many of whom deemed it a front for the Muslim Brotherhood and their Gulf-backers, the SNC was later compelled by London and Washington to rebrand itself as the more inclusive ‘Syrian National Coalition’. Nonetheless, the alliance’s November 2012 reconfiguration, which included envoys to the UK, France and Qatar as well as an Arab League seat, did little to boost its local or international credibility. Echoing criticisms issued by opposition leaders inside Syria, many diaspora and regional commentators disparaged the inefficiency, self-regard and detachment of this official opposition front. As a young British-educated Syrian journalist and activist derided, his country’s flailing diaspora opposition made its exiled Iraqi counterparts of 2003 look efficient. Indeed, another prominent analyst of Syrian origin noted at the outset of uprisings in June 2011 that “there is no such thing as the Syrian opposition”. Rather, the term had come to refer to a miscellany of groups and individuals on the ground and abroad who represented an emerging, but divided force. Despite the foregrounding of the SNC as its representative body, this circumstance became evermore apparent so that by 2013, many Syrians dismissed questions about opposition unity with counter-proposals about the magnitude of opposition “disunity”. Even SNC members and affiliates spoke of their difficulty in forging a unified opposition charter from the

139 Interview with Rime (via telephone), 29 June 2011.
140 Interview with Wassim, 2012.
miscellany of ideological and political strands that had been produced over forty years of Assad repression. A founder of the Syrian National Action group in 2011, and close associate of the SNC leadership, Obeida was nonetheless forthright about the challenges of working with such fractious political currents, either from within or as a prospective foreign ally. Describing what he deemed a combative “Syrian mentality” governing SNC internal dynamics and external dealings, he noted that “we do not concede to any leader. Everyone wants to be the leader themselves and this has made things very messy.” Similarly, the group’s British representative Walid identified the lack of cohesion among Syria’s opposition as the greatest challenge in the struggle against Assad, claiming that 43 years of despotism had greatly diminished capacities for political collaboration and unity.

To other activists unaligned with the group, the disproportionate weighting of the opposition toward external actors of limited cultural and political diversity, as embodied in the SNC, had disaggregated the opposition movement’s seminal values of inclusivity and authenticity. Many lamented the appropriation of the campaign by exiled or foreign groups, notably the Muslim Brotherhood, who were perceived as having factional interests or narrow agendas that detracted from guiding democratic principles of unity and inclusivity as well as the urgent imperative of removing Assad. Others, notably Kurds, also lamented the paucity of representation of minority groups, as well as women, in what was seen as a more elite coalition of established opposition figures.

Accounts from UK-based Syrian activists echoed anecdotal evidence from foreign policy-makers about various factions’ attempts to “hijack” the political opposition via the SNC platform to ensure their stake in any post-Assad power. Particularly among younger and/or more secular activists, it was perceived that many external actors had used their relative visibility, and therefore traction, on the international stage to draw foreign governments into desultory or misguided liaisons which had served only to

141Interview with Talal, Cambridge, 24 August 2013.
142Interview with Walid, 2013.
143Interview with Yusef, London, 19 February 2012.
prolong the crisis. As a prominent London-based writer and human rights activist, a former victim of the Assad regime, Ghias explained in summer 2013:

Opposition groups who live abroad, mostly the Brotherhood, have destroyed the revolution. A lot of individual groups with individual interests took charge, supported by Qatar, and driven by the big factors of money and religion. The SNC and later the Coalition are the ones who are responsible for Assad still being in power – because of their in-fighting, incompetence and financial mismanagement.145

Others referred specifically to the impotence of the external opposition in garnering any form of constructive support from Western governments. Instead, it was suggested that their geographical removal had alienated many veteran opposition leaders from the central aims of the uprising. As a young Cambridge-based scholar and founder of the 2012 ‘Building the Syrian State’ (BSS) initiative explained:

[The SNC] is very useful in terms of keeping the catastrophe going. Some are very good individuals, but as a whole the organisation is useless. For three years they have been sitting far away on their comfy chairs, doing nothing - just announcing their own attitudes to X or Y development, as if to show the West they’re happy with what they are doing, not thinking about the present. It’s very romantic to talk about war and revolution when you are on the outside, but for those stuck inside with no food or shelter they are offering no plan. They are stuck to exactly the same populist discourse as the regime; glorifying conflict and giving people false hope.146

This disjuncture was set against the campaigns on the ground being waged by the more independent so-called ‘Local Coordination Committees’ and the opposition’s self-declared military wing, the Free Syrian Army [FSA] – groups many in the diaspora described as the real drivers of the revolution, but among whom the SNC had limited currency.147 More broadly, other exiles critiqued the failure of ghettoised opposition groups abroad to “[translate] Syria’s dreadful suffering into universal meaning” – a tactical parochialism which had been born out of years of political constraint and isolation. As the renowned dissident and recent exile, Yassin al-Haj Saleh observed,

145 Interview with Ghias, London, 7 July 2013.
146 Interview with Talal, 2013.
“monologue rather than a dialogue is the default mode of interaction among Syrians: we have really lived for half a century in solitude.”

As sanctions from abroad and peaceful protest inside Syria proved increasingly futile in the face of Assad’s unrelenting assault, many in the Syrian opposition looked hopefully to NATO’s military campaign concurrently unfolding against Gaddafi. Indeed, the SNC appeared keen to style itself on Libya’s NTC, with its early and apparently effective brokering of foreign assistance. In August 2012, SNC representatives in turn began publicly advocating among Western leaders for a no-fly-zone to protect the rebel campaign against Assad – a proposal which took heart from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s statement that Washington would consider this among a range of measures in support of the armed effort. London, however, had earlier ruled out such a prospect. Confirming that there was “no question” of military intervention in the conflict in January 2012, the FCO described that “the situation in Syria is very different to the situation in Libya. We do not have a one-size-fits-all approach to foreign policy.” Similarly, the SNC’s comparative lack of unity, strategy and coordination with the local opposition campaign to many observers rendered its aspirations incredulous. By contrast, its efforts to perpetuate an arguably apocryphal notion of military intervention was seen by many activists abroad as squandering political energies and resources. As the young journalist Muhammed explained more than two years into the uprisings:

The Syria opposition is politically-bankrupt. They know for a fact that the US and UK do not want to get rid of Assad. And yet, they continue to give them their back pockets for funding. So what does this mean? It means you are not working for the national interest, you are working for your own interest.

With Syria by 2012 branded a “quagmire” embroiling neighbouring states from Turkey to Israel, Lebanon and the Gulf, as well as global superpowers, the failure of

148 Al Haj Saleh, Postel and Hashemi, “The conscience of Syria.”
150 Interview with Muhammed, Cambridge, 8 September 2013.
international cooperation to halt the crisis became a theme of official discourse in London. FCO statements issued repeated calls for foreign coordination with the opposition toward an “international solution” to an “international problem”. Hague’s efforts to engage the Friends of Syria alliance alongside the EU and US were repeatedly emphasised, with the Secretary reporting in April 2013 that, “we share a common aim: an end to the killing and a more stable and democratic Syria. And we share a common understanding of how to achieve it through increasing our support to the moderate opposition and putting pressure on the Assad regime.”152 The PM elaborated on this goal the same month, specifying the need to provide greater assistance to the opposition and FSA, while expressing his “[immense frustration] that we can’t do more in Syria”.153 By contrast to the relative UN cohesion on action in Libya, Cameron lamented the international paralysis over the Levant and advocated greater action to “to shake the system” beyond the strictures of the UNSC. As he explained in a Newsweek interview before a March 2012 visit to Washington:

I’ve always thought it odd the argument that because there’s a Russian veto [at the U.N.], suddenly all the other moral arguments are washed away… I think Kosovo proved that there are occasions when your responsibility to protect...to save lives, to stop slaughter, to act in a way that is both morally right but also in your own national interest.154

Despite the PM’s hawkish declarations and the Secretary’s purported strategic clarity, to many in the diaspora opposition London’s response reflected neither moral conviction nor practical value. Any tangible provision of assets fell far short of Cameron’s rhetorical enthusiasm and by the time fraught deliberations over military assistance to Syrian rebels were made public in late 2012, it was widely perceived that the utility of such measures had long-since passed. Within less than a year of uprising, the West’s Gulf allies had instigated scantly-veiled practices of channelling arms to the FSA via the SNC and other avenues in direct contravention of EU arms embargos against Damascus. Officials in the US and UK in turn expressed their muted objection, warning

154 Ferguson, "The British Prime Minister Is Coming to America.”
that such practices undermined concurrent UN efforts at a negotiated political solution, then the officially-advocated goal. Yet with Assad’s most ardent ally in Moscow, alongside its regional backer Iran, continuing to fuel the regime’s military assault, while affording ongoing diplomatic cover at the UN, such an outcome appeared evermore remote. International efforts to broker a ceasefire, let alone peace agreement, were recurrently stymied by regime intransigence (as was observed by one regional commentator at the time, Assad was “not going to listen to anyone who told him to behave”). Kofi Annan’s August 2012 renunciation of his post as UN and Arab League Special Peace Envoy to Syria, a “mission impossible” as he noted, appeared to further undermine hopes of a diplomatic solution to the crisis. The sporadic flow of arms from various foreign backers to factions of an increasingly militarised uprising meanwhile opened up further rifts among the opposition on the ground. In this context, Britain’s calls for Assad’s departure coupled with vacillation in realising espoused support for the local campaign, appeared to elude both serious diplomatic progress and opposition military victory. The risk of inflaming the battle on the ground or inflating the humanitarian crisis through more forceful Western intervention against Assad, argued by many expert and liberal anti-interventionists at that time, doubtless also weighed on policymakers. Yet amid what many Syrians pointed out to be an existing circumstance of multiple, more insidious international interventions in the conflict, London’s equivocation over concrete support was conversely perceived by many Syrians as a strategy of wilful delay that only aggravated civilian suffering. Activists widely recounted a view that Western governments were instead seeking to avert the likely chaos of regime change via a policy of ‘wait-and-see’, deferring hard questions on the use of force and thereby prolonging a brutal stalemate on the ground. As Rime Allaf described it shortly after Annan’s resignation, this bloody status quo was a “logical consequence” of the way the conflict had been handled internationally – that is,


156 Joffe, Late Night Live, 2012.


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“completely left alone” while revolutionaries waited for international assistance and fissures opened up through which other foreign-backed rebel and extremist groups could gain a foothold.159 Echoing this narrative, another British-Syrian professional and BSS co-founder, accused Western governments of “throwing breadcrumbs” to the local opposition with token articulations of support.160 As she explained in March 2013, Syrians had been left dangling far too long: “I don’t think the international community is doing enough to support its claim that it wants a political solution in Syria. [The West] says one thing and does something else. Right now many on the ground believe Syrian blood is on the hands of the international community.”161

Even those in the self-declared official opposition expressed vexation with Britain’s flighty strategy as it attempted to garner material assistance for the local campaign. After more than two years’ dealings with FCO and other UK officials, SNC representative Walid echoed the view that Britain’s practice fell short of its rhetoric. As he explained:

Our experience with the West is that they do not act as they say they will. From the start, the Syrian coalition requested help from the international community to remove the regime, including US, UK and France. In theory, we heard a lot about how they supported our cause, but in reality they have waited by the side of the Syrian regime in connection with Israel and its supporters who have applied pressure not to change the regime.162

Old-guard diaspora activists described the familiar bureaucratic and political obstacles that foiled their negotiations around British assistance. While UK humanitarian resources continued to be channelled via regime-approved NGOs like the Red Crescent, British reluctance to commit to an opposition alliance hindered provision of the most basic forms of aid - an impasse which was aggravated by the SNC’s manifest disorganisation. As Obeida, who nonetheless opposed further militarisation of the conflict, recounted of these futile official liaisons:

159 Allaf, “Inside the Regime.”
160 Rim Turkmani in “Syria: Who should help and when?,” panel at the Frontline Club, London, 7 March 2013.
161 Ibid.
162 Interview with Walid, 2013.
Everyone was asking for arms so they told us ‘forget about arms - what else can we give you?’ We needed things you couldn’t get on the normal market, so we proposed communications technology, which they also refused. Finally we suggested funding an SNC bakery, but they couldn’t give us that either because we were a political entity. They couldn’t give us any of these things, but they could channel aid under the alias of the Assad regime, and when they wanted to get arms to rebels in Libya, they could get arms.\(^{163}\)

Indeed, as Achcar notes, this relative withholding of arms from Syria’s rebels was commonly attributed by the opposition to Western fears of proliferating weaponry falling to those who might use it against Israel.\(^{164}\) Just like Russia’s unwavering military assistance to the Assad regime, measures similar to those undertaken by NATO in Libya were widely identified as a factor which might have fundamentally altered the play of the Syrian uprising. As Walid explained two-years into the conflict: "the Syrian people could have done this by themselves and toppled the regime months ago. But the continuous and massive support from the Iranians and Russians tipped the equation to the side of the regime. The Syrian people were promised a lot, but received very little from the West."\(^{165}\) Meanwhile, as many in the diaspora noted, the comparative military disadvantage of the FSA compelled rebel fighters toward better-resourced, more organised Islamist factions with a spectrum of radical agendas like those of Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) - vicious but effective campaigns with ever greater numbers of foreign recruits. So too, extremist forces were bolstered by the Syrian regime itself through the release of Al Qaeda prisoners detained around the country, as well as covert oil deals, as part of a wilful strategy to sabotage the opposition campaign.\(^{166}\)

Thus, when in May 2013 the EU voted to end its arms embargo against Syria on the grounds of aiding “moderate” rebels against Islamists and pressuring Assad toward

\(^{163}\) Interview with Obeida, 2013.
\(^{164}\) See claim by the Commander of the FSA Tawhid Division that “the world wants war to drag on”, weakening Syria to Israel’s advantage, cited in Achcar, *The People Want*, 249.
\(^{165}\) Interview with Walid, 2013.
negotiation, as advocated by Hague, the initiative was widely perceived as obsolete and self-interested; Syria had by then descended too far down the path of chaos.\textsuperscript{167} Many British-Syrians noted with scepticism the incommensurability of Britain’s stated goals. As Rime explained shortly after the embargo was lifted, “[the West] is carving out its own interests in Syria. You can’t talk about arming the rebels and a peaceful solution at the same time.” Likewise, noting the quiet efficiency of UK-French strikes on Mali in January 2013, the prominent Washington-based exile Radwan Ziadeh disparaged the strategic underpinnings of London’s action. As he explained: “the West has no interest in the Syrian issue and more importantly, they think that leaving Syria very weak will serve the interest of some neighbouring countries. We are destroying our entire army, our fighter jets, and Syria will need 20-25 years to rebuild, which suits very well some of its neighbours and their superpower allies.”\textsuperscript{168}

Other opposition activists cast similar aspersions on repeated Western objections to Assad’s campaign. As Ghias explained in August 2013 following sustained interaction with UK officials:

\begin{quote}
Britain is not interested in Assad being a reformer, they are interested in him being a client. In 2011, I told [the FCO] that exactly today’s chaos would eventuate – not because I am a great mind-reader, but because every single Syrian knew it. And now they are simply making statements - on Monday they will arm the opposition, on Tuesday they won’t - with no real interest or conviction. The West kicked Assad’s army out of Lebanon in five days, there is no question that if they’re interested, they could do something.\textsuperscript{169}
\end{quote}

Instead, in what was seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy, Assad’s narrative of siege by foreign conspirators, sectarianism and Islamist extremists – the perennial “armed criminal gangs and terrorists”\textsuperscript{170} – had come into fruition by the President’s own making, and in full view of the international community. By 2013, Syria’s various religious and ethnic minorities were under attack (chiefly due to perceived alignment

\textsuperscript{167} As recounted by, for example Christopher Phillips, “Expert Comment: Flawed Logic in Decision to Lift Syria Arms Embargo,” \textit{Chatham House}, 28 May 2013.
\textsuperscript{168} Interview with Radwan Ziadeh, London, 27 October 2012.
\textsuperscript{169} Interview with Ghias, 2013.
with the regime); the country was anarchic with foreign mercenaries and militia, and jihadist forces had claimed a number of towns and provinces.

Not only had this disarray in turn lent legitimacy to Assad's regime as a purported last bastion of stability, many in the Syrian opposition also suggested it had given cover to Western governments wary of relinquishing the embattled despot. Many were at pains to emphasise the regime’s complicity in burgeoning terrorism in Syria - a collusion which it was claimed had been overlooked by Western governments. As one prominent blogger noted, “far from fighting terrorism and extremism, Assad has been the single person most responsible for its resurgence in the Levant.” Yet conversely, the leader’s posturing as the custodian of secular unity in Syria was perceived to have garnered him greater international currency over the opposition, amid a narrative of unravelling sectarian extremism. As Walid noted:

Many parties believe that change of regime will bring extremists or Islamist groups to power. This is not true, the Syrian people ask for freedom, equality and justice, not differentiation between groups. On the contrary, the Syrian regime, supported by the West over the years, established a regime which enhanced injustice between Syrians.

