British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring
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British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring

PHILIP LEECH and JAMIE GASKARTH

The British government’s varied responses to the popular uprisings of the “Arab Spring” have been criticised for being inconsistent and/or selective. British actions ranged from providing substantial military support for the rebels in Libya to offering notably muted reactions to government suppression of protests in Bahrain. On assuming office, the new foreign secretary, William Hague, suggested that Britain would have a networked approach to foreign policy with a greater awareness of the bilateral interests that Britain had with other countries around the world. This analysis offers a provisional examination of the security, economic, and societal networks that Britain holds with states in the Arab world and, in doing so, tests whether these have any correlation with the British government’s policy towards protests in the region.

Why did the British government respond in the way it did to the Arab Spring? This question is important, as Britain’s apparently inconsistent behaviour has been seen as evidence of unethical foreign policy-making. Its condemnation of government violence in Libya—but only muted comment on brutality in Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen—have been viewed as double standards.¹ The negative consequence of this was that British policy-makers’ use of human rights language was portrayed as a cover for national self-interest rather than genuine concern for global norms.² This had an impact in later failures to achieve an international consensus on how to react to the Syrian civil war.

Whilst not discounting the possibility of hypocrisy in British foreign policy, this analysis suggests that it cannot fully explain the nuances of Britain’s actions in this context. Former allies either did not receive support or received only non-committal commentary. Groups targeted for criticism by the British government in the past, such as Islamists, now represented symbols of a desire for emancipation. What then was the underlying logic of Britain’s response?
The phrase “Arab Spring,” first coined by Marc Lynch, has been widely adopted as a metonym for the protests of 2010–2011 across the Middle East and North Africa. While the term is open to criticism and its precise meaning contested, it here denotes the protests that took place in Arab majority states across the Middle East and North Africa; specifically, it refers to the protests between December 2010 and December 2011 in 18 of the 22 states that comprise the Arab League.

It began in December 2010 when the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old street vendor from Sisi Bouzid, Tunisia, sparked protests. Bouazizi’s act highlighted popular dissatisfaction with socio-economic hardship in Tunisia, and similar protests quickly spread across the Middle East and North Africa, toppling four long-standing regimes and leaving several others embattled. It represented a profound challenge to policy-makers in Western governments, including Britain, who had long been criticised for their alliances with undemocratic Arab governments. Yet it also afforded Britain an opportunity to bring their strategic interests in line with normative values by supporting resistance to authoritarianism.

Before examining Britain’s response to these events, it is necessary to give a more accurate and nuanced overview of the protests overall. In this context, three variables exist: the nature of the regime that existed in each Arab state prior to December 2010; the severity of protests; and the various regime responses to protests.

The relevance of the first variable—the nature of the Arab governments prior to December 2010—lay in Britain’s repeatedly stated commitment to support democratization and advance human rights. Hague argued at the time that, “the Arab Spring has shown that stability and peace cannot be attained through repression. The idea of freedom cannot be confined behind bars, however strong the lock.” Since the British government sought to identify itself as an advocate for democracy, one might expect it to favour those regimes that were more democratic than authoritarian. The other variables highlight the different levels of salience of various protests for British foreign policy-makers. For example, protests that were thinly populated and rare were considered less serious. Even in countries experiencing regular mass protests, if Arab governments acted swiftly and without seriously violating human rights, British policy-makers would be less likely to respond with undue concern. Conversely, if British concern for human rights was genuine then protests that were severe and led to widespread human rights abuses should have necessitated a policy response.

