Capítulo XX

Great Britain and the Middle East: The rise and fall of a hegemonic power and the pursuit of eternal interests

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We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow…With every British Minister the interests of England ought to be the shibboleth of his policy (Lord Palmerston, 1848)[1]

Overview

Great Britain´s involvement in the region long predates the First World War, but it was between 1914 and the Suez crisis of 1956 when Britain was the dominant power in much of the Middle East. Between the two world wars Britain´s supremacy was almost unchallenged. However, after 1945 British hegemony quickly crumbled, leaving few relics behind. Like many other imperial powers before her in world history, successive British governments made and pursued public policy in the region in the pursuit of what they believed to be the "national" interest. The initial impetus for serious British involvement in the Middle East was to secure and protect the route to India with the secret purchase by Benjamin Disraeli´s government in 1875 of 44% of the shares in the Suez Canal Company and the establishment of British control from 1882 until 1953. The entry of the Ottoman Empire into World War I as a German ally brought further British involvement in the region leading to the post war partition of the Ottoman Empire between Britain and France. After

the independence of British India in 1947 the main reason for a continued British presence in the region had apparently gone. However, other factors began to influence British policy in the region after 1945; the containment of Soviet influence in the region and in Africa in partnership with the rising superpower of the United States in a new era of Cold War tensions and rivalry, regional stability and control of the world´s largest oil reserves and lastly, the attempt by Britain to maintain a claim to be a world power.

1.World War One and British Entry into the Region

For a hundred years before the outbreak of the First World War Britain had pursued a policy of keeping the Ottoman Empire together primarily in order to try and reduce the potential strategic threats from Russian expansionism and from Persia to British India. For this reason, Britain went to war with France against Russia in the Crimean War to defend the Ottoman Empire (1853-56). This long standing traditional British policy was suddenly reversed on 2 November 1914 by the British cabinet after the entry of the Ottoman Empire into World War One on the side of Germany and the Central Powers. Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith famously declared in an impressive speech at the Guildhall in London on 9 November 1914 that: "It is the Ottoman government, and not we who have rung the death knell of Ottoman dominion, not only in Europe, but in Asia"[2].

This was how Britain´s involvement with many new states in Mesopotamia began. One hundred years of self-interested British pro-Ottoman foreign policy had abruptly come to an end and marked the beginning of a new post Ottoman era for the Middle East, the consequences of which are still felt today.

Despite initial misgivings in the British High Command and some humiliating military defeats at the Gallipoli Peninsula (1915-16) and at Kut al-Amara (1916) by Ottoman forces, the British army was nevertheless able to eventually conquer and control most of the Fertile Crescent by October 1918 with the Turkish armistice being signed on 30 October 1918. Thus, hundreds of years of Ottoman power in the region collapsed and Britain found herself in control of a new empire in Mesopotamia which she decided to partition with her wartime ally France. Many new countries, which still exist today, were carved out of the defunct Ottoman Empire by Britain and France. Britain took over effective control of what became Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq and the Persian Gulf States and, as the occupying power in the entire region, decided to give France what would be known as Lebanon and Syria.

2. The main post 1945 determinants of British foreign policy towards Israel and the Middle East region

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Prime Minister´s Office are the two main policy making institutions which formulate British foreign policy towards Israel and the Middle East region in general. The FCO has been characterised by what is termed the "Diplomatic" approach which is based on trying to maintain the best possible relations with established regimes in the region or those forces which appear to be likely to take over power. This approach still dominates Britain´s foreign ministry. It began characterised by wide ranging support for the monarchical regimes in Iraq, Jordan and Egypt in the immediate post 1945 period and has made Britain wary of demonstrating too much open support for the United States in the region, reflecting concerns from Arab governments and is close to the traditionally dominant European perspective in foreign policy for the region.

The other principal approach which has helped shape British foreign policy towards Israel and the Middle East region is the so called "Strategic" approach. It tends to divide Middle Eastern regimes into either moderate or hostile ones and regards the principal threats to regional stability and British interests as emanating from aggressive, anti-western governments, radical Pan-Arab nationalism and revolutionary Islamism. This approach views the rival "Diplomatic" viewpoint as promoting appeasement and is more willing to use pressure and military force if necessary. This policy stance has traditionally been more characteristic of the Prime Minister´s Office, being markedly closer to the United States, viewing Israel from a more positive perspective as a valuable pro-western power in the region. It has tended to view the regimes in Iran, Saddam Hussein´s Iraq, Syria and militant revolutionary Islamist movements as the main direct threat to British interests and as the main source of regional instability and problems. These divergent policy approaches represent not only ideological differences, but institutional differences as well, related to the specific functions carried out by these two key British government foreign policy making institutions. Apart from these two principal foreign policy approaches other factors are not as important in the formulation of British foreign policy towards Israel in particular and to the rest of the Middle East region in general.