The regime’s more covert strategies of fostering sectarian division over decades of minority rule and under the rubric of secularism, had thereby ultimately worked to stifle the claims of his opponents. As journalist Muhammed explained in mid-2013, “all the borders have been opened – from Qatar, Saudi, Turkey – and foreign fighters drafted. And who paid the price? The Syrians who went out on the street asking for revolution.” Nonetheless, with the spectre of militant jihadism encroaching across Syria’s borders, many Western leaders had come to understand the crisis, not as one of humanity or political freedom, but of security. Despite hard-talk from London, Washington and Brussels, the threat of opening up an extremist chasm in Syria now provided a credible argument against removing Assad. As Amjad noted of the shifting tenor of transatlantic rhetoric in July 2013: “all this talk is working towards getting

172 Interview with Walid, 2013.
173 Interview with Muhammed, 2013.
Assad off the hook. If the US really wanted him to go, two easy Tomahawks to the presidential palace would do. But the West has made their mind up now that they've seen that 30 per cent of Syria is al-Qaeda. They have decided to keep Assad on.\footnote{175 Interview with Amjad, 31 August 2013.}

Indeed, such was this sense of duplicity that one young Kurdish activist expressed greater respect for Moscow’s coldly determined course in Syria, than the prevarication of the opposition’s supposed allies.\footnote{176 Interview with Yousef, Cambridge, 8 September 2013.} The same month, when suggestions of arming Syrian rebels were once again repudiated by London, there was little to mask the exasperation of the opposition on the ground. Hague denied that any concrete policy on arms to Syria had been formed, instead telling the Foreign Affairs Committee that “our resolve is to promote a political solution, to save lives where we can and to protect the national security interests of this country.”\footnote{177 United Kingdom, House of Commons, Oral Evidence Taken Before the Foreign Affairs Committee, “Developments In UK Foreign Policy,” London, 16 July 2013, transcript at: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmfaff/c268-i/c26801.htm [accessed 20 September 2013].} However, leaders inside Syria were quick to call betrayal. As the head of the FSA, General Salim Idris, told The Daily Telegraph "soon there will be no FSA to arm, Islamic groups will take control of everything, and this is not in the interests of Britain. The West promises and promises. This is a joke now. I have not had the opportunity to ask David Cameron personally if he will leave us alone to be killed."\footnote{178 Ruth Sherlock, “David Cameron accused of betraying Syrian rebels,” The Telegraph, 15 July 2013 at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10180820/David-Cameron-accused-of-betraying-Syrian-rebels.html [accessed 15 July 2013].}

Events that should never be repeated: crimes against humanity in Syria

Thus, when weeks later the Syrian regime unleashed a massacre whose only brutal precedent was that of Iraq’s Ba’athist dictator in 1988, Syrians’ horror appeared matched solely by a sense of indignation that the atrocity had taken place on the world’s watch. Graphic images from Ghouta of those dying from poison gas were readily likened by commentators to scenes from Halabja decades earlier. So too, counts of 1400 fatalities and 3000 cases of neurotoxicity within three hours quickly confirmed the
chemical attack as the biggest since Saddam’s. While world leaders swiftly pronounced their shock and horror, few in the Syrian diaspora seemed to share their surprise. As Radwan explained several days after the attack:

Everyone expected this. The West was playing a game of cat and mouse with Assad. First the regime used long-range missiles against civilians without punishment. Then when the use of chemical weapons on a small scale was confirmed by all nations and there was no response, Assad was given a green light to use them on a larger scale. We feel we have been abandoned by the international community who let Assad do this. How many people killed is enough, we ask? Will it only be when the whole of Syria is destroyed?

These sentiments were expressed vividly in banners and protest slogans filtering out from inside the country, which proclaimed: "Dear Free World: enjoy watching us burn", "Shame on you international community, Syrian people are not numbers" and "F--- your red lines Obama". In Washington, officials hastened to intercept the spread of this “black mark” left by Syria on Obama’s foreign policy with toughening rhetoric on prohibitions around chemical weapons. US Secretary of State John Kerry within days declared America's intentions to retaliate against an act that had "shocked the conscience of the world". France and Britain echoed the punitive call against Assad and ventured to suggest a readiness to defy Russia in bypassing UN authorisation. At Washington’s behest, Cameron expediently drafted a UN resolution authorising "all necessary measures to protect civilians", recalling the Commons from summer recess to

180 Interview with Radwan, 2013.
vote on the motion.\textsuperscript{184} A hastily-assembled parliamentary briefing paper on intervention gave a blunt appraisal of circumstances:

Chemical weapons have been used in Syria and have changed the position of major Western governments. The illegal use of chemical weapons does not affect the legality of outside intervention in Syria, which remains unclear without a Security Council resolution. The options for military intervention are complicated and expensive. Public opinion in the UK is firmly against intervention other than humanitarian.\textsuperscript{185}

Within days, military intervention in Syria appeared to many to have manifested from a chimera into a concrete proposition: not a question of if, but of how soon. Nonetheless, few in the diaspora viewed this about-face, clad in emotive appeals by the PM, as evidence of a more fundamental change in London’s regard for the crisis. Rather, the sudden rallying was seen by many as a rush bid to reassert Britain’s role on the international stage. As Malik explained at the time; “Britain does not want to be left out of international affairs. Obviously, Syria is the number one story at the moment and therefore the UK has to be part of the coalition against Assad. The vote is keeping Britain relevant… It is about realpolitik shrouded in the language of values, because how else are you going to justify intervening or not intervening?”\textsuperscript{186}

While official opposition representatives in the SNC welcomed fresh proposals “to punish” the Syrian regime\textsuperscript{187}, others in the diaspora described how any anticipation of genuine moral investment by Western governments had diminished over the preceding three years. As one young activist and aid-organiser, Alia explained on the eve of the vote: “if [Western] powers had wanted to help, they would have done it long ago - I don’t think Syrians expect anything from them today. There is a lot of hypocrisy going on and of course this has changed Syrians’ views of the West– after two years of bloodshed what


\textsuperscript{185} “Research Briefing: Intervention in Syria,” United Kingdom, House of Commons Library, 28 August 2013.

\textsuperscript{186} Interview with Malik, 29 August 2013.

\textsuperscript{187} As one SNC envoy told journalists after meeting with French President Francois Hollande to discuss the targeting of chemical weapons installations and government bases, “we are very happy. France and its partners are quite decided to punish the Syrian regime.” See “Obama makes case for Syria strike,” \textit{Reuters}, 30 August 2013 at: http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/08/29/syria-crisis-idINDEE97S0CM20130829 [accessed 31 August 2013].
do you expect? For us, Obama’s red line is just a joke.”\(^\text{188}\)

The hopes that had initially inspired Syria’s uprising had long-since been supplanted by a more urgent call for protection – one which was seen to have gone unheeded. Amid this unfolding catastrophe, initial denunciations of Western interference in the region by Syrians had likewise given way to a more compelling sense that “something must be done”.\(^\text{189}\) Yet that there by this time existed “no good options”,\(^\text{190}\) either strategically or ethically, for intervention in Syria was widely reflected in the response of the diaspora opposition to Cameron’s motion. On both individual and collectives levels, Syrians appeared overwhelmingly riven by the proposal. This sense of conflict was embodied by one young humanitarian organiser who recounted on the eve of the Commons vote how he was declining a BBC appearance on the issue on the grounds of his own inability to reconcile his stance. As he explained, “I can’t decide for myself, let alone for others.”\(^\text{191}\) Unclouded by delusions of humanitarian aims, others adopted a forthright stance in favour of the strikes. While recognising the questionable utility of its “highly limited” military charter\(^\text{192}\), some expressed a sense of vindication at this long-overdue symbolic blow against Assad. As a prominent young British-Syrian blogger Wassim wrote while MPs assembled to debate:

> It is not a question anymore of how many people might be killed accidentally in strikes against Assad, but how many deaths can be avoided by crippling his ability to wage war… Many more people would still be alive today if Assad was made to understand that mass murder is not acceptable, with chemical weapons or not. Let’s get one thing clear. Nobody is coming to help Syrians because they are getting killed… The behaviour of states in the international system is primitive and infantile, however thick

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\(^\text{188}\)Interview with Alia (via Skype), 2 June 2013.
\(^\text{190}\)As Michael Clarke of the Royal United Services Institute later noted, “we have missed the opportunity to train an anti-Assad force that would have real influence in Syria when he is removed, as he will be.” See, Nick Hopkins, “Syria conflict: UK planned to train and equip 100,000 rebels,” BBC News, 3 July 2014 at: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28148943 [accessed 5 July 2015].
\(^\text{191}\)Interview with Fadi, London, 29 August 2013.
\(^\text{192}\)As stipulated by Nick Clegg in United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1505, 29 August 2013.
the books on international relations may get. The basic rules… are about as complex as
the politics of siblings fighting over their toys.193

Simultaneously, those advocating British intervention were aware that on a domestic
level, it was the campaign’s rough symbolism – “the ghost of Tony Blair and George
Bush all over again” as it was described – which weighed against them. Likewise, its
proponents in Cameron’s Coalition government were alert to the inauspicious “sombre
and anxious mood” haunting Britain’s public and politicians.194 Indeed, the swift
mobilisation of demonstrations against the strikes, as noted by commentators at the
time, evoked scenes of a decade earlier with protestors from across the ideological
spectrum drawn together in their opposition. In this instance, regime loyalists, primarily
from the ‘Hands Off Syria’ campaign, found themselves alongside Stop the War and
other leftists bearing anti-imperial slogans against Western interference. However, it
was the mobilisation of the latter camp, one to whom Syrians might have expected to
look for support in a struggle for human rights and democracy, which appeared to elicit
greatest umbrage among diaspora activists. Here, many perceived that the continual
spectre of Islamism and extremism around the Syrian opposition had rendered the
movement unable to prove itself “revolutionary enough” for the support from these
radicals.195 As one British-Syrian activist noted of this opposition:

How infinitely nobler, infinitely moral it would have been for the anti-war movement to
have called to stop the war inside Syria, Assad’s war against his people, instead of the
vague, cynical, selfish, falsely virtuous call to stop a possible strike against Assad…
But to leave Syria to Assad to continue to destroy it, smash its cities and condemn its

193 “Airstrikes on Syria,” Maysaloon, 25 August 2013 at:
194 See Nick Clegg in United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1505,
29 August 2013.
195 As one prominent blogger noted, “it was never enough that there are people dying, and that there are
thousands in detention camps; it was never enough that the population is being forced into murderous
exodus or being deprived of basic needs. The European Left wanted its ‘revolutionaries.’” See Leil-Zahra
Mortada, “The Syrian Double Revolution and the EuroLeftist Double Impotency,” LeilZahra, 1 April
children to death or a living hell amounts to what ought to be considered as a crime against peace, life and humanity. 196

So too, in crafting roughly-hewn parallels between Blair’s maligned Iraq campaign – a ruthless Ba’athist dictator, allegations of chemical weapons, a US-led military campaign – many anti-war activists were seen to have eschewed the Syrian people for the false premises of politics. 197 The resentment this correlation inspired in those who had vested themselves in the opposition campaign was palpable. Writing as MPs made their final remarks in the Commons debate, Amjad, who had returned to Britain following his detention by the regime the previous year, addressed his online audience:

Let me explain it plain well to my friends: in Syria the majority of people support intervention, and you should too. The international community is obliged to protect Syrians and you should encourage intervention rather than discourage it… Only Syrians who live in luxury flats can afford to say no to intervention out of sheer selfishness, and those intellectuals who want to be hailed by others as anti-US. Let me tell you the voice of people who are killed in hundreds everyday: please stand with us, the US might kill civilians, but eventually they will end the massacres of the dictator against his own people and end the war. 198

While concurring on the urgency of the humanitarian crisis, others were more sceptically opposed to the possible strategic ambitions behind allied proposals. Nor was support for Cameron’s Syria campaign divorced from either grave apprehension about its outcomes or antipathy to the agendas fuelling it. Nonetheless, the proposed intervention in Syria was widely distinguished from Blair’s incursion into Iraq by diaspora activists, some of whom disparaged the knee-jerk anti-interventionism that had followed in his wake. Many were thereby compelled to attempt to reconcile valued tenets of peaceful resistance or a principled objection to the Western role in the Middle East with more concrete, pragmatic imperatives. As the writer Robin speculated in his blog hours before the vote:

198 Amjad, Facebook post, 29 August 2013.
If the US-led West wished to invade and occupy Syria, or to engineer regime change from afar, it would have taken advantage of the two-and-a-half-year chaos in Syria to intervene long before now… Simplistic ‘anti-imperialists’ (the sort who haven’t noticed Russia’s blatant imperialism in Syria) should reflect on the complexity of the situation. Even with our hypocritical and frequently criminal ‘international community’, is there no validity in attempting to preserve the semi-taboo on the mass use of WMD?199

Campaign advocates in Westminster were also beset by last-ditch efforts to prove that the proposed action, ipso facto sullied by events of ten years earlier, was so “fundamentally different” from Iraq.200 Concluding the day of oratory which preceded the vote (“this House at its very best” in the Deputy PM’s words), Nick Clegg offered a final appeal to naysayers in the house: “there's nothing we're trying to hide… We are not seeking to topple a dictator or flex our muscles. Voting for the government motion tonight however is sending a clear message. Iraq casts a long shadow, but it would a double tragedy if the memory of that war caused us to retreat from the laws and conventions which govern our world, which Britain helped to author.”201

A subsequent eleventh-hour Labour amendment to the motion nonetheless signified the residual anxieties around Britain’s adherence to those international conventions. Where the government’s draft proposed that “every effort” be made to secure a UNSC resolution backing military action, the opposition sought greater guarantees of multilateralism through heightened conditions - namely, a UNSC vote on evidence following weapons inspections. Miliband’s more “hard-nosed”202 drive to ensure international legitimacy through the UN was knocked down by a parliamentary majority (including by six Labour peers who rebelled against the amendment on the grounds that it failed to rule out military action203.) Yet to many Syrian observers, the government’s

200 Prime Minister David Cameron, United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1427, 29 August 2013.
201 Nick Clegg, United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1505, 29 August 2013.
202 Jason Ralph, “Briefing: The vote was not British isolationism. It was about the legitimacy of international action,” Foreign Policy Centre, 1 September 2013 at: http://fpc.org.uk/articles/629 [accessed 18 September 2013].
carefully constructed guarantees and ethical packaging were by now marginal to what was seen as one of few remaining avenues to exit the intractable bloodshed. Speaking as MPs gathered to cast their final votes, Ghias described his sense of paralysis at the circumstance now confronting Syrians “between the hammer and the nail”. As he explained:

We are usually pacifistic and against interference in principle. But now so many of us are desperate, completely in despair. So few Syrians trust the Americans, but everyone else is already there terrorising civilians, and there is no way out without Western involvement. The opposition is useless with no strategic plan, their forces have no leadership or consistent flow of arms and are themselves making terrible human rights violations. The only way forward is to get rid of the regime. There will be chaos and bloodshed, but we have already lost 100,000 so how much worse can it be? The continued existence of regime is the only worst option.  

Whatever the narrative being forged by debating parties in Westminster, the real tragedy in the eyes of Syrians was the violence and destruction persisting over two and a half years – a brutality which hours later appeared destined to continue unchecked. With the defeat of the government motion by seven votes, a British Prime Minister was for the first time in over 150 years prevented from going to war by parliament. The house had spoken, Cameron acknowledged, and there would be no participation in the US-led strikes, nor any British military involvement in Syria. Lauding their performance amidst clamorous calls of “resign” from the backbenches, the PM reassured his peers that no royal prerogative would be used to bypass parliament in this instance. As he explained: “I strongly believe in the need for a tough response to the use of chemical weapons, but I also believe in respecting the will of the House of Commons. It is clear to me that the British parliament, reflecting the views of the British people, does not want to see British military action.” Despite the opposition rancour, Cameron maintained that his government had nothing to apologise for; neither Britain’s international role nor its special relationship would be diminished (Obama, he hoped, “would understand”).

204 Interview with Ghias, 2013.
205 Prime Minister David Cameron, United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons,Col. 1427, 29 August 2013.
206 “David Cameron says he does not have to apologise to Barack Obama,” The Independent, 30 August 2013 at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/david-cameron-says-he-does-not-have-to-
Rather, the PM praised the country’s extant “great strengths” of diplomatic and military resources, alongside “a government and a parliament that is deeply engaged in the world.”\textsuperscript{207} The opposition leader likewise claimed the outcome as a vindication of British public values. Unlike the PM’s “cavalier” approach on Syria, the nation did not “need reckless and impulsive leadership, it needs calm and measured leadership”. In a position which, as was later noted, attempted to convey a vote for Britain’s international legitimacy rather than its isolationism\textsuperscript{208}, Miliband explained that "people are deeply concerned about the chemical weapons attacks in Syria, but they want us to learn the lessons of Iraq. They don't want a rush to war. They want things done in the right way, working with the international community."\textsuperscript{209} Others in the government were, however, less sanguine about the implications of the defeat. Within hours of the vote, Former Liberal-Democrat leader Lord Paddy Ashdown, tweeted that "50 years trying to serve my country I have never felt so depressed [or] ashamed".\textsuperscript{210} (The former envoy to Bosnia later elaborated that weapons like Assad’s "will become more commonplace in the Middle East battlefield...we will feel the effects of that as well."\textsuperscript{211}) Similarly dismayed, Chancellor George Osborne called for a period of "national soul searching about our role in the world", noting that “I hope this does not become a moment when we turn our back on all of the world's problems.”\textsuperscript{212}

For many British-Syrians, however, the vote had confirmed the failure of Cameron’s attempted reassertion of British influence: a hastily-calculated bid for relevance whose only outcome, as Malik wryly observed, was to render Britain irrelevant. Others recounted the defeat as symbolic of a broader retreat by Western governments in the face of more militant, and less prudent, global players. As Robin later speculated:


\textsuperscript{208}Ralph, “Briefing: The vote was not British isolationism.”