Beginning with the first variable—regime type—according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, there are two regime categories relevant to the Middle East and North Africa. The majority are “authoritarian” while only three qualify as “hybrid” regimes. Of the authoritarian governments, eight are monarchies and seven are republics. The following table presents an
TABLE 1 Regime Type in the Middle East and North Africa Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authoritarian Monarchy</th>
<th>Authoritarian Republic</th>
<th>Hybrid Regime</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain (122)</td>
<td>Algeria (125)</td>
<td>Iraq (111)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan (117)</td>
<td>Egypt (138)</td>
<td>Lebanon (86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait (114)</td>
<td>Libya (158)</td>
<td>Palestine (95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco (116)</td>
<td>Sudan (151)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qatar (137)</td>
<td>Syria (152)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia (160)</td>
<td>Tunisia (144)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Arab Emirates (148)</td>
<td>Yemen (146)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oman (143)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2 Overview of Severity of Protests and Government Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No Significant Protests</th>
<th>Some Significant Protests; No Government Concessions</th>
<th>Some Significant Protests; Some Government Concessions</th>
<th>Significant Protests; Limited Government Concessions</th>
<th>Significant Protests; Significant Rupture in the Structure of Rule</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qatar</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>Palestine</td>
<td>Oman</td>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>Bahrain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Kuwait</td>
<td></td>
<td>Egypt</td>
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<td>Libya</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tunisia</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yemen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

overview of these results—each state listed under the relevant heading while the numbers in brackets represent their index ranking.

The second and third variables are the severity of protests and the response of each government. For the sake of extrapolating information applicable to the impact on British foreign policy, these data are simplified and codified according to six categories ranging from: “no significant protests” to “significant rupture in the existing structure of rule.” This codification is necessarily broad and subjective.

There is apparently no significant correlation amongst the scale of protests, how the regime responded, and the extent to which they were authoritarian. Authoritarian governments exist across all categories of this model. Furthermore, three hybrid regimes—Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon—fall within different categories due to the different levels of government concessions granted. However, there does appear to be some relationship amongst the scale of protest, the response, and whether a regime is a monarchy or republic. In particular, the two non-Gulf monarchies—Jordan and Morocco—experienced equivalent levels of protest and reacted in a similar way. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates experienced no significant protests—although the explanation might lie in their very small native populations and relatively high per capita incomes. Meanwhile all five regimes experiencing a significant rupture in the structure of rule were
republics. Overall, authoritarian republics experienced more severe unrest than monarchies and proved more vulnerable.

The critical exception is Bahrain, which falls into the category of significant protests; limited government concessions. What distinguished Bahrain was the regime’s capacity to suppress protests—albeit with help from other Gulf Co-operation Council [GCC] states. Another important difference is how the international community received these actions. Both Libya and Syria attracted substantial criticism, spearheaded by Britain, for using force against protests. Yet for Bahrain, commentary was far more muted. Having set out a framework for understanding the Arab Spring, what was Britain’s response?

The British government issued policy statements on each Arab country between 1 December 2010 and 31 December 2011. Predicate analysis identifies the social construction of each situation by British foreign policymakers and ascertains whether the British attitude towards the government or the protestors was positive, negative, or neutral. On this evidence, the British government formulated three main types of response to protests in each country: substantial support for the protestors; substantial support for the regime; and no substantial commitment to either side. These categories summarise the British government’s overall disposition towards each situation rather than suggest British support for any particular policy. The following table presents an overview of Britain’s responses to the Arab Spring (Table 3).

Although in several cases Britain called for restraint or welcomed change, the most obvious conclusion to draw from this table is that Britain did not commit substantial support either for or against the regime in most cases. It also afforded some states assistance via the Arab Partnership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 3 British Government Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Substantial Support for the Protesters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. Since Qatar and the UAE did not suffer significant protests, neither country is included in this table.
Programme and through the EU. The tendency was to express “concern” about “reports” but otherwise remain noncommittal.

The lack of explicit action in most cases is curious given that the list contains a number of regional allies, such as Jordan, Kuwait, and Oman. However, if the death toll is a measure of the situation’s severity in each country a low number provides one explanation for Britain’s muted reaction (Table 4).13

On the evidence of fatalities alone, it appears that the majority of situations were not serious enough to compel Britain to take a position. However, Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen were notable exceptions where the death toll was high. In these cases, one might expect a firmer British stance. Furthermore, regime type does not seem by itself to have been a factor in shaping Britain’s responses, as Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and Syria were all authoritarian republics. Acknowledging this inconsistency, and given the expressed rationale for Britain’s networked foreign policy, it is possible to identify whether an underlying logic to Britain’s response can be found via a network policy analysis.