The British view of the Middle East nowadays, and Israel´s place within it, is governed principally by economic considerations, foremost amongst them oil imports and arms exports and give the country an obvious interest in the preservation of regional stability. Various Prime Ministers such as Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, and Margaret Thatcher of the Conservatives, and Harold Wilson and Tony Blair of Labour have adopted to some degree the Strategic point of view. In comparison, only Clement Attlee and Edward Heath can be said to have completely accepted the FCO policy standpoint. However, it is important to note that none of the Strategic-minded prime ministers have moved to permanently alter the FCO "Diplomatic" approach. Their transient term in office as Prime Ministers, as well as their need to devote attention and energy to other matters, has left the FCO with considerable staying power and influence regarding the Middle East. Nowadays, 10 Downing Street is probably more powerful than ever in the making of British Middle Eastern policy. In particular, the former Prime Minister Tony Blair has been criticised as being largely responsible for "centralising" foreign policymaking as well as for his stances on particular issues such as the Iraq war. The Observer newspaper described him as having, "Gone further than any prime minister since Churchill in overriding and by-passing the advice of the Foreign Office".[3]

Tony Blair has also been criticised for his use of special advisers during his time in office such as Lord Levy, favoured diplomats, and the N°. 10 Downing Street staff, rather than making more use of the Foreign Office. He was seen as introducing an almost US "presidential" style into British government. It hardly needs to be said that since the times of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s the dominant approach in British foreign policy would seem to be the openly pro-US "Strategic" approach. From the period when Tony Blair was Prime Minister this has been particularly obvious with active and direct British participation in the 2003 US led invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the toppling of the Gaddafi regime in Libya and in British support for rebel opposition groups in the civil war in Syria with David Cameron as Prime Minister from 2010.

3. Britain and Palestine/Israel

The publication of the Balfour Declaration in November 1917 by the then British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour in a short letter to Baron Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, marked a new beginning in British foreign policy toward the region.

His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.[4]

It gave official British support for the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine and eventually led to the creation of the State of Israel in May 1948 when Britain gave up the Palestine mandate. The Balfour Declaration is probably therefore one of the most important policy landmarks in the Middle East region in modern times and has marked the region´s affairs fundamentally for nearly one hundred years. As yet, the creation of the State of Israel and its turbulent relations with its Arab neighbours still forms the basis of relations between the West and the Arab world. The unending saga of the Middle East Peace Process continues without a definitive peace settlement in sight.

From the time of the Balfour Declaration the British allowed Jewish immigration into Palestine, but this policy was abruptly changed with the publication of the 1939 White Paper. The main points of the White Paper were that with over four hundred fifty thousand Jews having already settled in the mandate, the Balfour Declaration about "a national home for the Jewish people" had been met and called for an independent Palestine established within ten years, governed jointly by Arabs and Jews. Jewish immigration to Palestine under the British Mandate was to be limited to seventy-five thousand over the next five years, after which it would depend on Arab consent. This was a radical departure from the original ethos of the Balfour Declaration in support of the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine:

His Majesty's Government believe that the framers of the Mandate in which the Balfour Declaration was embodied could not have intended that Palestine should be converted into a Jewish State against the will of the Arab population of the country. His Majesty's Government therefore now declares unequivocally that it is not part of their policy that Palestine should become a Jewish State. They would indeed regard it as contrary to their obligations to the Arabs under the Mandate, as well as to the assurances which have been given to the Arab people in the past, that the Arab population of Palestine should be made the subjects of a Jewish State against their will.[5]

In the troubled summer of 1939 the British believed that Jewish support was guaranteed or unimportant in the imminent conflict with Germany. However, they feared that the Arab world might turn against them and support the Axis Powers. This strategic consideration was decisive to British policy in the region. Egypt, Iraq and Saudi Arabia were all independent and allied with Britain. Britain could not afford to lose the vital support of her Arab allies at such an important moment.