\textsuperscript{210}See Paddy Ashdown’s Twitter feed at: https://twitter.com/paddyashdown [accessed 6 January 2014].

\textsuperscript{211}Cited in “Syria crisis: Cameron loses Commons vote on Syria action,” \textit{BBC News}.

\textsuperscript{212}Cited in “Syria crisis: Cameron loses Commons vote on Syria action,” \textit{BBC News}.
We have not understood how small the West is now as a world power, allowing itself to be pushed around by the ridiculous Putin. If they want to act in future, they can’t - the age of the US as policeman is over. Before I would have welcomed this, but nowadays I am not so sure. It has not been replaced by any kind of more positive international force... We are not living in a happy world with any kind of order in it: it is the end of Western dominance and nothing can replace it.213

In Syria meanwhile, the Assad regime appeared provoked to reassert its own influence with the diminishing threat of Western intervention. Within twenty-four hours of the Commons vote, eye-witness reports emerged from Northern Syria, where a school playground had been bombed with a napalm-like substance, killing ten children and injuring dozens more. Speaking to broadcasters, the shell-shocked headmaster described the scene: “there were dead people, people burning and people running away, but where to? Where would they go? It is not safe anywhere. That is the fate of the Syrian people.” To those observing from abroad, the fresh attack signified a brutality which no amount of British soul-searching could mitigate. While the UN set about brokering a plan to destroy Assad’s chemical arsenal – a deal hailed as a breakthrough show of unity between Russia and its Western adversaries – and enticing the regime to a second Geneva peace conference in 2014, Assad’s presidency appeared untrammelled. Observing this diplomatic ruse, the young Damascene Muhammed noted: “whatever happens in Geneva, Assad is not going to step down after two and a half years - he is fighting to the death. You have no ground for a negotiation between the two sides, only destruction - one big mess. There is no such thing as Syria now, it has been wiped off the map.”214

Conclusion

By January 2014, when opposition and regime parties assembled in Switzerland for the much-deferred UN Geneva II conference on Syria, the Foreign Secretary was more downbeat about the negotiations he had hailed a year earlier as “the only hope” for

213 Interview with Robin Yassin-Kassab, London, 1 September 2013.
214 Interview with Muhammed, 2013.
peace.215 The talks, he suggested, instead would be “tortuous.”216 Despite Assad’s compliance with the agreed chemical weapons protocols, regime violence remained unabated and the advance of extremists largely unchecked by its security forces. New epidemics of disease and starvation had broken out, with the UN declaring the refugee crisis, then tallying two-million, the worst since the 1994 Rwandan genocide.217 Hours before talks opened graphic images, leaked from Syrian police photographers, were likened to scenes from the Nazi death camps by a panel of international war crimes prosecutors, with the cache of 55,000 photographs documenting "merciless" and "industrial scale" crimes against humanity.218

Assad’s regime was nonetheless characteristically brazen, claiming that it would use the Swiss conference to secure support against an ongoing siege by terrorists. As the regime’s National Reconciliation Minister, Ali Haidar, warned the world: "don't expect anything from Geneva II. Neither Geneva II, not Geneva III nor Geneva X will solve the Syrian crisis. The solution has begun and will continue through the military triumph of the state."219 Opposition delegates were likewise obstinate in their refusal to negotiate with Assad. While the FSA boycotted the talks as unrepresentative, SNC delegates were narrowly coaxed into participation, despite Russia’s refusal to accept the condition of Assad’s departure. Expectations among British-Syrian activists, many of them in attendance, were similarly low. For some, the talks, like the preceding six months’ machinations over chemical weapons, confirmed Western governments’ intentions to retain the Assad regime – a prospect which they disparaged outright. Observing regime delegates take their posts in Switzerland, one young London-based humanitarian organiser Tweeted, “there is no diplomatic solution to the Syrian Genocide: we want Bashar and his gang dead by any means... and we want to dance on their graves.”


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Violent scuffles meanwhile erupted between opposition demonstrators and Assad loyalists on the streets of Montreux. Watching this ire-filled pantomime, few could discern any remnants of the democratic spirit that arose inside Syria three years ago. As Ghias reflected from London, “where has it gone now? We had one of the best, most beautiful revolutions in the modern world. But we did such a bad job. I criticise the West, but first we must blame ourselves.”

Inside the conference halls, another prominent British-Syrian foreign policy analyst also noted the dissonance between these geopolitical theatrics (later deemed “one of the darkest hours for modern international diplomacy”) and the seminal hopes of Syria’s popular uprising. As she wrote:

If there were people who had never heard of Syria and who checked media… to find out about it today, they would discover there was a ‘sectarian civil war,’ jihadists, chemicals, refugees, polio, destruction, hunger, a push for ‘peace talks’ ... but they would not discover there had been a peaceful uprising, a savage repression by a genocidal maniac, and a population still desperately seeking a life of dignity.

220 Alia, Facebook post, 16 January 2014.
221 Interview with Ghias, London, 29 August 2013.
223 Zainab, Facebook post, 17 November 2013.
CHAPTER SIX

The Power of Community?

Diaspora, terror and Britain’s role after Iraq

The Arabs are like a page I have turned over, and sequels are rotten things.

T.E. Lawrence, May 1921.1

We should avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, but that does not mean that we should be trapped by the past. At the end of the day, this is also something which speaks to our values… We must act.

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, August 2014.2

An August 2014 cartoon in The Times depicted lines of supine refugee corpses assembled on the ground beside a pot-bellied David Cameron reclining on a beach towel.3 The previous week, the PM had declined to cut short his summer holiday in Portugal in order to address the crisis in Iraq, where IS forces had steadily and bloodily advanced across the country toward Kurdistan. Despite calls from senior British commanders for the UK to join American strike efforts against IS targets over previous months, Cameron had continued to refute the possibility of military re-involvement in the country. The image followed objections from Tory MPs at the PM’s allowing himself to be photographed on a Mediterranean sojourn while RAF crews undertook a

2 United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1336, 26 September 2014.
perilous humanitarian aid-drop to the thousands of Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar, under siege by IS.⁴

Within days, Cameron was back at No. 10 chairing a Cobra emergency meeting on Britain’s response to the crisis. The House of Commons was promptly recalled the following month to debate the PM’s resulting motion, entitled ‘Coalition against ISIL’. The draft motion condemned the extremist group’s “barbaric acts” against Iraqis of all backgrounds and emphasised the threat its terrorism posed to wider international security and to the UK specifically (as signified, it noted, in the murder of multiple British hostages). The request for international support from the Government of Iraq was acknowledged as a clear legal basis for any action, with UK air-strikes endorsed to protect civilians and restore Iraq’s territorial integrity. The motion, however, made two explicit caveats: it did not approve the use of either UK troops in ground combat operations in Iraq or its air-forces in strikes against IS targets in Syria. Opening the debate, Cameron highlighted the need for British national interest to be served by the mission, in particular through combatting a direct threat to the British people, alongside requirements for moral justification, clear vision and a comprehensive strategy – all of which he argued were satisfied in this instance. As he stated, “I believe that it is morally right that we now move to a new phase of action…against ISIL in Iraq, and I believe we should do so now.”⁵ In contrast to the debate of a year earlier, the Labour leader was now in accord with the PM on both the motion and its professed morality. Moreover, Miliband claimed, the failings of his Labour peers in Iraq more than a decade ago now fortified the ethical burden on the government to re-engage. As he explained to the House in response to questions from a Labour MP and vocal opponent of Blair’s 2003 campaign at the time: “while some people would say that our intervention in Iraq means that we should not intervene in this case, I think that there is a heightened responsibility for us precisely because we did intervene in Iraq, and—with all kinds of implications—the Iraqi state that has emerged is partly our responsibility.”⁶

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⁴Elsewhere, former Conservative Secretary of State for Defence, Liam Fox, publically denounced the "catastrophic complacency" of world leaders, claiming that “the idea that this is not our problem is wishful thinking at best.” Cited in “Iraq: UK completes third round of aid drops to refugees,” BBC News, 13 August 2014 at: http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28767754 [accessed 14 August 2014].
⁵United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons,Col. 1255, 26 September 2014.
⁶Ibid.
A new British mission in Iraq – more modest, if no less confused than 2003 – was thus endorsed by a margin of some 481 votes. The same month, to London’s approval, the discredited and divisive Maliki was deposed by his political peer Haider Al Abadi, himself a British-educated exile (and former lift attendant at the BBC), who returned to Iraq in 2003. The noted sense of déjà vu around the renewed transatlantic intervention was reinforced by concurrent US neoconservative attempts to promote Ahmed Chalabi as the PM’s successor.

With the ramifications of the 2003 campaign in Iraq appearing to have come full circle back to the door of No. 10, this chapter considers the arc of UK policymaking in the Middle East in the twenty-first century. Specifically, the dynamics of Britain’s recent interactions are re-examined with reference to history in order to assess whether principles of national interest, security and moral responsibility have altered in either practice or parlance. The voices of diaspora groups are again employed as a medium in this task. Revisiting case-studies alongside revived official rhetoric on terror, international security, human rights and just governance in 2014, this chapter thereby questions the consistency, and indeed possibility, of a British commitment to “robust democracy” - whether at home or abroad. Against this backdrop, it is argued that UK foreign policy in the region continues to be defined by strategic and ideological incoherence, and that it has failed to break with the manifold errors of either colonial or more contemporary history.

A new phase of action? Coalition policy in the Middle East

When in the days after 9/11 Tony Blair addressed his Labour peers to extol the potential

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7 “The new Iraq war: Britain joins the fight,” The Economist, 26 September 2014.
8 The PM’s attempts at more decisive action did little to stem his lambasting, as was evident the following week when Private Eye ran on its cover a captioned photograph of Cameron remarking on the “slippery eels” in a Portuguese fishmarket while on his summer getaway, with the headline “Cameron ‘clear’ on Iraq policy”.
10 United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1258, 26 September 2014.
of a global community on the cusp of a new geopolitical epoch, he was equally
cognisant of the fragility and imperfection of this force. As he noted:

The events of September 11 that marked a turning point in history… Round the world,
11 September is bringing Governments and people to reflect, consider and
change…amidst all the talk of war and action, there is another dimension appearing.
There is a coming together. The power of community is asserting itself…. Today
confidence is global; either its presence or its absence. Today the threat is chaos...
People say: we are only acting because it's the USA that was attacked. Double
standards, they say. But when Milošević embarked on the ethnic cleansing of Muslims
in Kosovo, we acted… And I tell you if Rwanda happened again today, when a million
people were slaughtered in cold blood, we would have a moral duty to act there also. 11

The threats which Blair evoked in 2001 are today far from dissipated. Conversely,
instability and chaos are on the ascent in the Middle East. Global confidence in
resolving the attendant crises is striking for its absence. Confronted with a refugee crisis
from the Syrian conflict of a scale not witnessed since that Rwandan genocide, the
international response has been marked by aversion more than cooperation. Indeed,
likening the two conflicts, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon deemed the global
community’s failure to prevent atrocities in Syria a “shameful indictment.” 12 In
September 2014, President Obama pledged to stand “shoulder to shoulder” with his
British ally in the campaign against IS in order to “destroy this threat to the people of
our countries, the region and the world”. 13 Yet Cameron’s botched 2013 House of
Commons vote on Syria and limited military charter against IS in Iraq, alongside his
government’s disfavour of the EU and Britain’s failures in Basra and Helmand,

12 “U.N. chief: 20 years after Rwanda, Syria shameful,” Al Arabiya, 28 February 2014 at:
http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/02/28/U-N-chief-20-years-after-Rwanda-Syria-
shameful.html [accessed 7 September 2014].
13 Cited in Rowena Mason, Ian Black and Martin Chulov, “Stop this menace: UK steps closer to taking
military action against Isis,” The Guardian, 15 September 2014 at: Monday 15 September 2014
http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/14/isis-david-cameron-david-haines-alan-henning-military-
action [accessed 16 September 2014].
signified a dramatically weakened investment in the progressive potential of the ‘special relationship’ envisioned by Blair.\(^{14}\)

In 2011, a decade on from Blair’s address and with Syria’s tumult still in its hopeful revolutionary infancy, William Hague also declared a new historical and geopolitical milestone, one imbued with even greater weight than that hailed by Blair. Speaking at the Lord Mayor’s Banquet Speech in May 2011, he identified the events of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ as unrivalled in significance. These events, he claimed, were “set to overtake the 2008 financial crisis and 9/11 as the most important development of the early 21st century.” The “true expression of what the people of the Muslim world want was seen in Tahrir Square in 2011, not at Ground Zero in 2001”, he argued.\(^{15}\) This whole-hearted endorsement of the democratic upheaval in the region was later elaborated upon in a Foreign Office video blog, in which he told viewers:

This is an extraordinary time in foreign affairs…. We will see it go on for many years to come in its effects, both on Arab nations and on perhaps many other nations in the world. Our response is therefore vital and will do much to define our approach to rest of world over the coming years. We should be clear what we think about this change - that it is a huge opportunity and that if it happens successfully, then it will be a great advance in human affairs, in global policy. It will be a huge advance for these countries to have economic freedom and political freedom and ability to work more closely with countries like ours that the people of these countries are so often seeking…\(^{16}\)

In 2014, by contrast, there remained little trace of this optimism. Hague’s 2014 Lord Mayor’s speech, delivered shortly before his departure from the Foreign Office, referred to an “exceptionally turbulent time” in world affairs. The single reference to the Middle East emphasised “patient support”, “saving lives” and “overcom[ing] the lack of


international political will and unity.” Simultaneously, expressions of embitterment and/or abandonment from opposition movements, locally and in exile, have underscored the increasing alienation of progressive political forces in the region from British policy-makers – a stark inversion of the closer alliances advocated by Hague. Like the events of 9/11, the fallout of the Iraq war afforded British governments occasion to “reflect, consider and change” prevailing foreign policy approaches to the Middle East, if not to geopolitics more broadly. Yet despite the Foreign Secretary’s claims, Britain has done little in practice to define its approach to the Middle East – either to the world or to the domestic constituency. Simultaneously, the rising specter of insecurity since 2011 has once more seen any potential turn toward policies of greater unity or sustained support for democracy eclipsed by the dictates of purported national interest. Indeed, the first major public interview by Hague’s successor Phillip Hammond in August 2014 saw the Secretary announce his intention to turn the FCO into the ‘British Office’ and shift the focus of diplomatic efforts to rigorously pursuing national interests. Where the transatlantic ‘War on Terror’ engendered a series of ill-conceived forays into the region under the rubric of British and global security, it appears that official perspectives on the region once again risk being consumed by the hue of terrorism, at the expense of other prerogatives. This persisting, if not escalating dynamic, was noted in the days after the extremist attacks in Paris of January 2015 - actions attributed by PM Cameron to unappeasable adherents to “this fanatical death cult of Islamist extremism” who “hate our democracy, our freedom, our freedom of expression, our way of life.” Cautioning British policy-makers against skewing their approach to the Middle East according to a panoptic counter-terror lens, Jane Kinninmont observed that:

The Arab uprisings of 2011 briefly provided an opportunity to re-focus policy attention away from the ‘war on terror’ to the broader reality of a diverse region, where violent

actors represent only a tiny minority of people. But the radicalization and internationalization of the Syria conflict have returned the focus of Western governments to direct jihadi security risks in their own countries… Western countries need to remember, in their rhetoric and in their policies, the non-Western victims of Al-Qaeda and IS… They need to avoid being co-opted into regional states’ struggles against those labelled as ‘terrorists’ but conveniently defined to include large swathes of peaceful domestic opposition.20

While, as Kinninmont notes, official concern for national security is central, the exponentially greater responsiveness of governments like Britain to IS attacks on Western nationals, has reinforced perceptions of injustices in UK foreign policy. Such moral disparities were magnified in the weeks after the Hebdo attack when Britain remained reticent on its Gulf allies’ public flogging of an anti-Islamist Saudi blogger and later lawful beheading of a woman in the streets of Mecca21. As Chris Doyle recently noted, observing the strategy of Cameron’s Coalition government in the Middle East, “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 ethical.”22 These discrepancies have come as a surprise to few sustained observers of and/or from the region. Rather, the re-emergence of national interest as a focus of UK discourse on the Middle East has for many retained echoes of Britain’s historical practices in the region – “imperial style delusions”23 overlaid with ancillary rhetorical gestures of support for local stability, prosperity or autonomy. Consonant with the previous century, official claims about investment in the welfare and/or security of the region have thus been perceived as shorthand for the continued protection of British interests.24

23 Ibid.
24 Similarly, the strategic and moral incoherence of current British policy in the region was disparaged by leaders from the Church of England in August 2014. In a letter to David Cameron signed by the Bishop of
The colonial resonance of Britain’s contemporary actions appeared consummate in December 2014, when Secretary Hammond unveiled plans to establish a £15 million UK base in Bahrain (its construction to be subsidised by the Al Khalifa royal coffers), giving Britain a permanent military presence in the Gulf for the first time since its official withdrawal in 1971. In a striking reverberation of Britain’s ‘East of Suez’ policy, the announcement was accompanied by Hammond’s tweet: “to our partners in the Gulf, my message is: your security concerns are our security concerns. Your stability is our stability.” The base would be used, as was explained, to *inter alia* launch airstrikes against IS militants in Iraq and combat piracy. The historical echoes were flagrant. While related headlines in the *The Economist* proclaimed “We’re back!”, advocates of human rights in Bahrain linked the development directly to Britain’s pernicious role supressing popular uprisings in the island during the 1950s and 60s.