On assuming office in 2010, Hague described foreign policy as operating in a “networked world” and promised Britain would have a “networked foreign policy” to match it. On the one hand, he posited that whilst this world was becoming increasingly multilateral, it was also increasingly bilateral and made up of “networks of states with fluid and dynamic patterns of allegiance, alliance, and connections.”14 In other words, British foreign policy would largely be formed on a country-to-country basis and subject to change according to the perception of Britain’s interests at the time. This argument might go some way to explaining policy inconsistencies. Rather than policy errors, these would actually be a logical result of a more flexible policymaking approach. On the other hand, another feature of his idea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substantial Support for the Protesters</th>
<th>Substantial Support for the Established Regime</th>
<th>No Substantial Commitment to Either Side</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Libya (500–700)15</td>
<td>Bahrain (30)17</td>
<td>Algeria (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria (5000)16</td>
<td></td>
<td>Egypt (846)18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Iraq (26)19</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Jordan (1)20</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kuwait (0)</td>
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<td>Lebanon (0)</td>
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<td>Morocco (0)</td>
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<td>Oman (0)</td>
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<td>Palestine (0)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Saudi Arabia (0)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sudan (1)21</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tunisia (132)22</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yemen (2000)23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of a networked world was that policymaking went beyond government-to-government interaction. As Hague put it: “Relations between states are now no longer monopolised by Foreign Secretaries or Prime Ministers. There is now a mass of connections between individuals, civil society, businesses, pressure groups, and charitable organisations that are also part of the relations between nations and which are being rapidly accelerated by the internet.”

It is possible to see a logical tension in these two observations. One posits a sovereign actor at the centre of policy-making, adapting alliances and connections, and instrumentalising networks to serve policy ends. The other sees the state eviscerated, with a wider range of actors in play and weaker central control. To some extent, this contradiction is apparent in the public policy and governance literature from which the term derives. Some see networks as emerging from the dynamic policy world of post-industrial developed societies wherein government is less hierarchical, its machinery fragmented, and transnational and sub-state actors have proliferated. In such a scenario, governments would struggle to manipulate networks as Hague envisages because they are symptomatic of a lack of centralized authority. Alternatively, others view networks as the means for government to achieve a more real impact on outcomes than the illusion of influence under previous static modes of governance.

In this context, three network configurations are explored to see if they correlate with policy responses. Whether they do or not should tell something about the meaningfulness of the concept of a networked foreign policy, and the networks that are most influential in foreign policy-making. Before doing so, it is necessary to provide some further clarification of the concept that will be useful later in understanding the patterns of networking in operation between Britain and the Middle East and North Africa region.

Broadly defined, policy networks are patterns of interaction between governance actors and the governed. However, there is significant variation in their nature and scope. Networks can be formal or informal, temporary or longstanding. They can also differ in their institutional structure and regulation. “Tight networks” exist where membership and behaviour are highly consistent over time. In contrast, there are “issue networks,” comprising “loosely ‘organized’ collections of stakeholders.” The latter could form and disband more readily as contexts change. Therefore, it remains important to identify both of these types and see whether variation in network type corresponds with policy influence. Within Hague’s networked world, there are “tight networks” that have a long term impact on shaping policy as well as more transitory “issue networks.”

To gain a sense of the networks between Britain and the Middle East and North Africa, three kinds are examined: one largely governmental—security networks; one mixing government and private actors—economic networks; and one based on social connections—societal networks. Together, they give
a rounded sense of the military, economic, and social links between Britain and the region. It is apparent from Table 4 that in six countries—Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen—fatalities were more numerous and governments put at risk. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on these states and the correlations between those network relationships in operation and Britain’s reaction to the protests.