This radical change in British policy in Palestine caused anger amongst many sections of the Jewish community and a campaign of violent insurgency began by various Jewish underground organisations such as Irgun, Lehi, Haganah and Palmach against the British mandatory authorities until the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948. Amongst many other attacks two of the most serious were when Lord Moyne, British Minister of State for the Middle East, was assassinated by the Jewish insurgent group Lehi in November 1944 and when in July 1946 ninety-one people were killed and forty-six were injured in a bomb attack on the British central offices in Palestine located within the King David Hotel in Jerusalem by another insurgent organisation Irgun.

In this difficult situation and with mounting pressure from the United States to admit one hundred thousand more Jewish refugees into Palestine, but without US assistance in helping to prevent an Arab revolt on the ground, Britain was determined to give up its mandate in Palestine and placed the Question of Palestine before the United Nations, successor to the defunct League of Nations, in early 1947. As a result, the UN created UNSCOP (the UN Special Committee on Palestine) on 15 May 1947, with representatives from eleven countries. UNSCOP conducted hearings and made a general survey of the situation in Palestine, and issued its report on 31 August. Seven members (Canada, Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, Netherlands, Peru, Sweden, and Uruguay) recommended the creation of independent Arab and Jewish states, with Jerusalem to be placed under international administration. Three members (India, Iran, and Yugoslavia) supported the creation of a single federal state containing both Jewish and Arab constituent states.

On 29 November, the UN General Assembly, voting thirty-three to thirteen, with ten abstentions, adopted a resolution recommending the adoption and implementation of the Plan of Partition with Economic Union as Resolution 181 while making some adjustments to the boundaries between the two states proposed by it. The division was to take effect on the date of British withdrawal. The partition plan required that the proposed states grant full civil rights to all people within their borders, regardless of race, religion or gender. It is important to remember that the UN General Assembly is only granted the power to

make recommendations; therefore, UNGAR 181 was not legally binding. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union supported the resolution. Haiti, Liberia, and the Philippines changed their votes at the last moment after concerted pressure from the U.S. and from Zionist organisations. Predictably the five members of the Arab League, who were voting members at the time, voted against the Plan. Britain announced that it would accept the partition plan, but refused to enforce it, arguing it was not accepted by the Arabs. Britain also refused to share the administration of Palestine with the UN Palestine Commission during the transitional period. In September 1947, the British government announced that the Mandate for Palestine would end at midnight on 14 May 1948. At midnight on 14/15 May 1948 David Ben-Gurion unilaterally declared the establishment of the State of Israel. The new Jewish state was recognised immediately by the United States and soon after by a long list of countries including the Soviet Union, Iran, Guatemala, Iceland, Nicaragua, Romania and Uruguay, etc. Great Britain was not one of the first countries to officially recognise the new State of Israel doing so eight months after de facto on 29 January 1949 and then finally de jure on 28 April 1950.

In general, British foreign policy towards the newly established State of Israel can be divided up into four main periods of a varying nature. 1948-56, 1956-67, 1967-79 and finally, 1979-present. When after the Second World War Britain decided to leave Palestine and hand over the mandate, with its increasing Jewish-Arab territorial conflict, to the nascent United Nations, relations between Britain and the Zionists were severely strained. British support for the Arab status quo in the Middle East shown by Britain´s help in setting up the Arab League in March 1945 and in the 1948-49 war between Arab countries and proto-Israeli forces served only to further weaken ties between the new Israeli State and Britain. British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, in 1949 directly linked British support for Arab regimes with fundamental British interests in the region when he stated: "It would be too high a price to pay for the friendship of Israel to jeopardise, by estranging the Arabs, either the base in Egypt or Middle Eastern oil"[6].

However, by 1956, British policymakers began to look at Israel with new eyes and to regard Arab nationalism linked with the growth of Soviet influence in the region as a growing threat to British interests in the Middle East. As a result, Britain was able to use Israeli support in the Suez Crisis debacle of 1956. Despite the humiliating failure of the British, French and Israeli attempt to take back the Suez Canal from Egyptian control due to US intervention, Britain continued to view Israel as a valuable means to ensure regional stability until 1967. This was

highlighted when the British government began to sell arms to Israel for the first time in the 1960s.