The British ambassador to the island, Iain Lindsay, nonetheless hailed the development as evidence of a strengthening, progressive relationship. As he told an audience at the Bahrain Business forum several days later: “we are ‘walking the walk’ on our strategic policy of constructive engagement with Bahrain by providing substantial technical support for the [Al Khalifa’s] ambitious reform plans… But we are also advancing our strong defence and commercial interests. We can do all of these things. They are not mutually exclusive.”

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Leeds, Nicholas Baines, and written with the support of Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, the PM’s approach was condemned as having been determined by “the loudest media voice at any particular time” and so muddled as to be “difficult to discern the strategic intentions.” 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].


26 See Phillip Hammond’s Twitter feed at: https://twitter.com/PHammondMP/status/54117561969054752 [accessed 6 December 2014].

27 As Maryam Al Khawaja commented, “this base is a disaster for human rights in Bahrain... if you look back at the role of the British in Bahrain it has always been negative, since popular uprisings were put down with the help of help of the British in the 1950s and 1960s.” See, Jamie Merrill, “British military base in Bahrain is a ‘reward’ for UK’s silence on human rights, say campaigners,” *The Independent*, 6 December 2014 at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/british-military-base-in-bahrain-is-a-reward-for-aks-silence-on-human-rights-say-campaigners-9908284.html [accessed 7 December 2014].

The local perspective, however, diverged starkly, with demonstrations erupting in Shi’a villages and activists deeming the base a reward for British collusion in repression. As Rajab noted, “money to be paid by Bahrain to build this base... is for buying the silence of the British Government and support for the regime and against our struggle for justice, democracy and human rights.” Nor was Britain’s praise for Bahrain tempered by Rajab’s ensuing sentence to six months’ imprisonment for a tweet purportedly insulting the king in January 2015 (despite coinciding with global leaders’ vehement endorsements of freedom of expression in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo affair). On the contrary, an official visit to the Al Khalifas the same week by the Duke of Westminster saw the island praised as an “oasis of tolerance” by the Lord. Such praise was manifoldsly welcome by the Bahraini royal family who were concurrently struggling to minimise evidence of growing religious extremism among its own security forces. Following revelations that at least one senior employee of the Ministry of Interior had been recruited to IS, the sectarian foundations of Bahrain’s security forces had come under a degree of international scrutiny – a development which had provoked Rajab’s incriminating tweet that the institution was an “ideological incubator” for jihadists. So too, subsequent leaked copies of Ministry of Defence publications uncovered titles including "The Sunni Light and the Darkness of Heresy." The emergence of these elements from within the state severely undercut the al Khalifa’s own narrative of Shia extremism, while reinforcing a sense of siege among Bahrain’s Shi’a. As one UK-based activist and exile noted in The Huffington Post under the title “Je Suis Hypocrite”, the systematic abuse of Bahrain’s Shi’a, as reflected in the ill-treatment of clerics and destruction of some 53 mosques, could only amplify sectarianism.

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29 Demonstrations erupted in Shi’a villages in response to the announcements, with banners imploring Lindsay to “shut-up”.
30 Cited in Merrill, “British military base in Bahrain.”
32 The full Tweet stated that: “many #Bahrain men who joined #terrorism & #ISIS came from security institutions and those institutions were the first ideological incubator.” See Nabeel Rajab’s Twitter feed at: https://twitter.com/NABEELRAJAB/status/516179409720852480 [accessed 28 May 2015].
34 Alwadaei, “‘Je Suis Hypocrite’: Bahrain Suppresses Free Expression.”
Bahrain’s parliamentary elections in November 2015 served to highlight a "clear political strategy to alter the country's demographic balance in order to counter the Shia voting power."  

In the face of these flagrant inequities, London’s unflinching exoneration of its Gulf allies - confirmed the week after Rajab’s arrest by an outpouring of official praise for Saudi Arabia’s late King Abdullah - has served as confirmation of its unaltered role as protector and beneficiary in Bahrain. The level of official commitment to preserving this dynamic was ratified in late 2014 when the FCO disregarded recommendations from the Foreign Affairs Committee that it “bite the bullet” and designate Bahrain a “country of concern” in its 2015 Human Rights Report. Concurrently, the evolving campaign for rights in Bahrain has seen local activists employ in greater capacities the same democratic strategies which UK officials have appeared so keen to overlook in relation to Bahrain. The widespread boycott of Bahrain’s 2014 elections, a ballot commended by the FCO but deemed a step toward cementing absolutist rule by opposition parties, reflects a growing popular rejection of the callow democratic furnishings proffered by Bahrain’s rulers and endorsed by its international backers. (The Al Khalifa government meanwhile made an ironic move to outlaw electoral boycott campaigns.) In its place, campaigners sought recourse to mechanisms beyond the internationally-vindicated but manifestly redundant democratic state architecture established by its historical benefactors, calling for a provocative popular referendum on Al Khalifa legitimacy. As Christopher Davidson observed at the time of the 2014 election, “nothing will be served by perpetuating the regime strategy of control. People in Bahrain are now tapping into a much bigger shift towards referendum-style politics in the region. They are not going to work within the established system.”

37 For FCO endorsement of Bahrain’s November 2014 elections (from which international monitors were barred), see “British Ambassador welcomes the elections held in Bahrain,” press release from the British Embassy Manama, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 30 November 2014 at: https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/british-ambassador-welcomes-the-elections-held-in-bahrain [accessed 31 November 2014].
38 Interview with Christopher Davidson, London, 18 November 2014.
The method behind Britain’s espoused strategy in the region has likewise been called into question by its apparent willingness to overlook the security and political implications of actions by its other Gulf allies. As circumstances in Libya descended further toward governing anarchy after feeble July 2014 elections for a new parliament, international scrutiny turned to the role of Britain’s lucrative economic partner (and Harrod’s owner), Qatar, in fuelling instability through its support for Islamic insurgent groups across the country. The aftermath of the elections had seen armed affiliates of the poll’s defeated Islamist contenders coalesce into a loose coalition of forces calling itself ‘Operation Dawn’ and their influence spread westward, beyond established Islamist strongholds in eastern Libya. Simultaneously, an opposing armed campaign, ‘Operation Dignity’ burgeoned under the aegis of an exiled former general and self-declared leader of the Libyan National Army, Khalifa Haftar, who pledged to cleanse Libya of the “terrorism and extremism”39. By August, embattled MPs had assembled in Tobruk (Tripoli and Benghazi were off-limits due to violence) to vote 111 of 124 in favour of a call for foreign intervention. “The international community must intervene immediately to ensure that civilians are protected”, the decree claimed40, though it was unclear whether the motion intended to solicit a peacekeeping force or some larger-scale intervention. Within a week, Operation Dawn had laid claim to the capital, seizing Tripoli’s airport which was set ablaze to victorious gunfire. The event signposted the country’s incontestable dissolution into an ungovernable terrain of competing military groups and castrated politicians – a state of “armed politics”, as Chatham House described.41 Riven by a complex of intricate social, religious, tribal, regional and ideological ties and identities, Libya was declared by many a de facto failed state.

The severity of this diagnosis was refuted by British officials, yet by the time a handful of Libyan leaders gathered in Geneva for a round of UN Nations-facilitated peace talks (rejected by most militia blocs) in January 2015, IS had declared its caliphate in the east

of the country. With 120,000 Libyans displaced, the humanitarian crisis appeared on the brink of implosion as food supplies diminishing alongside the country’s dwindling oil wealth. The execution of dozens of Coptic Christians by IS militants in February 2013 prompted Egypt and the UAE to launch their own strikes against targets in Libya, heightening calls for a wider foreign intervention. But the international community showed little sign of moving beyond advocating national dialogue and an end to violence, with Hammond reiterating the need for an “inclusive political solution.” In the light of this bleak circumstance, it appeared to many inconceivable that Cameron had publically taken the podium in Benghazi three years ago to declare Libya free and the city an inspiration to the world. The hand of Britain’s Gulf allies in this fragmentation was plain, with Conservative MPs themselves acknowledging the existence of lucrative funding channels between Qatar and jihadist groups in Libya (as well as in Syria). Yet officials remained widely reticent to chastise the trading partner who, alongside others, was unashamedly undermining any prospect of realising their formerly espoused democratic vision for Libya. Similarly, with reconstruction duties now conferred on the UN, Cameron’s Coalition government seemed less wrought by the humanitarian and protective responsibilities which had allegedly mobilised its forces in 2011. As the former UK ambassador to Libya, Oliver Miles, claimed in response to suggestions that Britain should re-engage in Libya in 2014:

We didn’t cause this mess. We helped to get rid of Qaddafi, that’s another story, but it would be madness to say that we have some sort of obligation to intervene now simply because we intervened in 2011. I am very much against the idea of accepting some sort

45 In this instance through the former’s undisguised and regular weapons shipments in cargo flights to Islamists militia in Misrata.
of responsibility for what’s happening now… Our intervention in 2011 was limited, it was successful, and now it is up to the Libyans.46

Through the purview of Britain’s restricted aims in the 2011 NATO campaign, Miles’ claim possessed a certain logic. Cameron himself noted when hailing the reasons for success in Libya in November 2011 that “we set limited goals and stuck to them. We worked with allies. We went through the UN. We had the support of the people. We didn't presume to tell people what sort of government they should have. But we held our nerve when critics here said we should give up.”47 Irrefutably distinct from the charter of Blair’s 2003 Iraq campaign, the adoption of these strategies signaled a break with the former PM’s intervention paradigm. By contrast, Cameron’s approach appeared more astute to idiosyncratic circumstances. In particular, the comparative absence of foreign ground-troops or official proprietorship of the military campaign or reconstruction effort indicated a new acknowledgement of the limits of both Britain’s capacities and its ambitions.

Yet through his advocacy of military involvement in Libya (as well as later in Syria and Iraq), Cameron has simultaneously confirmed his support for the principle of intervention without refining a coherent approach to its application. There is arguable wisdom in eschewing blanket strategies or binding precedents, as has been observed in relation to Cameron’s abandoning of inflexible doctrines, utopianism and “messianic interventions.”48 Yet Britain’s response to post-Gaddafi Libya has promised little for an approach of greater principle or practical value in its place. The resurgence of debates on intervention in the Middle East since 2011 has seen many nod toward T.E. Lawrence’s much-cited adage that “it is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them…”49 And indeed, the disproportion between NATO’s narrow 2011 charter

and the large-scale calamity which flowed from it raises legitimate questions about the bounds of intervening parties’ duties accountability for post-Gaddafi Libya. Yet the characteristic distance assumed by British policy-makers toward these questions of responsibility suggests a reserve that transcends the mere regard for local autonomy or undesirable neo-colonial practices of occupation. Where the voices of diaspora representatives were in 2011 seized upon as a driver for and vindication of Britain’s campaign in Libya, policy-makers’ subsequent disengagement signals a more direct contravention of the counsel of their former interlocutors. Noting this disjuncture in 2014, the former NTC co-ordinator for the British government, exile Guma Al Gamaty claimed that “we inherited a Libya with no institutions whatsoever, with no constitution, with no expertise in how to run a country, and the international community just walked away. That was the mistake. Now they are coming back because they cannot afford to ignore Libya.” Some Conservative MPs have themselves likewise expressed regret at the inertia of Britain’s more recent policy in Libya. As the chair of the UK’s all-party Libya group explained, “I am…very disappointed that we have not been able to help the Libyan people to create a situation of normality and security subsequently.” The voices of diaspora activists who returned to Libya post-2011 have meanwhile expressed an equal sense of London’s new apathy toward the local aspirations it so eagerly brandished in 2011. As one young woman noted in late 2014 of the debates around renewed intervention:

I feel like we've been here before... when Benghazi was under threat in early 2011, there was a debate about international intervention and we all know how much that help was welcomed and how many people it saved. Now, those sitting in a country which doesn't have fighting or random rockets falling in their neighbourhoods, should really allow those scared for their lives and being terrorised by thugs with heavy weaponry and no

(often incorrect) commonly appeared on walls around in Iraq during the course of the insurgency after 2003.

50 Underscoring a mandate of limited involvement, Britain has invested in a number of reconstruction and transition projects in post-Qadhafi Libya. Among these, are initiatives relating to political accountability and the rule of law; civil society; economic development and security, with the latter extending to training Libyan army recruits at Bassingbourn Barracks until 2014, when the program was aborted in invidious circumstances. For details of Britain’s current projects in Libya, as administered by the FCO, DFID and UK Trade and Investment, see “UK and Libya,” at Gov.uk: https://www.gov.uk/government/world/libya [accessed 16 April 2015].


52 Daniel Kawczynski, cited in Mardell, “Has Libya been let down by the West?”
state to protect them, to be the ones who decide whether they would like someone to make sure they're not killed whilst trying to live the life others take for granted. We all know and understand the risks of foreign intervention, but come sit in Derna, Benghazi or Tripoli and say you don't want someone to help protect you or your family.  

Circumstances in Libya were at the time of intervention unique and complex and remain increasingly so. Despite attempts by foreign powers, regional and Western, to construe the conflict as such, there is no clear binary narrative of Islamists versus anti-Islamists, or allies against adversaries. Rather, the years since Qaddafi’s overthrow have seen a miscellany of groups vying, politically and militarily, for power and influence, with agendas variously favourable or inimical to those of Western policy-makers. The failure of these policy-makers to account or prepare for such a circumstance suggests, as Pack notes, an enduring Clausewitzian conception of regional conflicts as a war between two opposed antagonists. In the case of Libya, such a perspective has ostensibly rendered policy-makers ill-equipped to address realities beyond the heroics of humanitarian intervention or regime-change. As Mark Mardell recently noted, “foreign policy in Paris, London and Washington appear still trapped between the ease of going to war and the difficulty of creating peace. Libya is just one of the proving grounds.”