There is some variation in the significance and duration of British–Middle East and North Africa security networks. Egypt is arguably the most important security actor of the group. Yet, after Britain’s invasion of Egypt during the Suez crisis in 1956, bilateral relations soured and the British pursued their interests in collaboration with the United States. The United States annual provision of $1.3 billion in military aid to Egypt since 1979 underlines the importance of Egypt to their shared security goals. In a leaked 2009 cable, the American ambassador to Egypt, Margaret Scobey, stated, “President Mubarak and military leaders view our military assistance program as . . . ‘untouchable compensation’ for making and maintaining peace with Israel. The tangible benefits to our mil-mil relationship are clear: Egypt remains at peace with Israel, and the U.S. military enjoys priority access to the Suez Canal and Egyptian airspace.” By extension, Britain also enjoyed these benefits. However, independent of the United States, Britain’s specific military links with Egypt remain less easily identified. A House of Commons Library report notes: “Training or other assistance is being provided by the MoD [Ministry of Defence] to assist the Egyptian authorities develop accountable institutions, but very little detail is available.”

A Foreign and Commonwealth Office list of British foreign policy goals that rely to some extent on Egyptian co-operation includes “the Middle East Peace Process, Sudan, Iran, and nuclear non-proliferation.” The same report notes that Egypt “cooperated with the US and UK on counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation concerns.” Many of these initiatives are carried out multilaterally, as in the quartet of the European Union, United Nations [UN], United States, and Russia co-ordinating the “Road Map for Peace” since 2002, or in the E3+3—Britain, France, and Germany, plus China, Russia, and the United States—negotiating over Iran’s nuclear programme. As such, they link to broader, recent issue-based networks. Although cordial, bilateral Anglo–Egyptian security relations are not as warm as Anglo–Bahrain links.

Defence co-operation between Britain and Bahrain is substantial and longstanding, British military influence in Bahrain beginning in the 1830s. Following Bahrain’s independence in 1971, the United States took control of the British base, which is now home to the United States Navy Fifth Fleet and hosts the United States Navy’s Central Command. Critically, Bahrain supports Britain’s efforts to counter Iran’s influence in the Persian Gulf, cooperates on counter-terrorism, and engages in multinational counter-piracy. It also accommodates the Combined Maritime Forces [CMF], a multi-national naval security arrangement involving 29 states including Britain.
also houses an international counter-terrorism centre, established by Saudi Arabia. In February 2011 Hague visited naval personnel said to be “engaged in crucial counter-piracy and counter-terrorism operations” and “thanked the Foreign Minister” for Bahrain’s “very valuable cooperation in defence and security.”

There is also an Anglo–Bahrain military link via training and assistance programmes. In 2011, a Guardian report noted, “the Ministry of Defence has helped train more than 100 Bahraini military officers in the past five years at Sandhurst and other top colleges in the UK.” More controversially, for decades the head of Bahrain’s intelligence and security services was a British former colonial police officer, Ian Henderson, accused of complicity in torture allegedly conducted by Bahraini security personnel. Security and intelligence links are extensive and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website notes “frequent visits to and from Bahrain by ministers and senior members of the armed forces.” The signing of a bilateral defence co-operation accord in October 2012 is evidence of the continued strengthening of this relationship. Any rupture would have major implications for Britain’s security interests in the region as Bahrain’s hosting of major defence installations allows Britain to project influence, with allies, across the Gulf. Furthermore, its involvement with the GCC is another network that links Britain through various political initiatives such as managing the government transition in Yemen.

By contrast, British security links with Libya developed more recently. Nevertheless, they were evidently substantial. Restoration of diplomatic relations between Britain and Libya resulted from lobbying by Nelson Mandela, the South African statesman, after October 1997. On 19 December 2003, the Libyan government offered to abandon its non-conventional weapons and its ballistic missile programmes. Following this opening, the then prime minister, Tony Blair, visited Libya in March 2004 and May 2007. These meetings resulted in agreements to co-operate in “defence, counter terrorism, police co-operation and training” and “Regional security.” British security and intelligence relations in this period later proved highly controversial following allegations that Britain had shared intelligence and co-operated with operations that led to the rendition of individuals to Libya and their subsequent torture. Leaked documents indicated a close relationship between officials, although Libyan requests for co-operation were subject to some degree of caution on the part of British personnel at times. The historical legacy of Libyan support for terrorism would make these links costly in British domestic politics, particularly, the decision to repatriate the Lockerbie bomber Abdelbaset al-Megrahi.