Ten years later, in May 1967, Britain reversed its foreign policy support for Israel when it refused to back Israel during the crisis produced with the closure of the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping by Egypt´s Nasser. It would seem that Britain was more afraid of the potential damage "open identification with Israel might do British political and economic interests in the region" (Ibid: 11). Therefore, pragmatism would seem to be the guiding factor influencing British foreign policy in the region at this time, even allowing the British to maintain relations with Yasser Arafat, during the first years of the recently established revolutionary leftist organisation the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

With the election of the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher in May 1979, Britain´s relations with Israel started to improve even although trade relations, and especially arms sales to states in the Middle East, flourished. Britain was evidently pursuing its self-defined national interests by improving bilateral relations with Israel and at the same time selling large quantities of arms to countries like Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the communist threat to western interests in the Middle East, Britain has been able to formulate foreign policy more independently, although in general terms British governments have by and large preferred for the US to take the lead in the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) with Britain trying to keep the US focused on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in various ways through the Oslo Accords and the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1397 officially endorsing, for the first time, an independent Palestinian state in March 2002 and more recently through the Quartet´s Roadmap to Israeli-Palestinian Peace set up in Madrid in 2002. However, the results of the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections giving a majority to the radically anti-Israeli group Hamas has made the resolution of the Peace Process more difficult. Throughout all of this successive British governments have sought to act as a bridge between US and European Middle East policy. Britain´s official foreign policy toward the resolution of the decades old Arab-Israeli conflict is characterised by support for a two state policy based on the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as the future capital of both states, and a just, fair and realistic settlement for refugees. However, the British government recognises the need for the US, supported by the EU, Arab and other nations, to lead a new effort to revive the peace process in the belief that the best way to definitively resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is by means of direct negotiations between the parties.

4. Britain and Iraq

British involvement with Iraq began, as has been mentioned before, with the First World War and the post war partition of the Ottoman Empire in the region by Britain and France. Iraq was placed under formal British control in November 1920 when it became a League of Nations mandated territory with the name of the State of Iraq. The new country was quickly established by the British as a monarchy under the pro-British Hashemite King Faisal I, who had ironically been recently forced out of neighbouring Syria by the French. In their attempt to establish the new Iraqi kingdom, the British appointed Sunni Arab elites from the region for high ranking government positions, after the recent anti-British Iraqi revolt which began in the summer of 1920. The main objectives of the revolt were independence from British rule and the formation of an Arab government. Although by October 1920 the British had largely crushed the revolt, elements of it lingered on until 1922.

On the advice of King Faisal, Britain granted independence to the Kingdom of Iraq in 1932, although the British retained the use of military bases and rights of transit. After the death of King Faisal, Iraq continued as a monarchy under British influence until April 1941 when a military coup briefly overthrew the pro-British government. Fearful that Iraq and its oil reserves would fall into the hands of the Axis powers, a British military force invaded Iraq and re-established the pro-British Hashemite monarchy until another military coup definitively overthrew the monarchy and established Iraq as a republic in what was known as the 14 July Revolution. After a succession of coups, in 1968 Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr became the first Ba´ath President of Iraq with the gradual rise of General Saddam Hussein through the ranks of the movement, finally becoming Iraqi President in July 1979 shortly after the Iranian Islamic Revolution.

Saddam Hussein quickly found western favour and backing when he invaded Iran in September 1980 beginning an eight-year war with revolutionary Iran which eventually ended in a stalemate between both sides and a high cost in human lives and economic losses. In August 1990, Hussein decided to invade neighbouring Kuwait by surprise. This led to the First Gulf War when a coalition of US led forces recaptured Kuwait, but Hussein was allowed to remain in power until following the 9/11terrorist attacks in the US the Bush administration led another coalition which invaded Iraq in March 2003 under the pretext that the Hussein regime had failed to abandon its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programme in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 687

starting years of violent conflict with different groups competing for power. The claim that Hussein´s Iraq had a significant collection of WMDs was based on information provided by the CIA and British intelligence which was later shown to be unreliable and discredited.

After the revelation that the evidence supposedly held by western intelligence services about the threat to western security and interests posed by Iraq´s alleged weapons of mass destruction were false, not only British, but US policy in the region has been largely delegitimised and widely criticised in western countries for its wide ranging negative consequences for Iraq as a country and especially for the civilian population of the country with total civilian deaths since the conflict began estimated at nearly five hundred thousand[7]. The result has been a complex political landscape in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Sectarian violence has picked up once again in the country after having declined following a peak in 2007. The attempt by the US led coalition to set up a western style democracy has come across many problems due to the sectarian division between the Sunni and Shia communities and the large degree of autonomy given to the Kurds in the north. The fledgling democracy is now fighting for its very existence after the large scale incursion into Iraqi territory in June 2014 of rebel Sunni ISIS militants from the neighboring civil war in Syria. It remains to be seen if Iraq as we presently know it as a country will be able to survive in the present circumstances of chaos and rampant instability. In these circumstances, with Iraq on the brink of collapse, the legacy of, not only British, but US foreign policy in general, in the country has been dramatically negative with the Iraqi people paying a very high price for western intervention and mistakes.