Yet more resoundingly, Britain’s frank disengagement after the fact of intervention implies a lack of investment in evolving strategies which cater to complex humanitarian, military or political crises beyond those bearing easily-quantifiable indicators of immediate or long-term national interest. Current official resistance to re-involvement in Libya (or indeed to jeopardising Britain’s economic interests by condemning the role of its Gulf allies therein) reveals more starkly that the once-lauded Libyan struggle no longer carries the same gravity or political capital. Though momentarily imbued with agency and aspiration by official discourse, local and diaspora voices appear to have been re-assigned peripheral status in the face of more

56 Mardell, “Has Libya been let down by the West?”

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pressing, or lucrative, foreign policy imperatives. With respect to the continuing expendability of these actors in debates around foreign policy in the West, a debate in the *LRB* recently noted that much contemporary discourse:

seems hopelessly trapped in a time when the voice of a foreign subject was still of no consequence. Since we oppose US intervention in Libya, we must also trivialize the wishes and achievements of the Libyans. If they are showing signs of empowerment, let’s belittle them, and contrast the present state of affairs with the more absolute stability of authoritarian rule. Our criteria for evaluating the merits of other governments cannot possibly be their representativeness, but how peacefully they settle into our hegemonic order.57

**A moral duty to act: interests and values in Britain’s role**

The putative utility of Western involvement in Libya, past or future, clearly remains the subject of ongoing speculation. Yet the reanimation of an official vocabulary of morality with Britain’s first military foray into the Middle East since 2003 signified the unavoidable mark of ethics on foreign policy discourse in the region, and therefore demands greater scrutiny of its terms. Nowhere have these ethical terms been rendered more questionable than in the international response to the crisis in Syria. In a BBC program commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide in 2014, Blair took to the airwaves to warn the world of the dire fallout from its failure to intervene in the Levantine conflict. "The consequences are, in my view, terrible and will be a huge problem not just for the Middle East region, but for us in the years to come," he claimed. The former PM’s argument, like the “moral case” put forth by his Tory successor the previous August, was one premised on the values as well as interests of the international community. And yet, after more than three years of unrelenting crackdown by the Assad regime, overlaid with the assault of pernicious IS forces holding swathes of the country, many Syrians already felt themselves to have fallen outside the moral bounds of that community. This sentiment was expressed in plain terms by a Syrian journalist who posed the question directly to his online international


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audience: “why does the West insist on dealing with our dead and injured as if they were less valuable than a Westerner – as casualties who don’t even deserve respect or compassion?”58 Underlying such observations was an awareness that the marginalisation of Syria’s humanitarian and democratic struggle was in many ways the cost of a prior armed campaign against a Ba’athist dictator, similarly couched in rubric of values and global security. The reverberation of the Iraq war in determining the 2013 Commons vote against intervention in Syria was aptly appraised at the time by a prominent British-Syrian commentator who observed that “this is another debate about Western values, though the reality is different. It is about realpolitik shrouded in that language, because how else are you going to justify intervening or not intervening?” Cameron himself had been quick to confirm that Britain’s record in the region had been marred by the events of 2003. As he acknowledged to MPs during the Commons debate, "the well of public opinion has been well and truly poisoned by the Iraq episode."59 The residual toxicity of that campaign was emblematised in the apparent resolve of Labour’s new leader, Ed Miliband, against intervention, as offered to the Commons on a similar plinth of morality.60 The reality of this lack of appetite for involvement among Britain’s public and politicians was invoked more lucidly by a photojournalist working in Syria who noted that he could think of no photo that could be taken which would alter attitudes toward the plight of Syrians.61 In this context, many Syrians could interpret the rousing of lofty values-based arguments in London during August 2013 as little more than subterfuge. As one young-British-Syrian noted, contrasting Cameron’s marginal loss in the Commons vote with Blair’s own painstaking efforts to lobby individual MPs on the eve of the Iraq motion in 2003:

58 “Why the West is wrong on Syria,” The Damascus Bureau, 14 October 2013.
59 United Kingdom, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, Col. 1428, 29 August 2013.
60 This stance lead Downing Street and the Foreign Office to accuse Miliband of giving succour to the Assad regime, with one government source going so far as to claim the night after the vote that, "No 10 and the Foreign Office think Miliband is… a copper-bottomed shit." See Nicholas Watt and Rowena Mason, “Syria: No 10 accuses Ed Miliband of giving succour to Assad regime,” The Guardian, 30 August 2013.
61 Only days prior, an Opinium poll following the Ghouta massacre likewise signaled popular objection of some 60 per cent to any British military role in Syria. See, Toby Helm, “Poll finds 60% of British public oppose UK military action against Syria,” 1 September 2013 at: http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/aug/31/poll-british-military-action-syria [accessed 2 September 2013].
If Cameron really wanted to win or to have all the British people on the streets saying ‘freedom for Syria’, he could do it. In two and a half years now, there has not been a single demonstration from the British, from these people who say they care about human rights.62

Indeed, many of those Britons who did espouse a regard for human rights in Syria had already mobilised in active opposition to any form of British military involvement – most notably, under the aegis of anti-imperial coalitions like Stop the War. While professing a core belief in the need for local autonomy in the Syrian uprising, such anti-intervention stances were seen by many Syrians as equally guilty of seconding the conflict to their own broader political agendas. Similarly, it was noted that associated arguments against intervention failed to account for the existing role of Britain and its regional allies in catalysing the conflict since 2011.63 As one condemnatory editorial appraising Britain’s Syria policy observed in The Independent in April 2014:

There is a school of thinking that says the Syrians must be masters of their own destinies… What proponents of this view tend not to mention is that governments in the West and their Sunni Middle Eastern allies, Saudi Arabia above all, actively encouraged the rebels to rise in the first place, not just with warm words but with persuasive-sounding talk of a large-scale flow of arms. The chance to put an end to his regime appeared too good to miss. But while policymakers in Washington, London and Paris were busy concocting their schemes, they forgot to factor in Plan B.64

Indeed, this covert tampering at the fringes of the Syrian uprising had been coupled by Cameron’s explicit calls for the international community to back a “rapid political transition” in support of a “precious opportunity for people to realise their aspirations for a job, a voice and a stake in their own future”.65 It is perhaps unsurprising then that when the urgency of such programmes proved revocable as atrocities escalated in Syria, British actions should be interpreted as mendacity. (Indeed, as was noted at the time,

62 Interview with Muhammed, 2013.
63 As noted, for example, in an interview with Julien Barnes-Dacey of the European Council on Foreign Relations, London, 22 January 2014.
this would not have been the first betrayal of a British pledge to support revolting Arab forces in Damascus by the “great men” of London.66)

The relative alacrity of the mobilization of support for British military action in Iraq against IS – the same forces terrorizing Syrian civilians alongside Assad – vindicated for many the fissure between the ideals and interests espoused by policy-makers and those upon which they were in fact willing to act. While both Cameron and Foreign Secretary Hammond firmly ruled out an “unholy alliance” with the Syrian president in combatting IS, some senior UK officials’ advocacy of such a prospect likewise signified that the forces guiding foreign policy-making were far from moral.67 Condemning the myopic self-interest of a foreign policy which would seek to defeat IS in Iraq, yet leave its catalyst to flourish in Damascus, another diaspora commentator observed at the time of British calls for intervention in Iraq in 2014 that:

One year ago, the Syrian Coalition and the [FSA] pleaded in vain for help against Assad's incessant airstrikes and ISIS's ground offensive in Raqqa and Deirezzor. In vain. Not only did tens of thousands of Syrians perish and suffer in total oblivion since then, but Syria is now in large parts under occupation by two equally savage entities: IS and AS, the Assad State and original source of the cancer. You can't eliminate one without eliminating the other.68

Yet it appeared that is was not the cosmopolitan imperatives of protecting a progressive political rebellion nor forging longer-term regional stability shaping Britain’s response to the Syrian uprising a decade after the Iraq war. Rather, policy-makers appeared more oriented toward reactive goals of shielding Britain from global terror and insecurity - the same threats previously emblematised by 9/11. The spectre of Islamic extremism

66 Ready analogies were drawn between contemporary UK conduct in the region and London’s perceived betrayal of the 1916-18 Arab Revolt by British officials – an deceit then deplored by T.E. Lawrence himself, who claimed that he hoped to be killed on the road to Damascus because, “we are calling them [the Arabs] to fight for us on a lie, and I can’t stand it.” See, Tabachnick, The T.E. Lawrence Puzzle.

67 Earlier both General Lord Dannatt, former head of the British Army, and former foreign secretary Sir Malcolm Rifkind, said that the pressing need to combat the Sunni extremist group was more urgent than the goal of toppling Assad. General Dannatt noted that Britain and the US would have to speak to Assad, privately or publicly, if it wished to use Syrian airspace to bomb IS strongholds, while Rifkind claimed that, “Sometimes you have to develop relationships with people who are extremely nasty in order to get rid of people who are even nastier.” See Jake Flanagin, “Bashar al-Assad: Frenemy or Foe?” The New York Times, 26 August 2014 at: http://op-talk.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/bashar-al-assad-frenemy-or-foe/?_r=0

68 Zainab, Facebook post, 22 September 2014.
had been revived: through gruesome media coverage of IS beheadings, official
preoccupation with the scourge of British jihadists taking up arms in Syria and through
the tireless rhetoric of the Assad-regime itself. In turn, this threat had come to
overshadow the democratic claims of the Syrian opposition. Britain’s response to the
conflict engulfing Syria and Iraq thereby signified the primacy of a counter-terror
paradigm over farther-sighted policies aimed at safeguarding civil society or statehood.
It was the latter approach, as Kinninmont notes, which so many governments had
“pledged to take after the uprisings of 2011, but which has again and again been
overtaken by events.”69 Though President Assad’s self-fulfilling prophecy of jihadism
had not by 2015 afforded him victory in the conflict, it had effectively served to
vanquish the opposition in the eyes of the world. As the renowned Syrian exile, Yasin
Al Haj Saleh, noted in relation to the success with which the regime had manipulated
this “commodity” of a war on terror to retain some legitimacy as an international player:

However grave the deficiencies of the Syrian opposition are—and they are grave—it has
been impossible for us to convince the “international community” that we are victim(s)
who are worthy to be assisted in the name of a general defence of ‘European
values.’…Those who say Syria’s sides are equally bad are the same people who believe
in that despicable slogan of realpolitik: a devil you know is better than a devil you don’t
know… This is bad politics, devoid of knowledge, devoid of human values.70

With public opinion on Syria goaded by IS’ graphic execution of British hostages like
Alan Henning, Cameron did venture in 2014 to address the prospect of military
intervention in the Levant. Reassuring MPs that there would be no "pre-meditated"
action in Syria without a Commons vote, he nonetheless reserved the right to act if there
was an “urgent humanitarian” need to do so.71 "This is not 2003 but we should not use
past mistakes as an excuse for inaction or indifference", the PM explained. So too, he
conceded that strikes against IS in Iraq would not suffice in themselves, but must be
part of a "comprehensive" political and humanitarian plan. Endorsing Cameron’s stance,
the shadow foreign secretary, Douglas Alexander, further explained that Labour’s
support for action in Syria would not be contingent on UN authorisation, stymied as it

69 Kinninmont, “Paris Attacks May Distort Western Policy Focus.”
70 Al Haj Saleh, “The Conscience of Syria.”
71 “Cameron: IS threat may require Syria intervention,” BBC News, 26 September 2014 at:
was by China and Russia. As he explained, "the UK's moral compass is not set in Moscow and Beijing". And yet, this late bipartisan recognition of a worthy campaign in Syria – not against a ruthless despot, but against Islamic jihadists – called into question the orientation of Britain’s moral compass over the preceding three years of humanitarian catastrophe. As one diaspora Syrian wrote of London’s apparent ethical confusion around the key antagonists in the conflict:

> When the West sees the news of a fight in Syria between the Syrian regime and al Qaeda they forget that the Syrian regime prefers to bomb a school in Al-Raq rather than an al Qaeda center… When the West asks whether we prefer cancer or an infection, I say they are both cancer, and because of the silence of the world and the ignorance of the West, both are killing our activists, our friends…both are killing Syria.  

Similarly, many Syrian onlookers disparaged the hypocrisy of a renewed Western push against IS which served to affirm Assad’s own narrative of terror. As one young British-Syrian activist explained in September 2014, “after three years of witnessing the unthinkable, grieving family members and more than 150,000 Syrians killed by Assad, I feel genuinely sick to my stomach, sick that the so-called nations didn't lift a finger until IS came in.”

Like Britain’s equivocation in the aftermath of Libya’s revolution, the ostensible disorientation of UK foreign policy over Syria signifies the enduring pitfalls associated with identifying actors as allies or adversaries according to prevailing geopolitical currents. Reified post-9/11 in the projection of a reductive counter-terror paradigm of allegiances, this predicament has over more than a decade seen UK policy-makers oscillate their relations with regional regimes and opposition movements in fickle configurations which have rarely proven in alignment with long-term interests, or

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74 Interview with Alia (via telephone), 23 September 2014.
75 See Podmore, *British foreign policy since 1870*, 81.
indeed, ethics. It was such dynamics which lead to Blair’s partnership with the progenitors of Maliki’s sectarian government in Iraq, to court Assad against any evidence of reform, collude in torture with Qaddafi and to Cameron’s later abandoning of this “profitable friend” in favour of his rebel opponents. Rarely have these calculations of perceived interest involved sustained attention to the demands of local populations, beyond their mobile elites, whose democratic aspirations nonetheless form the focus of values-based foreign policy discourse. In Syria, protracted deliberations over the merits of removing Assad against risks of burgeoning Islamism, political fragmentation and regional spill-over has seen alliances falter alongside humanitarian goals.

One hundred years earlier, similar schematic confusion over Britain’s bid for regional influence lead policymakers to promise “everything to everyone” only to abnegate allegiances and emerge equally tarnished with charges of hypocrisy. Most recently, Britain’s constricted vision in the region has seen London charged with a “stovepipe approach” that ignored the battle of Syrian Kurds against IS until such time as their campaign became proportionate to the recognisable scale of Western interests. Simultaneously, however, these questionable strategies point to a broader quandary of relating abstract morality to concrete policy. As Knaus and Stewart note, the nebulous nature of ethics has rendered it difficult to incorporate “practical ideas of success, of context and of luck” – the key ingredients of any foreign policy calculation - into moral judgments.

As Vijay Prashad notes, this decision was facilitated by the defection of a number of figures from the regime; Qadhafi’s previous resistance to economic reform and his more general unreliability as an actor, all of which lent the balance in favour of the opposition with view to creating long-term stability. See, Richard Norton-Taylor, “UK must look at its role in Libya,” The Guardian Weekly, 30 January 2015.

As Rory Stewart noted with respect to Britain’s neglect of the Kurds of Rojava and elsewhere, “Kurds have been long-term allies of the West who have made a lot of progress towards trying to build democratic state and we should support them. The link to Syria is totally vital. We tend to take stovepipe approach, but we cannot continue to do this.” Interview with BBC Radio 4, The World Tonight, broadcast 15 August 2014.

Unlike the pursuit of tangible interests, morality in foreign policy is realised not as a question of what ought to be done, but of what can be done. As such,
proclaimed democratic or humanitarian ideals, however genuinely espoused, have most frequently been diluted by realism or exchanged wholesale for more quantifiable strategic, economic or diplomatic goals, with political alliances forged or flouted accordingly.

From a regional perspective, however, it seems that Britain’s unaltered foreign policy paradigm of “eternal interests” and fungible friends or enemies has not on principle precluded engagement with London. Indeed, it was an unromantic acknowledgement of both the hypocrisy and agency of British influence in the region that engendered many Kurds’ support for the 2003 invasion and the sober forging of alliances by Libyan opposition members with British policy-makers in 2011. Likewise, such appraisals have continued to inspire calls for greater Western support from indignant Syrian opposition groups. Reflecting on the unpalatable necessity of taking recourse to Western assistance in the days after Assad’s 2013 chemical attack, the British-Syrian writer Robyn Yassin-Kassab noted that:

> It goes without saying that all states – if we must compare them with people – are hypocrites. The white phosphorus and depleted uranium munitions [America] used in Iraq, for instance, can certainly be considered as weapons of mass destruction, and late 20th Century America actively aided Saddam’s chemical programme. But simplistic ‘anti-imperialists’ should reflect on the complexity of the situation. Should a tyrant be left unchecked to gas his people?83

Such observations recall the views of many Iraqis a decade earlier, for whom the absence of a credible humanitarian motive in the US-led invasion was unremarkable and at the same time, unrequired. As Kurdish MP Muhammad Kayani explained on the anniversary of the invasion in 2013:

> I don't think that in foreign policy there is ever a humanitarian goal. First, there is a national interest and then on the backseat, there are humanitarian considerations. When these converge it is for the better, as they did with Kurdish and UK interests in the Iraq campaign. I too am after my national interest, but I want it to be allied with foreign policy. And this is the way the West's interests are best preserved in the long term:

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83 Yassin-Kassab, “Intervention?”
when they support the people to have democracy and economic prosperity, not corruption and repression.\textsuperscript{84}

The dearth of a sustained commitment to moral imperatives on the part of foreign policy makers into the twenty-first century has nonetheless produced outcomes in the region which are overwhelming inimical to British interests. In Iraq, the US-led Coalition’s disregard for local autonomy and democratic accountability produced a governing structure in which values are indiscernible behind the web of interests, sectarian partisanship and political violence. For all New Labour’s rhetorical embrace of an ‘ethical’ foreign policy and global community, Labour’s strategy in Iraq was to many most evocative of old patterns of British conduct in the region, reflecting neither novelty nor ethics. As one prominent British-Iraqi academic and anti-war activist reflected in 2013:

It should always have been for the Iraqi people to sort out their own affairs, not external forces – particularly not powers who are the main backers of dictatorship in the region, who once armed Saddam to the teeth and gave him chemical and biological weapons. But this was not just hypocrisy, it is part of a systematic pattern from the West: a movement will only be given support, if it can be controlled.\textsuperscript{85}

Similarly, this pattern was observed by Tripp in the form of an ideologically-outmoded catalogue of British practices applied anew in 2003 - a “repertoire based not on contemporary advances in the social sciences or indeed on detailed knowledge of the country, but on the rich traditions of racism, imperial patronage and contempt for ‘subject peoples’ that echoed the very language of the British Mandate in the 1920s.”\textsuperscript{86}

The increasingly tenuous nation-state of Iraq - established by Mesopotamia’s British ‘liberators’ in 1921, refurbished under its nominal authority in 2003 and now fragmenting under the influence of jihadist forces the Coalition sought to expunge - today stands as a testament to these failed strategies in the Middle East. In June 2014, IS released a slick online video of its official spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, atop a bulldozer at the Iraqi-Syrian border where he proudly expelled the “Idol of

\textsuperscript{84}Interview with \textit{Mohammad}, 2012.
\textsuperscript{85}Interview with \textit{Sami}, 2012.
\textsuperscript{86}Tripp, “Three costly lessons from the invasion of Iraq.”
nationalism” by demolishing the “borders of humiliations” imposed by Sykes-Picot.87 His sensational dissolution of Western influence in the region had, however, already been presaged by international commentators pronouncing on the death of the Anglo-French configurations.88 Indeed, the scene reflected a stark inversion of Curzon’s vision of a century earlier, when Britain declared its victory in the Middle East. Yet al-Baghdadi’s forces were not the first to have raised this challenge to emblems of British influence. IS’ razing had been the express goal of generations of Ba’athists, established long-before Syria’s Michel Aflaq and enduring well-after the regime of Saddam Hussain.89 Likewise, fifty years earlier Arab nationalism, as articulated by President Nasser in Egypt, explicitly sought to erase the partitions laid down by colonial powers in Sykes-Picot and Balfour, with rhetoric of this vein accompanying Britain’s more emblematic Middle Eastern downfall at Suez.