With regard to Yemen, security links focus around countering potential terrorist threats from al-Qaeda affiliates such as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP]. The National Security Strategy notes that AQAP “came close to a successful attack against a US flight over Detroit in December
2009 and aspires to similar attacks against the UK.”44 As Yemen is a former British colony, Britain had a historical interest in its security, only withdrawing its military from South Yemen—then named Aden—in 1967 amid controversy over brutal military tactics.45 Britain co-operated closely with the government of Ali Abdullah Saleh in counter-terrorism since 2001, continuing to do so with that of his successor, Abdrabbuh Mansour al-Hadi.46 It has also trained and co-operated with the Yemeni coastguard. However, the terrorist threat to British personnel working in Yemen may have hampered deeper bilateral relations.

Security relations between Britain and Syria have been more circumspect because of mutual political antagonism. Tony Blair, the first British prime minister to visit Damascus, received a very negative reception in 2001, with President Bashar al-Assad lecturing him on civilian deaths in Afghanistan and refusing to halt support for groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and Islamic Jihad.47 Assad undertook an official visit to Britain in 2002 but disagreements remained over how to deal with issues such as terrorism and Iraq’s non-conventional weapon programmes. Intelligence co-operation was evident over threats from al-Qaeda in the last decade but broader military relations were negligible. Syria’s close relations with Russia and Iran, two Powers with which Britain has endured negative relations, have hampered closer ties.

Britain’s bilateral security links with Tunisia were, according to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, insubstantial. A report of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee [FAC] notes: “Prior to the revolution, the UK’s Embassy in Tunisia was one of our smallest in the region and the FCO described the UK’s bilateral relationship with Tunisia as ‘limited.’ It attributed this mainly to the closed nature of the Ben Ali regime.”48

In sum, from a security angle different groups and types of network exist in British relationships with each state. For Egypt, the United States is the lead partner and Britain benefits indirectly through their security relations. That relationship seems to be “issue-led,” similar to Anglo-Libyan relations where counter-terrorism dominated the agenda. Political antagonism and the corresponding alliance networks with Britain’s strategic rivals hindered Syrian relations with Britain. Meanwhile, links with Yemen and Tunisia have been largely pragmatic and based on specific security needs. Conversely, longstanding historical ties, official co-operation and training, and multi-lateral involvement in organizations such as the CMF and GCC link Bahrain and Britain. It is a firm example of a “tight network.”

Thus, the different British responses to protests in each country as part of the Arab Spring begin to make sense. The costs of alienating Bahrain, a tightly networked ally, would be far greater than Syria, with its links to rival networks. British reaction to Egypt’s protests would be likely to follow the American lead, as had its security policy in recent decades. Meanwhile, despite Britain’s developing links with Muammar Gaddafi’s regime in Libya,
it is apparent that they were new, issue-led, and involved no institutionalised commitment to a particular government. However, it is only part of the picture of British–Middle East and North Africa networked relations. Through examining economic links, a rather different pattern emerges, with some states enjoying close-networked relationships despite the apparent lack of attention from foreign policy-makers.

Economic networks shape Britain’s priorities, and energy needs play a particularly important role in Britain’s relations with the six case study states. Yet the correlation between economic networks and policy is far less clear than one might expect. According to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs agency, over the last decade Britain has enjoyed a much stronger trade relationship with Egypt and Libya than any of the other case studies states. Of the case studies states, Egypt is the main destination for British exports, with an average value of £761,743,704, rising from £464,593,070 in 2002 to a peak of £1,134,696,883 in 2010. However, since the onset of the Arab Spring, the value of British exports to Egypt fell by 2012 to £920,606,649. The states with the next highest value of exports from Britain are Libya and Tunisia, with an average annual value of £242,699,029 and £153,128,054 respectively. The value of British exports to Libya rose sharply between 2007 and 2009, from £231,990,898 to £423,498,153. This coincided with the improvement in Anglo–Libyan diplomatic relations, before collapsing as the Arab Spring began. The level of exports to Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen has been consistently lower compared to the others. For all three, there was a relative drop in the value of exports after 2010.