5. Britain and Afghanistan

British involvement in Afghanistan began in the early nineteenth century with the so-called First Anglo-Afghan War from 1839-42. This war was one of the first important military conflicts in what was known as the "Great Game", or in other words the century long strategic competition for power and influence in the region between British India and the Russian Empire. Although British forces were initially defeated in the First Afghan War diplomatic relations were established with Afghanistan and after the Second Afghan War of 1878-80 Britain began to exert an increasing degree of influence over the country, even controlling its foreign policy. Following the Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919, Afghanistan gained the right to conduct its own foreign policy and

the Treaty of Rawalpindi was amended in November 1921 by the Lloyd George government to formally recognise Afghanistan´s independence.

From 1979 Afghanistan became a key Cold War battleground after thousands of Soviet troops invaded the country initially to "prop up" a pro-communist regime leading to a major conflict which drew in the US and Afghanistan´s neighbours. Both the Carter and Reagan US administrations actively backed and helped local anti-communist Islamic Mujahideen forces in an attempt to weaken Soviet influence in the country. Eventually, after ten years of conflict with mounting casualties and international criticism, in February 1989 the Soviets withdrew, but continued to politically support Afghan President Najibullah until 1992. It is estimated that the Afghan-Soviet War caused around one million deaths, mostly civilian and about six million refugees. British policy throughout all of this period was characterised by strong political backing by the Thatcher government for US efforts to help the anti-Soviet Mujahideen forces in the country and open diplomatic condemnation of the Soviet invasion.

After the Soviet withdrawal, the outside world rapidly lost interest while the country´s protracted civil war between conflicting local forces dragged on. The emergence of the Taliban, originally a group of Islamic scholars, as a dominant political force, brought at least a degree of much needed stability to the country after nearly two decades of conflict. However, very soon their extreme interpretation of Islam soon brought widespread criticism. Largely made up of the biggest ethnic group in the country, the Pashtuns, the Taliban were opposed by an alliance of factions from other ethnic communities from the north. The Taliban controlled about ninety percent of Afghanistan until 2001. They were only recognised as the legitimate government of Afghanistan by three countries. After the Taliban´s refusal to hand over Osama bin Laden, regarded by the US as the culprit for the September 11 attacks, the US began air strikes in October 2001, thus enabling opposition groups to overthrow the Taliban from power and initiating a long term NATO led military presence in the country which is in its final stages.

Naïve predictions of the demise of Taliban forces after the western invasion and the adoption of a new democratic constitution in 2004 proved to be premature. The Taliban extremists came back with a vengeance and violence increased. Amid a rapidly rising death toll and the increasing unpopularity amongst western voters of the conflict, mounting pressure grew for a military withdrawal of foreign forces. In 2012, NATO agreed to hand over combat duties to local Afghan forces by mid-2013 and practically all western military forces are scheduled to leave the country by December 2014 with only a small number of foreign

military trainers and advisers staying behind to train Afghan forces. Talks began with Taliban representatives in 2013 have, as yet, come to nothing and instability continues to reign in the country with the definitive results of the 2014 Presidential elections due to be announced by the end of July 2014, despite widespread accusations of fraud between both candidates and the possibility of more political instability as a result.

As in the case of Iraq, British foreign policy in Afghanistan has largely followed and supported the US led coalition and its military intervention in the country from December 2001. Whatever the initial justification for toppling the Taliban led regime in late 2001 after the September 11 attacks, western intervention has not, as yet, achieved its stated goals of fostering a stable peaceful and democratic Afghanistan. It is feared that after the December 2014 NATO military withdrawal that the Taliban opposition forces will stage a comeback with the distinct threat of taking the country back to the pre-2001 situation again. After so many years of direct intervention in Afghanistan´s affairs the western powers, including Britain, should not just wash their hands of the future of the fledgling Afghan democracy. The present chaotic situation in neighbouring Iraq clearly demonstrates the necessity of continued western support and help for recently installed democratic governments in both countries threatened by potent extremist Islamic forces. However, this western support must be careful to contribute positively to creating stability and prosperity in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Economic prosperity will lead to social and political stability and largely discredit the extremist anti-democratic Islamic forces in both countries. The West must do all in its power to help promote economic progress and prosperity as the best possible way to help the flowering and continuation of western style democracy.