Commenting on this imperial demise shortly after Iraq’s anti-monarchy coup of 1958, the US Secretary of State noted that “Great Britain has lost an Empire and has not yet found a role.”90 The remark was an astute characterisation of the Middle East’s former superintendent, now crippled by “economic strain” and “loss of confidence.”91 Over the years since, UK policymakers have struggled to adjust to Britain’s new status as, in the words of one former Foreign Secretary, a “major power of second rank” while attempting to retain “considerable influence all over the world.”92 It was not until the twenty-first century that Britain would attempt to lever itself back onto the international stage by way of its actions in the Middle East. Following 9/11 the region assumed primacy in Blair’s vision of a new “pivotal role”93 for Britain in shaping world affairs in the capacity of peace-maker and interlocutor. More than a decade on, this aspiration has

87 Indeed, the previous year the man who would later be appointed IS Caliph, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, had outlined in a letter to the leader of Al Qaeda his mission to foist “the last nail in the coffin of Sykes-Picot conspiracy” from his group’s seat in Iraq. See Waziri, “IS: from a jihadist ideology to a jihadist state.”
89 Waziri, “IS: from a jihadist ideology to a jihadist state.”
91 PM Harold Macmillian cited in Smith, Ending Empire in the Middle East, 59.
92 Michael Stewart, cited in Hollis, Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era, 20.
93 Blair, Speech to the Confederation of Indian Industry.
failed – both at the hands of New Labour’s zealous foreign policy elite and those of Blair’s more hesitant Coalition successors. Britain’s strategy in the region can now be characterised as one shaped by events, rather than shaping events in the region.\(^9^4\) Cameron’s Coalition government has nonetheless continued to refute suggestions of waning British influence throughout the unfolding developments since 2011. Indeed, Hague himself in 2014 disparaged the late twentieth-century assumption that the end of Britain’s empire would see it lapse into “permanent retreat internationally”.\(^9^5\) Yet the present crisis in the Middle East has been widely seen to attest to the deficiencies of Britain’s influence, if not its moral authority, on an international scale. Arguably, however, it is not the aftermath of Britain’s colonial misdemeanours in the Middle East - many of which continue to be replicated in the Gulf and elsewhere – which has born Britain’s current policy atomization in the region. Rather, it appears more the unreconciled failings of UK action in Iraq a decade ago which now immobilise its strategy. After more than a century of Britain inventing itself as emancipator, conqueror, ally, hawk, diplomat and humanitarian to populations in the region, within the space of a decade, these roles have all been worn thin.

**Double standards they say: the Middle East in Britain**

The ambivalence of London’s post-Iraq policy in the Middle East – fraught by conflicting instincts that “nothing seems to work” and “something must be done” – has been replicated domestically, within Britain itself.\(^9^6\) A news poll in August 2014 indicated that there was majority public support for the notion that Britain had a “moral responsibility” to attempt restitution for the failings of its 2003 campaign in Iraq (as had been proposed at the time by Maliki’s former foreign minister.)\(^9^7\) Only thirty per cent thought that policy-makers should “leave the situation to run its course” and not involve British force. But most also firmly opposed granting asylum to Iraqis of any faith persecuted in the conflict of any faith (only one in six supported giving refuge to Iraqi

\(^{94}\) See Hollis, “The end of historical attachments.”
\(^{95}\) Hague, “The Future of British Foreign Policy.”
\(^{97}\) See poll breakdown at ComRes: http://comres.co.uk/poll/1246/itv-news-index.htm [accessed 12 September 2014].
Muslims.) While Cameron’s own “vague and contradictory” stances reflected these popular apprehensions, Labour was likewise vigorously attempting to expunge the stains of Iraq from its foreign policy. Addressing Chatham House in February 2015 amid renewed controversy around the interminable deferral of the Chilcot Report, Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander called for a “progressive internationalist foreign policy”. Alexander thus promoted a strategy that rebuilt public trust through fully acknowledging the gravity of Labour’s errors in the Middle East, while refusing to be straight-jacketed by the past. As he noted, “the continued [Chilcot] delay has contributed to the growing sense of introversion that many people feel about Britain’s place in the world…Learning the lessons from the Chilcot inquiry will mean that the next Labour government will turn the page on the last decade of foreign policy, not turn our backs on the world.” Though a commendable goal, Alexander’s charter failed to acknowledge other wounds and fissures relating to Britain’s actions in the Middle East which had endured over the past decade. These spectres of mistrust, which continued to infiltrate the parlance and practices of self-declared ‘internationalist’ policy-makers had been identified more frankly the previous week in a public address by the former Foreign Office minister and Conservative Baroness, Sayeeda Warsi. Writing in The Observer, Lady Warsi, who resigned in August 2014 over the government’s alleged failure on its Gaza policy, expounded a damning critique of a so-called “policy of non-engagement” with British Muslims by both Coalition and Labour governments. According to Warsi, “obsessive” official practices of monitoring communities and screening contact with representatives likely to challenge government views had entrenched a “trust deficit” on public and political levels. British society had in turn been cleaved and counter-extremism efforts thwarted, as she explained:

Many groups and individuals have been defined as “beyond the pale”… The coalition even set up a high-level committee to decide whether a group or individual was

100 Sayeeda Warsi, “Muslims will speak up for British values only when they know they will be heard,” The Guardian, 25 January 2015 at: http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/24/sayeeda-warsi-muslims-british-values [accessed 26 January 2015].
someone ministers could engage with... This is to view ever-increasing numbers of Muslim organisations or individual activists with suspicion and dangerously narrow engagement to a dozen people from a community of more than three million.¹⁰¹

The backdrop to Warsi’s critique was a much-disputed letter sent by the Communities Secretary Eric Pickles and fellow Conservative politician, Lord Tariq Ahmad, to more than one-thousand Muslim leaders in the wake of January’s Charlie Hebdo affair.¹⁰² Conveying the government’s pride in local Muslim reactions to the attacks – a resounding “not in our name” – and affirming that “British values are Muslim values”, Pickles also noted that there was much work to be done. Namely, he explained, it was incumbent upon religious leaders to demonstrate “how faith in Islam can be part of British identity” and to “lay out more clearly than ever before what being a British Muslim means today: proud of your faith and proud of your country.”¹⁰³ The PM was quick to defend the document as “reasonable, sensible and moderate”, but many recipients (the characteristic response was silence) expressed their umbrage at its inferences. As the Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) replied, while recognising the ‘good faith’ in which the letter was intended:

We do take issue with the implication that extremism takes place at mosques, and that Muslims have not done enough to challenge the terrorism that took place in our name… that you were somehow endorsing the idea that Muslims and Islam are inherently apart from British society. We reject such notions. We also reject suggestions that Muslims must go out of their way to prove their loyalty to this country of ours.¹⁰⁴

Efforts by the MCB to counter extremism and unite communities, he noted, had been undertaken "not out of apology, but because it was the right thing to do". The exchange signified the larger grievances, amplified across Britain with the rise of IS, of Muslims and others from the Middle-East, who felt increasingly answerable in their domestic constituencies for the atrocities of Islamic extremists abroad. As the prominent British-Muslim commentator Medhi Hassan commented following IS’ gruesome beheading of

¹⁰¹Ibid.
¹⁰³Ibid.
American journalist James Foley, “followers of other religions are not expected to condemn violence carried out in their name… As a Muslim, I want to say ‘these people aren’t proper Muslims speaking in my name’, but on the other hand, I don’t want to have to always dance to someone’s tune which says ‘has the latest condemn-a-thon begun?’” 105 Similar resentments issued forth on social media in the form of #muslimapologies, ‘Muslims Condemning Things’ and t-shirts proclaiming “I am Muslim and I’m sorry for everything”.106 Yet on a graver level, as was noted, this logic of condemnation had plagued Muslims in the UK since 9/11. Where Washington’s ‘War on Terror’ laid the foundations for a discursive paradigm which cast Muslims as either allies or enemies of the West, Blair’s subscription to the campaign had tarnished British communities accordingly.107 As Mahmood Mamdani noted in 2002, “the political leadership of the antiterrorism alliance, notably Tony Blair and George Bush, speak of the need to distinguish ‘good Muslims’ from ‘bad Muslims’… This talk has turned religious experience into a political category, differentiating *good Muslims* from *bad Muslims*, rather than terrorists from civilians.”108

Intensifying over time through a media preoccupied with violent *jihad*, this “culture talk” has with the recent surge of violence in Syria and Iraq increasingly embroiled Muslims in the West.109 In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, a narrative of ‘homegrown’ Islamic extremism been bolstered by the rise of far-right parties like the UK Independence Party (UKIP), whose unabashed anti-immigration sentiments are buoyed by readily-discernable currents of Islamophobia and isolationism.110 Indeed, as UKIP


106 See Twitter feed at: https://twitter.com/hashtag/muslimapologies [accessed 22 August 2015].


108 Mahmood Mamdani. “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism.” American Anthropologist 104(3) (2002).

109 See Tariq Modood, Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005.)

110 Among other policies, Farage has advocated cutting foreign aid spending from Britain’s budget. See Sebastian Payne, “Eight different ways Ukip would spend Britain’s international aid budget,” The Spectator,
party leader Nigel Farage claimed in addressing the subject of the Paris attacks in January 2015, the presence in Western nations of “a fifth column” of violent cultural antagonists in the form of Muslim communities held “some very worrying implications for our civilisation.”¹¹¹ British politicians were quick to condemn Farage’s attempt to make political capital out of the tragedy, yet the power of UKIP’s narrative was not far from the surface of official discourse on either side of the Atlantic. In Washington, the Secretary of State John Kerry responded by deeming the French murders as “part of a larger confrontation, not between civilizations – but between civilization itself and those who are opposed to a civilized world.”¹¹² Despite Kerry’s careful distancing from Huntington’s notorious thesis, his message did not depart entirely from that of the US President in the aftermath of 9/11: that, as Bush had claimed, “they hate us for our freedoms”.¹¹³ Other prominent commentators in Britain were more enthusiastic to revive the oppositional Manichean paradigm that ensued from 2001, with Richard Dawkins offering the view that “all religions are NOT equally violent. Some have never been violent, some gave it up centuries ago. One religion conspicuously didn’t.”¹¹⁴ Just as in 2001, public expressions of this kind were reproduced in documented increases in racially-motivated attacks on Muslims (as well as those with Muslim ‘appearance’) in Britain and across Europe.¹¹⁵

Relative to 2001, however, Muslim communities in Britain in 2015 also appeared to have become more ostracised from Britain’s governing institutions. Concurrent with

¹¹¹ As he explained, “we’ve got people living in these countries, holding our passports, who hate us… It does make one question the whole really gross attempt at encouraged division within society that we have had in the past few decades in the name of multiculturalism.” Cited in “Paris shooting: Nick Clegg ‘dismayed’ at Farage comments,” BBC News, 8 January 2015 at: www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-30726491 [accessed 9 January 2014].
¹¹⁴ See Dawkins’ Twitter feed at: https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/552844234689372160 [accessed 21 January 2015].
New Labour’s implementation of anti-terror measures after 9/11, many British Muslim leaders also reported a heightened engagement by government officials who were apparently concerned to stem the foreseeable anti-Islam backlash and collaborate in counter-extremism.116 Such liaisons extended to the Foreign Office, who was astute to the growing politicisation of young British Muslims around issues of foreign policy. Accordingly, forums were established for the exchange of views between policy-makers and ethnic minority groups on related matters, including responses to Britain’s involvement in Palestine, Afghanistan and Iraq – what the FCO deemed the “Domestic Echoes of Foreign Policy”.117 Similarly, the spread of Islamic terrorism to Europe in the form of the Madrid, and later London bombings (7/7) compelled officials to consider the domestic effects of their foreign policy, to look beyond how it was merely communicated or justified to Muslim constituents, to the implications of how policy itself was formulated.118 These links between domestic and foreign policy were noted by the former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook the day after 7/7 in The Guardian, where he echoed sentiments present in the FCO. As Cook explained: “the more the West emphasises confrontation, the more it silences moderate voices in the Muslim world who want to speak up for cooperation.”119 Such reflections from within and outside government were however swiftly rejected by Blair, who instead seized the London attacks as vindication of his offensive in the Middle-East. Although New Labour officials persisted in measures to engage with British Muslims on questions of foreign policy, efforts appeared to be undertaken with an evermore self-serving agenda of co-option to the PM’s strategy. (As was reflected in, for example, tailor-made official documents like a 2001 pamphlet appealing for Muslim support for the Afghan campaign with pictures of Blair meeting Arafat.120) This cosmetic engagement or “illusion of dialogue” with little penetration into official thinking on foreign policy, has been observed by Arab and Muslim communities across successive governments. As

117 Greene, Blair, Labour and Palestine 60.
118 See concerns expressed by Cabinet Secretary, Sir Andrew Turnbull about the relationship between UK policy on Israel-Palestine and radicalisation among British Muslims, cited in Greene, Blair, Labour and Palestine 60.
120 Greene, Blair, Labour and Palestine 61.
one young British Libyan noted in 2015 regarding the “photo opportunities” contrived by politicians since Blair:

We would be invited on the basis of dialogue, but the reality would be more of a monologue. It became clear that the intention was not to hear and address Arab concerns, but to justify British policy while portraying the government as interested in and engaged with the community.  

The official approach critiqued by Warsi and promulgated in the language of Secretary Pickles nonetheless reflects as a magnification of these trends. With the resurgence of Islamic terror this decade, it instead appears that even those deemed “good Muslims” have moved precariously more close to the exterior boundaries of British society and politics. While there is no linear demographic data equating Britain’s Muslim and Middle-Eastern diaspora populations, the infusion of official approaches to both groups with the politically-pervasive stigma of culture and ideology is readily apparent. (This obfuscation has also been confirmed in documented increases in popular hostility to Arab and other Middle-Eastern minority groups, as well as Muslims, in Britain since 2001.) That the bar for national inclusion had been set to a new, heightened threshold for British Muslims following the rise of IS - more stringent still for those mobilising around controversial matters of foreign policy – became doubly apparent with government responses to the death of British Muslims in the region. The muted official and media responses to the killing of the charitable British surgeon Abbas Khan in Syria was widely noted by Muslim and diaspora groups from the region. As one Syrian humanitarian activist noted following his death: “behind it all is the suspicion, hard to shake, that had Abbas been white, or from a non-Muslim family, things might have been different.” Such suspicions were corroborated by accounts from relatives who had spent extended periods lobbying MPs and had been in Syria attempting to free Khan. Lamenting the FCO’s insistence on keeping the issue “at arm’s length”, Khan’s brother noted that, “when you have career politicians, everything is seen as political

123 Interview with Alia, 2014.
currency... They were maybe worried that if he came back, and was found to be a member of any [jihadi] organisation, it would look bad for them.”

Where official views of the region have been coloured by the lens of counter-terrorism, so too, it appears that governmental responses to the ‘domestic echoes’ of conflicts in the Middle East have been similarly skewed. The inherent inconsistency of policies which decried violent extremism against the West, yet failed to equally valorise its Muslim victims in the region (or indeed from Britain), was observed by Taraq Ramadan in the days after the Paris attacks. As he noted of this “confusion in discourse” among politicians, media and among the public:

We need to have an overall vision of what is happening around the world, we have to come together and to say [that] as much as we are condemning what is happening here, the value of lives in Iraq or in Syria or around the world... have the same value as our lives. And we have to ask our governments for consistency, and then to come to social policy when it comes to equal citizenship to act against racism.

In this vein, many from the diaspora in Britain had, even prior to 2011, appealed to policy-makers on the grounds of an assumed shared investment in realising liberal ideals abroad. However, it seems that the clarity of London’s espoused democratic vision in the Middle East has remained clouded by strategic anxieties and interests. This web of competing aims has in turn obstructed policy-makers’ recognition and/or active sponsorship of local claims to membership of a more universal community of values. As a young British-Libyan observed in relation to events in Europe and North Africa in January 2015:

The people committing terrorism and atrocities in the West are the same type of people terrorising Libyans (and Syrians and Iraqis among others). Except that the international community keeps telling us to sit down and dialogue with them whilst happily sending mixed messages by being photographed with and holding 'productive' meetings with those funding and actively supporting those who are forming alliances with terrorists who have publicly proclaimed that they do not believe in democracy... It’s not an ‘us’ in

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125 Interview with BBC Radio 4, Today, broadcast 8 January 2015.
the civilised West and 'them' in the Muslim world situation... It’s an all of us against the same extremist threat...  