For imports, Britain’s relationship with Libya is the most valuable. Since 2007, imports from Libya overtook those from Egypt and their value rose dramatically. Imports from Libya reached a peak of £1,646,703,131 in 2012. During the Arab Spring, they fell from £1,290,506,028 in 2010 to £418,620,786 in 2011. Similarly, the value of imports from Egypt grew relatively steadily throughout the 2000s but fell from £792,906,718 in 2011 to £623,983,886 in 2012. The value of British imports from Tunisia, which after a period of growth, dropped significantly in 2010–2011. Meanwhile, the trade relationships between Britain and Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen were of a much lower value throughout the 2000s. Contrasting with the general trend, imports from Bahrain increased during the Arab Spring from £161,376,532 in 2010 to £253,708,663 in 2012. British trade relationships with the case study states are summarised in Table 5.

From Table 5, it is evident that the Anglo–Egyptian relationship is the most valuable, measured by both total trade and net gain. The next is Libya, as the second largest market for British exports on the list—although the balance of trade equates to a deficit larger compared to the other bilateral relations listed. Trade between Britain and Bahrain is the fourth largest in total but the second most significant in terms of net gain. If economic networks alone determined policy, one could expect either stronger British
TABLE 5 British Trade with Case Study States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Average Value of Exports from Britain 2000-11 (£)</th>
<th>Average Value of Imports to Britain 2000-11 (£)</th>
<th>British Balance of Trade 2000-11 (£)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>216,126,681.5</td>
<td>121,775,723.5</td>
<td>94,350,957.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>761,743,704.2</td>
<td>575,890,825.2</td>
<td>185,852,879</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>242,699,029.3</td>
<td>649,427,299.7</td>
<td>−406,728,270.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>90,663,504.55</td>
<td>86,643,092.55</td>
<td>4,020,412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>153,128,054.5</td>
<td>272,837,981.7</td>
<td>−119,709,927.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>69,762,103.18</td>
<td>30,568,129.55</td>
<td>39,193,973.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

support for the Egyptian regime, or a more neutral stance towards Libya. However, the response to the situation in Bahrain seems consistent with that country’s economic importance. As a net contributor to Britain’s balance of trade, and a destination for over £200 million of exports, it is a valuable economic link but arguably not so large that it demands British action in the case of unrest.

There is no obvious prima facie connexion between the total value of Britain’s trade with each case study state that can directly explain British policy during the Arab Spring. While one might expect Britain to support those governments with which it has the strongest trading relationship, it is apparent from the data that the opposite is largely true. That Britain enjoys a positive trade balance with only Bahrain and Egypt but is a net importer from the other four states, fails to account for the variation in British reactions to unrest. It suggests that the need to protect its interests in important foreign markets has not simply motivated Britain’s policy.

Since the early twentieth century, hydrocarbon resources have been a significant factor in British–Middle East and North Africa economic relations. Assuming that identifying the resources of each state and their main export markets would illuminate whether this is a factor influencing policy, the distribution of hydrocarbon reserves among the case study states is shown in Table 6.

TABLE 6 Hydrocarbon Reserves in the Middle East and North Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Oil Reserves (Billion Barrels)</th>
<th>Gas Reserves (All Products, Billion Cubic Feet)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bahrain</td>
<td>0.125</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>4.400</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>46.420</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>2.500</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia</td>
<td>0.425</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yemen</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data from the US Energy Information Administration.
Libya is the most important of these states for supplying Europe’s energy needs. In 2010, 4 percent of Libya’s oil exports went directly to Britain, 27 percent to Italy, 16 percent to France, 10 percent to Germany, 10 percent to Spain and 5 percent to Greece. There are also a number of oil refineries run by the Libyan state-owned petrol group, Tamoil, throughout Europe. According to the United States government’s Energy Information Administration [EIA], “Most of Libya’s natural gas exports are transported via pipeline to Europe, with small volumes also shipped in the form of liquefied natural gas.” Although not in the same league as Libya, Syria enjoys a reasonable wealth of hydrocarbon resources. However, Syria’s crude oil is heavy, making it more expensive to process and therefore less attractive to buyers. According to the EIA, in the 12 months before the beginning of Syria’s protests in March 2011, 99 percent of its oil exports went to Europe—$3.6 billion worth in 2011. Exports to Europe were cut harshly because of the EU’s trade sanctions that came into effect as the civil war escalated.