6. British policy and the Arab Spring in Libya, Egypt and Syria

Although the so-called Arab Spring began in Tunisia in late 2010 and early 2011, this chapter will focus on the situation in neighbouring Libya, Egypt and in Syria where British policy and intervention has been much more active and obvious than in Tunisia.

6.1. Libya

After events related to the Arab Spring movements overthrew the autocratic and authoritarian rulers of neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt,

Libya experienced a popular revolt against the government of Muammar Gaddafi, who had ruled over Libya since 1969, beginning on 17 February 2011.The anti-Gaddafi forces were initially centred in and around the eastern city of Benghazi. Just a few days later, on the 20 February, the unrest had quickly spread westward across the country to the capital Tripoli and a week later on 27 February the National Transitional Council was established, with western support, to administer the areas of Libya under rebel control. A civil war between forces loyal to Gaddafi and the anti-Gaddafi rebels with western military and political help quickly brought about the end of the Gaddafi regime by late October 2011 with the capture and execution of Muammar Gaddafi by rebel forces.

After the fighting between both sides became more brutal in the fight for control of the country, on 17 March the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1973, with the abstentions of Russia and China, in favour of establishing a no fly zone in Libya using "all means necessary" to protect the civilian population. As a result from 19 March the NATO allies (largely the US, France and the UK) launched a large number of air strikes against the Gaddafi forces in the country. The military support provided by NATO was clearly decisive in ensuring the rapid success of the Libyan revolution and the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime. The western powers had for decades been trying to get rid of Gaddafi. The unexpected events of the Arab Spring provided a golden opportunity to help remove Gaddafi from power.

Unlike, Iraq and Afghanistan, the western powers did not send any ground troops to fight in Libya, although considerable backing and support has been given to the provisional authorities such as the National Transitional Council and from 2012 the General National Congress. Similarly, to Iraq and Afghanistan, the removal of autocratic and authoritarian regimes has produced large scale instability in the Libya with numerous regional and tribal militias competing for power. Competing militias have lined up in two main groupings of Islamist politicians and their opponents. As a result, the newly established central government has very little authority in the country and like this it is very hard to create a new, democratic state. Sectarian violence and attacks have become commonplace such as the attack on the US Consulate in Benghazi and the subsequent killing of the US Ambassador by Islamist militants in September 2012.

From mid May 2014 retired Libyan general Khalifa Haftar launched a series of air and ground attacks on Islamic militant groups in and around the eastern city of Benghazi without the authorisation of the central government and on 18 May troops loyal to Haftar stormed the parliament

in Tripoli in what looked like an attempted coup. In an attempt to reduce the spiraling sectarian violence in the country parliamentary elections were held on 25 June 2014, but less than half of registered voters turned out to vote, reflecting a widespread lack of support and uncertainties about the Libyan political situation and system. Initial indications point to a strong performance by secularist and federalist groups. The final results will not be available until sometime in July 2014.

Again, as in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, western intervention (both military and political) in Libya has been fundamental in the overthrow of a long standing and entrenched authoritarian and dictatorial regime followed by large scale political instability due to a power struggle between numerous local militias and factions competing for influence and power. The western powers, including Britain, have decisively helped bring about this new political situation in Libya and as such are responsible for ensuring, as much as possible, that Libya is helped to make a peaceful transition to a western style democratic system and social and economic progress. Without stability and social and economic progress the new Libyan political system will remain fragile and in real danger of collapse without popular support. As in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, the final outcome in Libya remains to be seen.

6.2. Egypt

In neighbouring Egypt, widespread protests against the Mubarak government began on 25 January 2011 culminating with Mubarak´s resignation on 11 February. The power vacuum was then assumed by the Egyptian armed forces with Mohamed Hussein Tantawi becoming de facto interim head of state. On 13 February 2011 the Egyptian Parliament was dissolved and the constitution suspended. A month later, on 19 March, a constitutional referendum was held and eight months later on 28 November new parliamentary elections were held in the country, the first since the fall of the Mubarak government fell. Turnout was reported as high and with no major problems. This election was proclaimed as the first honest national election in Egypt since 1952 despite some complaints of fraud. The Muslim Brotherhood Freedom and Justice Party led by Mohamed Morsi won the elections with thirty-seven point five percent of the vote. Morsi was elected President on 24 June 2012 and on 2 August 2012 Hisham Qandil, the recently appointed Prime Minister by Morsi announced a new Egyptian government which included a number of ministers from the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, by November 2012 liberal and secular groups left the Constituent Assembly in protest believing that strict Islamic laws would