Nonetheless, divergent prejudices and priorities have seemingly continued to obstruct such perspicacity on the part of policy-makers, who have only selectively countenanced any relationship between Islam and democracy. The reported suspicion with which policy-makers regarded Islamist elements of some opposition movements in the region from 2011 underscored the ideological prism which has continued to mould many of London alliances in the region, filtering its engagement with political actors in Britain. As one Islamist-affiliated former NTC member explained of official unreceptiveness to his views around the 2011 Libyan intervention:

Yet in other context, policy-makers objections to fusions of Islam with political power in the Middle East have proved more capricious. The malleability of the official approach was made patent with Cameron’s proclaimed 2014 investigation into the Muslim Brotherhood, including the prospect of its banning as a terrorist organisation in Britain. Following the coup against Egypt’s democratically-elected President Morsi (described by Blair as "the absolutely necessary rescue of a nation") the enthusiastic coup-backer Saudi Arabia had claimed that the Brotherhood used London as a key base for organising. Accordingly, Cameron delegated the British ambassador to Saudi and chief of M16 with reporting on the group’s philosophy, activities and influence on

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126 Interview with Habibah, London, 22 September 2014.
129 The latter, Sir John Sawers, also served as Blair's foreign affairs adviser and ambassador to Egypt under Hosni Mubarak, with whom he retained strong ties.
UK national interests, domestically and abroad.\textsuperscript{130} Despite its packaging as “an important piece of work... to get our policy right” the PM’s justification for the initiative was unconvincing to many. As was noted at the time, more than an earnest effort toward political rigour and consistency, the inquiry reflected an opportunistic measure to appease; not the aggrieved thousands of Egyptians who had become victims of the iniquitous coup, but its Saudi advocates, themselves presiding over a long-standing campaign against democracy in the Gulf.\textsuperscript{131} London’s casting of yet another regional force in the garb of terrorism once again bore little relation to national security or a principled stance against anti-democratic values in North Africa or the region. Rather, it signified the ongoing chasm between liberal values promulgated in official discourse domestically and the application of those values abroad in foreign policy. As Achcar notes, in this and countless prior instances, this discrepancy has been embodied in “the hypocrisy of Western powers who swear by democracy and human rights in general...and ally with the very antithesis of democracy or human rights: the Saudi Kingdom.”\textsuperscript{132} (Indeed, Blair himself noted in his autobiography that a Libya-style intervention was not necessary under Gulf monarchies because they held out "the possibility of evolutionary change").\textsuperscript{133}

The failure of British policymakers to reconcile its matrix of regional alliances with its own ideological platforms casts further doubt on the integrity of British strategy in the region. While London’s axis of Middle Eastern allegiance appears now to centre around governments (and key defence customers) in Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as Hollis notes, none of these can be regarded as “exemplars of the British values” it continues to tout at home.\textsuperscript{134} For observers from the region in Britain, this duplicity in Coalition policy is the inheritance of Britain’s strategy in the Middle East in the twenty-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{130} The urgency of such a conscientious review was perhaps surprising, given that Cameron had dined with the Brotherhood’s Egyptian envoy only months before the coup, in a two-hour reception at the PM’s country house.
\item \textsuperscript{131} David Wearing, “Cameron’s investigation into the Muslim Brotherhood is not about national security,” OpenDemocracy, 4 April 2014 at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/david-wearing/cameron%E2%80%99s-investigation-into-muslim-brotherhood-is-not-about-national-secur [accessed 5 April 2014].
\item \textsuperscript{132} Achcar, The people want, 112.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Tony Blair, A journey (London: Hutchinson, 2010), 112.
\end{itemize}
first century, unaltered between governments, despite its changing ideological tincture. As one British-Arab commentator observed shortly after Blair’s 2014 Bloomberg address on the subject of ‘Why the Middle East Matters’¹³⁵, “the figure of Tony Blair reflects the historical continuation of British foreign policy in the Middle East – one which has never really changed… Western audiences might buy the changing gloss on dictators, but Arabs will not.”¹³⁶

These commonly-held views of an intransigent British foreign policy are a salient rejoinder to the prevailing Western conceptions of a static socio-political order in the Middle East. Even after the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, as Bayat notes, political discourse indicates the persistence of prevailing conceptions of more than a decade ago – that is, that “everywhere in the world has changed except for the Middle East.”¹³⁷ Sustained attention to developments in the region over the past decade (if not century), attended as they have been by myriad new and evolving political cultures and mobilisations, disproves such a thesis. Persisting views around ‘Arab exceptionalism’ – perceptions of a Middle East mired in sectarian conflict and/or outside the bounds of global democratisation – instead suggests a failure to recognise circumstances in the region as the very outcome of historical and transnational processes. What has implicitly, or at times overtly, been attributed to cultural factors, such as religious atavism or an inherent ‘Asian despotism’, conversely reflects the mark of the modern world with its unequal patterns of globalisation which have been magnified in the Middle East. As Halliday notes, “what appear as distinct, ‘non-Western’ voices outside the broader process of globalisation are indeed both product and part of that process seen in its wider context.”¹³⁸ A more integrated acknowledgement of this broader context and its inherent inequities, the legacy of colonialism and system of global capital not least among them, would appear pivotal to any foreign policy professing an international outlook. So too,

¹³⁶ Interview with Maher Mugrabi, Melbourne 16 February 2014.
¹³⁷ Bayat, Life as Politics, 6.
any genuine effort to credit or support local mobilisations will require the discarding of
outmoded or polarising explanatory paradigms for understanding the Middle East.

The continued application of “old epistemologies” in British approaches to the region,
in Iraq in 2003 as well as since 2011, suggests a more unyielding framework in London.
Indeed, policy-makers resistance to a more universal endorsement of democratic
movements in the region, as well as their representatives in the UK, raises questions
about official practices of relating to ‘the foreign’ itself. As Bully notes, despite the
proliferation of a cosmopolitan discourse of universal morality in international relations
since Blair’s New Labour government, the fully coherent, humanised subject upon
which the development of any ‘ethical’ foreign policy or ‘responsible’ engagement
depends, has yet to assume a permanent place in British policy-making. Rather, foreign
policy has remained “an arena of practise in which some subjects emerge with the status
of actors and others do not.”139 While, as has been noted, the ethical “volume control”
had been turned down in discourse since Blair’s hubristic idealism of 2003, policy-
makers have nonetheless remained wedded to the idea of ethics in foreign policy.140
And yet, as has been underscored by official dealings since Blair’s government, the
ethical status of a foreign ‘subject’ in British policy is never assured. Various domestic
and foreign actors have instead been measured against a more concrete yardstick of
geopolitics rather than values: a strategy which validates subjects not in accordance with
common ideals, but common interests.

In the eyes of many diaspora activists, this obstinate pursuit of British influence and
British interest, irrespective of strategic wisdom, potential human cost or popular
mandate, has itself amply emblematized British values. Like Thatcher’s resoundingly-
unpopular participation in American raids over Tripoli decades earlier, the British
invasion of Iraq in 2003 signified that there was little role for democracy in matters of
security. Indeed, Sabah of the Stop the War Coalition later reflected that:

It is important that we did not stop the war, though it was a kind of failure, despite the
massive support we had. It showed what kind of democracy Britain is: even when you

139 Bulley, Ethics as Foreign Policy, 15.
140 Nicholas J. Wheeler and Timothy Dunne, Moral Britannia?: evaluating the ethical dimension in
Labour’s foreign policy (London: The Foreign Policy Centre, 2005), 19.
have millions of people on the street, you find rulers still do not listen to what their people want.\textsuperscript{141}

These practices may have been as unremarkable to those from the Middle-East as the chicanery of local autocrats. Yet at the same time, the imperviousness of policy-makers to real perceptions of British hypocrisy – as evident in their determined discursive reinventions of Britain as ally, liberator or protector – has continued to facilitate the reproduction of iniquitous policies. Reflecting on the reductive yet incendiary currents which have fuelled relations between Britain and the Middle East since 2003, the Iraqi former President of the Islamist Society, Fareed explained a decade later that:

\begin{quote}
I see learning on the Arab side – learning that it is simplistic to look at the other as an enemy simply because of his past policies. It is wrong to demonise one side: you need to demonise an idea. The problem is that the West was demonised because of Palestine, and because of this we accepted despotism, the poor treatment of women, tyranny and exploitation of resources. That does not mean that the US or UK are right, but it does not excuse us from being wrong. We all must look at ourselves and consider why the other looking at you in this way, why he is always seeing you as an enemy.\textsuperscript{142}
\end{quote}

Resonant in this observation is the perception that such reflexivity has yet to penetrate British policymaking as applied to the Middle-East. Where enduring conceptual lenses on the region have prevented UK officials from recognising value-bearing foreign subjects, so too, Britain has been blinded to alternate perspectives on its own role as actor and subject.\textsuperscript{143}

The anti-democratic effects, both historical and potential, of this “moral blind-spot” in British policy-making have likewise been noted by those from the region who had sought to enlist official support for their campaigns. Among them, one veteran Libyan activist who noted that: “the UK is not the only hypocrite. But Western hypocrisy is

\textsuperscript{141}Interview with Sabah, 2012.
\textsuperscript{142}Interview with Fareed, 2012.
\textsuperscript{143} As Gary Younge observed on this failure of reflexivity around the release of the film \textit{American Sniper} in January 2015: “The west does not see itself the way others see it…it promotes itself as the upholder of principles it does not keep, and a morality it does not practise. This alone would barely distinguish it from most cultures. What makes the west different is the physical and philosophical force with which it simultaneously makes its case for superiority and contradicts it. Therein lies the dysfunction…” See Gary Younge, “American Sniper illustrates the west’s morality blind spots,” \textit{The Guardian}, 26 January 2015 at: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/26/america-morality-blind-spots-guantanamo-bay-king-abdullah-hypocrisy-civilisation [accessed 27 January 2015].
more dangerous than Arab hypocrisy. It harms us in a different way.”144 The enduring prejudices which continue to define relations between Britain and the Middle-East have, as Mamdani notes, been born from an historical encounter in the form of a colonial project. Nonetheless, it appears the enduring power of this project remains widely unacknowledged among policy-makers whose discourse thereby “dehistoricises the construction of political identities.”145 Inattention to this history, as reflected in a dearth of political or strategic introspection, thus remains at the core of Britain’s reproduced failure in the region. As James Meek noted in January 2015, speculating on the bungled UK legacy in Afghanistan in the aftermath of Britain’s withdrawal:

Although it is about how poorly Britain understands Afghanistan, it is also, implicitly, about how poorly Britain understands Britain… Next time we think about military intervention in a foreign country that hasn’t attacked us, it might be worth running a thought experiment to work out at exactly which moment, in the many internecine conflicts that have afflicted the British Isles, our forebears would have most benefited from the arrival of 3500 troops and eight helicopters, and for which ‘side’ those troops would have fought.146

When the last British troops exited Iraq in 2011, former Foreign Secretary David Miliband was likewise undeluded about the failure of Britain’s operations in that country, or their wider consequences. While claiming that there was “still history to be made in Iraq”, Miliband was sober to his predecessors’ strategic shortcomings. As he noted, “[the Iraq war] obviously divided not only our country, but divided the whole world really. It proved how much easier it is to win wars than to win the peace and I think that is the sort of lesson that we have got to learn.”147 Like Miliband, and later his sibling, many British officials have remained emphatic about the productive insights the pending Chilcot report will afford for forging better policy in the Middle East. Indeed, some have partially attributed Britain’s subsequent failings to the stalled revelations of

144 Interview with Ibrahim, 2012.
the inquiry over more than five years. Among them, Conservative MP David Davis lamented that “in the interim, we have had Libya, Syria – all actions or putative actions that would have gained from the knowledge that Chilcot will presumably provide at some point.”

There is no doubt that the report’s findings will provide illuminating, if not instructive by negative example, in particular around policy-making protocols between Downing Street, Whitehall and parliament.

Nonetheless, the tenacious cross-party emphasis on scrutinising the Iraq war for learning toward Britain’s future campaigns appears misplaced. For there is already extant in various perspectives on practical and ideological failures, tracts of evidence elucidating British error in that campaign alongside indications of avenues for reform and strategic evolution. So too, beyond Operation Iraqi Freedom, vast treatments of Britain’s innumerable prior wars, military forays, political trysts and colonial projects in the region across centuries attest lucidly to past misdemeanours and their potential mitigations. More locally still, among policy-makers’ own constituents there is ample recourse to learning in the form of diverse alternative perspectives on Britain’s role in the region. The obstacle to developing more constructive methods of relating to the region, either practically or ethically, does not therefore appear to be a want of information or lack of precedent, as identified by policy-makers in relation to the Iraq war. Its lessons, if not already apparent, might be learned with facility through sustained investment, a project for which the erosion of region-specific expertise across the FCO does not augur well.

Nor does obstruction seem to lie, as likewise critiqued, in an official inability to reconcile with or cast off from the failings of the past decade. Rather, the recurring pitfalls and ravages of UK policy in the Middle East seem the

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result of a converse apathy to Britain’s history there: a practiced inattention, or an ever-readiness to turn the page on the Arabs, and forget the past.

Conclusion

Sitting behind the desk in his Marlyebone office, the Bahraini exile, writer and opposition leader, Saeed Shehabi, reaches into a drawer and produces an official document for me. It is a 2001 letter from the Home Office, responding to his second application for British citizenship after more than twenty years’ residence in the UK. In addition to a standing in absentia trial for leading a terror network, Shehabi has recently been stripped of his Bahraini nationality alongside 30 fellow dissidents, for alleged involvement in his country’s ongoing Shia-majority uprising. His host nation and home of more than three decades has likewise rejected his citizenship. As he reads aloud to me, “after giving your application very careful consideration, we find that your activities in opposing the government of a friendly country to be inconsistent with the requirement of good character.” The same month, the ruling monarchs of that “friendly country” have appeared as VIP guests at the Royal Windsor Horse Show - as they have each year since 2011, despite ongoing evidence of their complicity in the torture and killing of Bahrainis demanding democratic rights.151 This same demand, Shehabi notes, has rendered him akin to criminals and drug-dealers in the assessment of the UK Home Office.

Reflecting on the role of diasporas in the post-9/11 era, Pnina Werbner describes a recent transformation in conceptions of communities from the Middle East and Muslim regions. The democratic aspirations of Egyptians, Libyans, Bahrainis and Syrians among others, she argues, have since 2011 confounded international observers’ generalities and upended prevailing Islamophobia. As she notes: “if September 11 highlighted an apparent moral chasm between Muslims and so-called Westerners, the Arab Spring has underlined their commonalities and shared humanity”.152 This observation affords a hopeful insight into the real prospects for corroding prejudice and

151 “UK-Bahrain relations to come under scrutiny as Gulf state’s king visits UK,” The Guardian, 13 May 2014.
building cosmopolitan communities and political solidarities across borders, despite the persistent mythologies of siege and cultural division.

And yet, such optimism is perhaps overstated. Notwithstanding the manifest democratic aims of those who engaged in the Arab uprisings or mobilised around the Iraq war, a political argot of terror, security and national identity has continued to define who is afforded entry into those communities in British political discourse, and subsequently, who is afforded assistance in foreign policy terms. Commonalities have emerged selectively and humanities, though real, continue to be qualified and subject to rescinding with the dictates of national interest. This revitalisation of a post-9/11 catalogue of foreign policy tropes was evidenced par exemplar in a 2014 address by Blair himself in which he warned that radical Islam was the biggest threat to global security of the century. As the former PM postulated: "underneath the turmoil and revolution of the past years is one very clear and unambiguous struggle: between those with a modern view of the Middle East, one of pluralistic societies and open economies… And, on the other side, those who want to impose an ideology born out of a belief that there is one proper religion and one proper view of it."153

Blair’s claim of a defining conflict, or “essential battle”, between forces of progress and oppression in the region was not in error. And yet, the concrete struggles taking place on the ground in so many countries remain distant in shape from his imagined collision of ideology and culture. So too, however, the trajectory of British foreign policy since his leadership has ensured that these real battles, often fought and represented by exiles, dissidents and activists in Britain itself, have remained less visible to Blair’s hallowed “international community” than those forged and promulgated by offices in London and Washington. Nor does it yet seem likely, either from Blair’s own record or that of his successors, that it will be those at the forefront of lived struggles for freedom against tyranny who will continue to draw the battle lines in the eyes of the world.

153Blair, keynote speech at Bloomberg Headquarters.
CONCLUSION

It is the wish not only of my King and his peoples, but it is also the wish of the great nations with whom he is in alliance, that you should prosper even as in the past. Between your people and the dominions of my King there has been a close bond of interest. Therefore the British Government cannot remain indifferent as to what takes place in your country now or in the future...

Sir Stanley Maude, “The Proclamation of Baghdad”, March 1917

Erbil, May 2013

The man hesitates, leaning momentarily on his mop, and then nods. It is almost ten o’clock and commerce on the streets of the Kurdish capital is folding-up. We seat ourselves on yellow plastic chairs outside the restaurant, and the waiter brings us salad and bread on paper plates. He is, as my companion points out, Syrian. It is his accent that is now a key minority dialect in this city, snatches of Arabic issuing from exchanges in bakeries and among ginger-haired children selling gum and tissues in its own diminutive souq. Hundreds of thousands, many of them Kurds, have by now crossed the border, staking out refugee camps or dwindling in urban settlements, with little to indicate a stem in the flow. “He is one of the lucky ones,” my friend observes. Afterwards, we visit a friend from Damascus now living in Erbil’s dusty and concrete suburbs. His teenage daughters are talking about their new school, mandatory hejab and the future, and I wince at the harsh juxtaposition of the city, so palpably different from the Syrian capital.