be passed. When President Morsi issued a presidential decree effectively immunising his decrees from any possible challenge this led to massive protests, some of them violent, throughout Egypt. On 5 December 2012 what was reported to be the biggest ever clash, involving tens of thousands of supporters and opponents of Morsi, clashed. Six months later at the end of June 2013 massive protests were organised against President Morsi´s rule directly leading to the ousting of Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood government in a coup by the Egyptian military on 3 July 2013. The following day, Adly Mansour took office as acting President of Egypt. The presidential elections held on 26-28 May 2014 resulted in an overwhelming majority (96.6%) for Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a leading member of the Egyptian armed forces who played an instrumental role in the overthrow of Morsi, becoming Egypt´s 6th President on 8 June 2014.

Since Egypt´s new President al Sisi has taken power on 8 June 2014 we have seen a number of trials against leading members of the deposed Muslim Brotherhood and of journalists accused of publicly supporting the Muslim Brotherhood which is presently an illegal organisation in Egypt. Therefore, many western governments and observers are concerned for the human rights situation in Egypt. British foreign policy in present day Egypt is characterised by continuing concern for the building of a democratic state and society in Egypt with the unhindered rights of freedom of expression, including freedom for the media. Sectarian violence and a lack of protection for religious minorities, such as the Coptic Christian community, are of great concern as well. Forty churches were burned and twenty-three damaged in sectarian attacks in 2013. Women´s rights are also an area of British concern with a high level of sexual violence, sex trafficking and forced marriage.

This is a historic moment for Egypt and the wider Middle East region. Egypt, one of the countries at the heart of the Arab Spring, is in a process of political and economic transition. Egypt´s transition to a democratic state, although problematic, has the potential to be a role model for many other countries in the Middle East region. British policy reflects great concern and preoccupation for the democratic system to take firm root in Egyptian society and thus bring about much needed political and social stability and economic progress in a country with a very high level of unemployed educated young people. Britain has a long history of shared interests with Egypt and therefore should use its influence in order to continue to help Egypt rebuild itself and the country´s leading role in the Middle East region. A values oriented foreign policy must predominate, and not only trade interests as many times has traditionally been the case, such as the selling of arms to authoritarian regimes in the region. Britain

can help a lot of countries in the region like Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan, etc, in their transitions to democracy and social and economic progress. The historic opportunity must not be lost.

6.3. Syria

Syria was not immune to the Arab Spring which swept across many countries in the region in early 2011 and quickly led on to the ongoing civil war in the country. Syria's uprising began with largely peaceful protests against Assad's rule before turning into a civil war. The conflict has taken on strong sectarian overtones, with predominantly Sunni Muslim rebels fighting an Assad government that is dominated by Alawites, a branch of Shiite Islam. The protests in Syria began on 26 January 2011 in the capital Damascus. Anti-government protests quickly spread to other towns and cities with a harsh response from the government. The Syrian civil war is considered by many observers to have begun on 15 March 2011 in Damascus and Aleppo when mass anti-government protests took place which then quickly spread across the country to other cities. By the end of March an estimated hundred people had been killed. This was just the opening chapter of what has become a long drawn out sectarian proxy conflict which has lasted over three years causing by June 2014 what has been estimated at over 160,000 deaths, forcing more than 6.5 million people to flee their homes and some 2.7 million to leave the country[8].

In the midst of all of this fighting, the Assad government held presidential elections on 3 June 2014. Assad declared himself winner of the vote and of having obtained eighty-eight point seven percent of the votes with voting reportedly only taking place in those areas of the country controlled by government forces. President Assad had two rival election candidates in the election who, for the first time in decades, were not members of the ruling Assad family. Inevitably in such war torn circumstances, Assad´s opponents have dismissed the elections as a farce, arguing that the elections have no credibility in the midst of a civil war. Western allies of the Syrian opposition forces, such as US Secretary of State John Kerry, have also dismissed the elections as "meaningless, because you can't have an election where millions of your people don't even have an ability to vote"[9].

The events of the Arab Spring in Syria, as in Libya, have been subject to the intervention of outside forces and countries. In the case of Libya, it was the western powers, principally the US, Britain and France, who were able to intervene and topple the Gaddafi regime. However, in Syria, non-western foreign powers, like Russia in particular and regional

powers such as Iran, have also openly intervened to support the Assad government, an old ally of Moscow. Whilst the US, its western allies and Middle East regional allies, especially Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are supporting the militants operating inside Syria. So far no side in this proxy conflict has been sufficiently strong enough to end the civil war and strife quickly. Mainly due to outside intervention the Syrian conflict has dragged on for over three years with countless suffering, deaths and widespread destruction. Foreign intervention has only exacerbated the underlying sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war, largely Sunni rebel opposition forces fighting against an Alawite Shia Assad government and pro-Shia militia groups.

The sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict has recently spilled over into neighbouring Iraq. Various Sunni militias from the Syrian conflict have invaded large areas of north and western Iraq and threaten the Shia led government in the capital Baghdad. Many western observers have even questioned the very survival of neighbouring Iraq as we presently know it, if the Sunni militia advance in Iraq manages to conquer the rest of the country and the capital. As a result of the invasion by Sunni opposition militia from Syria into Iraq, both Russia and Iran have moved to support the Shia led government in Baghdad and we now have a situation where revolutionary Iran has become an ally of an initially pro-western government in Iraq. Russia has supplied the Iraqi government with fighter jets with which to attack the Sunni militia from Syria. We therefore have an escalation of the Syrian civil war into neighboring Iraq with unforeseeable consequences for the entire region and for the west as well.

Strange as it may seem, the western powers, principally the US and the UK, have openly given their support and backing to a range of opposition forces in Syria, some of whom are dominated by hardline Islamist and jihadist fighters closely linked with groups such as Al-Qaeda. The main western strategic objective would seem to be to remove Syrian president Assad from power and thus limit Iranian and Russian pretensions in the region. The invasion of Afghanistan was justified on the basis that militant Islamic groups there constituted a grave security threat to the national security of the US and the UK, especially after the 9/11 US terrorist attacks and the 7/7 London bombing attacks. Now many western journalists and commentators are rightly questioning the western support for opposition groups in Syria. What is clear from the chronic instability and strife in countries like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan is that foreign intervention has not resolved the already existing problems, but made them worse and created new problems of difficult solution.

It is to be hoped that foreign intervention in Syria brings a rapid halt to the civil war and great suffering of the population, instead of pursuing strategic interests which are not Syria´s in a new version of the Cold War and a non-declared global battle for power and influence between the US and Russia being fought in the streets of Syria and in other areas of the Middle east region.

Conclusion

British foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa region has always been characterised by the pursuit of eternal interests, just as Lord Palmerston commented in 1848. In the days of imperial glory, and before the discovery of oil, Britain´s main concern in the region was largely strategic and commercial, to safeguard the route to India and the east, especially after the opening of the Suez Canal. In more modern times, after the Second World War and Indian independence, a new world order emerged dominated by the US and the Soviet Union which had both become a new class of superpower competing with each other for influence and resources around the world in a new Cold War. Although one of the three leading victors in World War Two Britain, severely weakened after two world wars in twenty years, saw herself decline to become a second class world power. However, after 1945 British interests have largely coincided with those of the new North American superpower around the world and in the Middle East, Britain has thus found it reasonably easy to follow a foreign policy which has mainly looked for US leadership and supported US hegemony and policy. In today´s world, the main interests of the UK, are remarkably similar to those of its North American cousin and can be reduced to guaranteeing the control and supply of Middle East oil and stability in the region. In order to safeguard these two paramount western interests, western foreign policy, in particular of the US and UK, has since 1945 favoured the establishment of friendly regimes in the region which ensured the free flow of oil to western economies. Unfortunately, many of these regimes have been characterised by their authoritarian and autocratic nature and have been armed by our countries as well.

The events of the Arab Spring which began in late 2010 in Tunisia and quickly spread around the region to other countries initially represented the desire of the people of these countries for progress and democracy. Britain and the west in general must take the historic opportunity which the events unleashed by the Arab Spring in countries like Egypt, Libya and Syria represent to genuinely help these countries in their difficult transitions to democracy and economic progress. In short, a value based

foreign policy favouring democracy, human rights and economic progress must be followed with support for the ordinary people of the region in their demand for basic human rights and economic improvement. Western interests can, in the long run, be better served by following a genuine values based foreign policy rather than the decades old traditional policy of supporting friendly and obedient dictators whilst selling them large quantities of arms with which to oppress their people which has brought chaos, instability and great suffering to millions of people in countries across the region. We must not repeat the errors of the past. The lives and well-being of millions of people in the region depend on this.

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