But they are not the only outsiders here. Alongside the ranks of foreign aid-workers, security contractors, businessmen and official elites, there are other gradations of estrangement. Driving around Erbil’s labyrinth of freeways, gated communities and super-malls, a former exile and Danish-educated professor explains his decision to

1Maude, “The Proclamation of Baghdad”, 1917.
return to Erbil in 2004, taking up a university post at the invitation of Mahmoud Barzani, now KRG’s President. He is among the thousands of diasporic Iraqi Kurds who have repatriated over more than a decade, new elements in a “transnational circuit” of cultural and political engagement, many of them to a homeland now unrecognisable. “I have no idea of where we are going as a society in Kurdistan,” he says:

Today, people are more concerned with their next iPad than questions of Kurdish politics or identity. Now the government tells us that we don't need political struggle because we have oil, and we don't need independent thought or culture or free expression because we have Islam. Our standard of living has improved, but our quality of life in our mind is very low.

Later, another returned exile – a journalist imprisoned under Saddam as well as by his KRG successors – describes the dilemma more succinctly: “we’ve had two problems with civil society and free speech in Kurdistan. Before, if you said what you thought about politics, Saddam would execute you or throw you in jail. Now, if you say what you think, there is nobody who cares enough to listen.”

Decades earlier, in a treatise on “war, tyranny and uprising in the Arab World”, fellow Kurdish expatriate, Kenan Makiya wrote of the plight of his country that “there can be no more romance and no more false heroics in the Arab world. There is only the legacy of pain which must be grappled with by a new language and in a new style.” Today’s Erbil, still animate with old and new legacies of war, tyranny and uprising, appears to underscore the pitfalls of this past heroism and romance. The disjuncture and rivalry that has emerged in ‘liberated’ Kurdistan evokes the failings of what Benedict Anderson has called “imagined community” and “long-distance nationalism” – bonds founded on myths of unity, belonging and cultural identity as perpetuated in exile. Yet the broader

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3 Interview with Rebwar, Erbil, 20 May 2013.
4 Interview with Araz, Sulaymaniya, 24 May 2013.
5Makiya, Cruelty and Silence, 293.
fragmentation of Iraq along myriad axes also indicates the pitfalls of another valiant campaign from afar. During that spring of 2013, international commentators as well as Iraq’s own leaders were declaring the country’s disintegration at the hands of a long-standing and incendiary oil dispute around the fractious governorate of Kirkuk. But within a year, different ideological forces had cleaved the country, posing equal menace to Erbil and Baghdad. The rise of IS was not, however, causally remote from the sectarian and political conflicts that had engulfed Iraq over the decade since 2003. In the light of this legacy of suffering that ensued from the Coalition war he so ardently supported, Makiya’s proposal echoes with grim irony, if with added gravity.

A close bond of interest: reviewing the story

It is these causal failures – blind romance, deception and hubris among them – of Britain’s participation in that campaign that have formed the focus of this thesis. By extending accounts of London’s role in Iraq beyond the official arena, it has foregrounded some of the flaws in Blair’s attempted realisation of an ethical foreign policy alongside their lasting consequences. In the still-somber shadow of that campaign, I have examined the implications of the Iraq war for Cameron’s Coalition government and its response to subsequent powerful and grass-roots calls for assistance, both from within the region and from its representatives in Britain.

Britain’s prior colonial incursions into the region, as introduced at the outset of the thesis, have elucidated how many of its twenty-first century practices have mirrored earlier projects of occupation and malign influence, executed under the aegis of imperial benevolence. The aspiration to evolve British foreign policy beyond neo-imperial

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9 As Tripp notes, the post-2003 occupation of Iraq touched a raw nerve among many Iraqis with memories of British colonialism, appearing to revive the notion that foreigners might “order Iraqis about.” For the occupiers, moreover, it dangerously evoked the 1920 revolt which ultimately convinced the British that they could not rule Iraq. See Tripp, *The Power and the People*, 41.
and/or realpolitik strategies toward a more progressive liberal internationalism, as pioneered by New Labour, was detailed in Chapter One. Here, reconfigured conceptions of intervention and humanitarianism - doctrines of “international community” and “enlightened self-interest” - were presented as a yardstick against which to reflect on Blair’s ensuing actions in the Middle East, and those of his political successors more recently. Blair’s participation in the US-led 2003 Iraq mission was examined in Chapter Two which examined how the project to re-found a democratic Iraq betrayed the PM’s cosmopolitan platform. Accounts by diaspora members who both supported and opposed this campaign were highlighted to underline the subordination of democratic goals to other strategic agendas as defined by Blair’s senior partner. Among these, the Coalition’s self-serving alignment with elite figures from the Iraqi diaspora, whose goals were ultimately antidemocratic, underscored the dearth of transatlantic commitment to the espoused aims of the invasion.

Such grand-scale goals of regime-change and liberation were contrasted with the less ambitious aims articulated by Cameron’s government in relation to the Libyan anti-Gaddafi uprising in 2011 in Chapter Three. This chapter analysed the development of the ensuing NATO-led intervention, documenting official as well as diaspora proponents’ attempt to revivify the notion of British liberal intervention. While not doubting the persistence of an overarching British interest in Libya, this section problematized the question of local recourse to Western military assistance by drawing attention to expressions of agency and autonomy by diaspora activists. The apparent greater regard by Cameron’s foreign policymakers for this articulation of sovereignty was noted in this instance. I observed also, however, that the Libyan intervention was nonetheless guided by an element of expediency which has since played-out in instability post-Gaddafi.

London’s recurrent appetite for military intervention in the name of democracy was in Chapter Four set against its enduring and active support for despotic government in Bahrain. Here, the apparent indifference of Cameron’s Coalition government to human rights violations in Bahrain since 2011 was located within the broader context of
Britain’s historical endorsement of misgovernment by the Gulf monarchy. Underlining the supremacy of British strategic and economic interest over ethical considerations, diaspora perspectives served to highlight the duplicity of British foreign policy, as well as the concurrent growth of transnational and trans-generational campaigns of resistance to perceived neo-colonial interference. Chapter Five has likewise questioned the recurrently-espoused ethical goals in Britain’s foreign policy since 2011 by examining the UK response to democratic demands articulated by the Syrian diaspora. This chapter underscored Britain’s continued reluctance to invest in a productive alliance with forces opposed to President Assad. It demonstrated that diaspora groups saw this reticence magnified after 2011 as British policymakers remained paralysed by political and strategic anxieties in the face of mounting atrocity. While this chapter acknowledged the various obstacles and uncertainties mitigating against a cohesive, effective international response, it concluded that diaspora groups saw London’s prevailing disinterest in the crisis reflected in the 2013 Commons vote - a retreat from involvement seen to diminish yet further Britain’s role as a credible moral force, internationally and domestically.

It is this perspective on Britain as an international actor or, in Blair’s words, Britain as a “force for good” in the world, which formed the focus of Chapter Six. This concluding chapter stepped back from the country-specific case-studies to consider Britain’s involvement in the region from a wider historical and ethical purview. While continuing to employ diaspora perspectives, it reflected on the broader ideological and material patterns at play in British foreign policy in the Middle East, examining official attitudes to the region and those from the region within British borders. It is these diverging accounts, documented in the case-studies throughout this thesis, that confirm that policymakers have yet to live up to the moralism of their rhetoric through an approach that fully humanises those on the receiving end of their policies. Instead, Britain’s strategy in the region has repeatedly failed to integrate purported values into practice. While noting the pairing-back of discursive and doctrinal idealism among policymakers in the years since 2011, this thesis has argued that London has proved unsuccessful in developing a more constructive, cohesive strategy of engagement in the Middle East, with morality yet to assume a proportional place alongside pragmatism.

The wish of the great nations: broadening the inquiry
Hamid Dabashi recently noted that critiquing dying knowledge paradigms is easier than detecting emerging ones. Indeed, this thesis has made a project of interrogating outmoded ideologies and practices in full awareness that it has offered little indication of what might take their place. While this neglect doubtless stands as a deficiency, it is hoped that the urgent task of evolving new approaches to foreign policymaking and new ethical frameworks to sustain them will take place within, and chiefly, beyond the bounds of academia, drawing on the insights and case-studies proffered in this thesis. Future research in this vain might examined in greater detail some of the many themes addressed here, or indeed, those not featuring in this study.

Whole theses might be written on the evolving activities of country-specific, and even ethno-specific, diaspora groups. In particular, there has been little written on the history of the Syrian diaspora in the West and such research would doubtless form a useful backdrop to the many evolving diaspora and transnational campaigns. Studies of this nature might also draw fruitful comparisons with groups in other countries in Europe or North America and their various political and cultural mobilisations (an original aim of this thesis, but beyond its ultimate scope.) Likewise, it would also be instructive to undertake research into the role of displaced and/or diaspora groups from sites of upheaval in the region, examining their conjunction with local campaigns and cultures in host-counties. So too, more detailed investigation into the experiences of those from the diaspora who returned to their countries of origin following regime-change, most notably Libya, would be of doubtless benefit to studies of reconstruction, state-building and post-conflict engagement.

Within Britain, additional research into foreign policy mobilisations might adopt the case-study of Palestine and its diaspora – one which has been omitted from this thesis due to the magnitude and perceived historical peculiarity of this instance, which takes it beyond the ambit of more narrow questions of uprising and intervention addressed here. The lack of sustained analysis of the role of the Israel-Palestine conflict, though referred to obliquely here, is acknowledged as a shortcoming of this study. However, it is

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10 Hamid Dabashi, keynote address at “An International Conference on the Transnational and Transgenerational in Central and West Asia and their Diasporas,” Monash University, Melbourne, 16 March 2015.
simultaneously recognised that a relatively more extensive literature already exists on this subject, arguably more so than other examined themes and case-studies detailed here. This thesis has also not engaged in an explicit or detailed ethnography that seeks to chart with greater nuance the multiple political experiences of the “diasporic condition”.

Among other issues, more specific and thorough attention might have been paid to the internal dynamics of each national case-study, including the role of class, sect and political affiliation among groupings in the UK. Most especially, this study has been undertaken with an appreciation of gender as a strikingly persistent, but unacknowledged factor, and thus with an awareness that an entirely different thesis might have been produced by adopting this framework for analysis. The accounts presented here therefore reflect a limited purview of diaspora experience and opinion. This too, signifies a gap in the research and a pathway for further probing given greater resources of time and access.

Although the arguments put forth in this thesis have been supported by a range of documentation and original research, significant limitations on source material have been apparent throughout. Restrictions on access to official records, in particular, have curtailed my ability to draw firm contentions about the role of specific actors or policymakers’ calculations in each instance, as FOI requests have yielded increasingly little material over the period of research. Gaps have in some instances been partially filled by anecdotal evidence from key diaspora figures, but these remain an insufficient measure of official decision-making dynamics. With a more singular focus, and as greater tracts of official documentation are made available, it is anticipated that the fuller dimensions of policy-making might be brought to light to constructive effect in the aftermath of some of the events examined here.

Despite these shortcomings, a key contribution of this thesis has been to highlight the need for “a new language and a new style”, as it were, in foreign policymaking. The perspectives articulated here confirm that a more genuinely post-colonial cosmopolitanism is required, one which abandons former modes of self-interested and undemocratic interference alongside their duplicitous reincarnation under the banner of

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11Ghassan Hage, “The Diasporic Condition,” keynote address at Monash University, 14 March 2015.
ethics, as embodied by Blair’s foreign policy. Noting the demise of powerful colonial binaries of “the West and the rest”, Dabashi further describes the Arab uprisings as themselves a demand - not only for bread, freedom and regime-change - but also for a new language with new terms of reference. Such an alternative would transcend enduring and essentialist discourses to reimagine history from multiple poles and found dialogues anew with interlocutors on an equal footing. Demands for reinventions of this kind, articulated during the Arab spring and documented in the preceding chapters, simultaneously point to the failure of fruition of the cosmopolitan doctrines posited alongside Blair’s New Labour government. Ulf Hannerz has proposed that ‘genuine’ cosmopolitanism might be described as “an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other… an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity”. Through this prism, it becomes readily apparent that foreign policymaking in the form of reflective experiments of this kind has yet to manifest in Britain. As this thesis has argued, selective, opportunistic and/or neo-colonial patterns of official engagement with the ‘Other’ instead remain as a major obstacle to realising such an ethos.

Yet so too, a chief goal of cosmopolitanism has been identified as a willingness and ability to interrogate one’s own structures of meaning: that is, to achieve competence in foreign cultures through consideration of the self. At its outset, this thesis cited a call by Stewart and Knaus for an “anthropology of ourselves” in the context of British intervention abroad. It has since been argued that policy-makers have fallen short of this project, as reflected in a prevailing reticence to reflect on Britain’s own role in the region from an de-centred, historicised position. While the perspectives documented here underscore these deficiencies, it remains unclear from this ‘alternative archive’ what such a revised ethos would look like as applied in practical policy-making, signaling the importance of further research, debate and experimentation across multiple political, intellectual and social forums. Some indication of such a political strategy might perhaps be detected in calls like those by the former Foreign Secretary David

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12 Dabashi, Keynote address, 2015.
15 Stewart and Gerald Knaus, *Can Intervention Work?*, v.
Miliband in 2009 for a “coalition of consent” between the West and Muslim world. According to Miliband, this would entail a “shared effort” to recognise difference while maintaining consistent values, and to more conscientiously address local grievances, both socio-economic and political. 16 As applied abroad, this more evolved approach would in the very least, as Tripp describes, imply “taking the country, its society, the plural nature of its population and their aspirations seriously and answering to them.” 17

Any contemporary review of cosmopolitan ideals and practices likewise suggests that the very category of ‘diaspora’ must also be interrogated under the impact of growing hypermobility among populations. 18 It has recently been noted that the evolution of this conceptual and methodological division has failed to consider alternatives which may more efficiently and creatively address emerging global patterns and complexities. In their place, some have advocated new groupings to encompass the outcomes of multiple displacements and re-articulations of identity, without privileging notions of territory or often chauvinist nationalisms. 19 Among these, a theory of ‘neo-nomadism’ has been pioneered to describe the outcomes of post-identitarian mobility – a social formation and ethical condition that rather than origin, gives primacy to critical voices in history, power and “cultural encounters”. 20 Such a grouping, as promulgated by Deleuze and Guattari, would account for diasporic heterogeneity and alienation by rejecting exclusionary identity to focus instead on bonds forged from global solidarities, ideals and contestations of power. Indications of these new conceptions of transnational allegiance are evident in the original research for this thesis – for example, in the accounts of Iraqis who rejected the partiality and privilege of diaspora leaders in favour

19 May Telmissany, "Nomadic Citizenship: reflections on exile and revolution,” keynote address at “Cultures of Freedom: Voices from the Arab and Muslims Worlds Symposium”, University of Sydney, Sydney, 10 April 2015.
20 See, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizofrenia (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1980).
of what was perceived as a more authentic democratic practice, or Bahrainis who have contested foreign interference in their country as part of a more universal struggle against enduring colonial power.

I began research for this thesis in what is now recognised as a very different time - one when the events of the Arab uprisings, let alone the transformation of Syria itself, were unforeseen, not least by commentators with regional expertise. Initially, my intended focus was to be the human consequences of the 2003 Iraq campaign for those from the region, namely refugees in countries neighbouring Iraq and those who had journeyed to the US, UK and Australia. However, this trajectory was reconfigured after 2011 in the light of historical events too powerful and too compelling to be overlooked. This project has throughout its production thus been defined by an accelerated attempt to document, scrutinise and contextualise rapid and unprecedented developments as they unfolded, its key questions and terms of reference evolving as events transpired. It is doubtless that this circumstance has resulted in gaps in its methodology, sources and analyses, which as noted above, have ruptured neat conclusions (if indeed the complexity of the subject matter permits such an outcome.)

Notwithstanding these problematics, this project nonetheless found an ending of sorts in present-day Erbil – either in answers to its precipitating questions, or in a resignation to their absence. Its conclusions have been encountered among the diverse accents, dialects, experiences and places that reflect an Arab Middle East re-making its future devoid of aid from those who first defined it, from the proclamations of Sir Stanley Maude through to those of Blair, Cameron and their peers. It is evident from the burgeoning academic research on the Arab uprisings that rejoinders to these pronouncements, like those archived in this thesis, are now being documented with greater rigour. It is anticipated that their findings will yield positive outcomes for academic accounts of the region, historical as well as across other disciplines. In the interim, it is hoped that the present, unbounded and harrowing realities that beset the Middle East will be re-examined, more urgently and more attentively, by the architects
of foreign policy itself. This effort must be undertaken not only toward the salvaging of any palpable notion of a British “moral civilization”\textsuperscript{21}, but more fundamentally, in the service of those in the region seeking to be the agents and authors of their own history.

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