In other words, prior to the Arab Spring, Libya and Syria were important energy suppliers to Europe. By contrast, the second largest holder of hydrocarbon reserves in the group, Egypt, sends only 39 percent of its gas exports to Europe, with most of its oil exports going to the United States (32 percent) and India (46 percent). For Yemen, too, the third largest exporter, most of its petroleum comes through an integrated pipeline network to Asia.

Therefore, contrary to common narratives about Western intentions in the region, it is hard to make a simple case that a desire to maintain access to oil and gas supplies solely motivated British foreign policy. Libya was the largest supplier of hydrocarbons to Europe out of all the case study states. Yet it was against the Libyan regime that the British government took its hardest line. By contrast, Bahrain—the state with which Britain has maintained the closest ties—is much less significant in terms of hydrocarbon supplies. Although, Bahrain’s importance in hosting the naval vessels used to protect the sea-lanes in the Persian Gulf, vital to maintaining global energy needs, means that it does have an indirect significance for Britain in the energy field.

Arms sales represent one area of economic activity that transverses security and economic networks. The Middle East and North Africa is a key market for Britain’s arms industry. According to a FAC report, the Middle East and North Africa region accounts for over 50 percent of the total value of Britain’s arms sales in the past decade. Moreover, the British government has risked political criticism to promote arms sales, as when Prime Minister David Cameron led a trade delegation to Kuwait on 20–23 February 2011 containing at least seven representatives of arms manufacturing companies. Immediately after this visit, Cameron went to Cairo to offer support and congratulations following the fall of the Mubarak regime. But the juxtaposition of these two visits meant, according to the FAC, that “the goodwill that could have been generated by a Prime Ministerial visit to the region at
such a critical time was somewhat squandered.\textsuperscript{61} In other words, the British government appeared willing to promote arms sales, even at the expense of its image as an advocate of democracy.

Given the support afforded to arms sales, was there any correlation between their value and British responses to the Arab Spring?

The evidence shown in Table 7 suggests a similar conclusion as the more general economic and hydrocarbon relationships. Based on the value of exports, Britain’s arms industry has a much better developed relationship with Egypt, Libya, and, to a lesser extent, Bahrain than the other case study states. Yet while Libya was the second most valuable market for British arms, a high number of licences were revoked, suggesting that this relationship was considered less politically valuable than that between Britain and Egypt or Bahrain. In sum, there is a clear discrepancy between the economic importance of these states and Britain’s political response to protests. Egypt and Libya have larger economic links with Britain than the other states in terms of trade, energy, and arms sales. Yet Britain offered muted comment on events in Egypt compared to its forceful response against Libya. Meanwhile, Bahrain, whose resources are small and total value of trade only fourth out of the six states, received the most support from Britain.

In a globalised world, the sheer extent of the societal networks between Britain and these six states makes it impossible to give more than an overview of their primary drivers. Nonetheless, it is possible to focus upon three categories. First, the expectation exists that the nature and scope of elite interaction might influence the tone and character of bilateral relations. Secondly, wider social interactions such as hosting diaspora communities, visitors to and from Britain, and media reporting indicate the extent of communal and personal links between British citizens and these states. Lastly, if British-based non-governmental organisations [NGOs] are drawing attention to a particular state then that may imply an emotional connexion or pre-existing social network, although such a supposition is hard to verify.

Elite inter-actions take a range of forms. Starting at the top with official state visits, none of the six case study states received such visits in the last two decades. However, Queen Elizabeth did host Hosni Mubarak in 1991 and

\begin{table*}[h]
\centering
\caption{Arms Exports (2011)}
\begin{tabular}{lll}
\hline
Case Study & Arms Exports (Value)\textsuperscript{56} & Export Licences Revoked\textsuperscript{57} & Extant Licences that Remain (2013)\textsuperscript{58} \\
\hline
Bahrain & 13,630,375 & 45\textsuperscript{59} & 105 \\
Egypt & 59,073,314 & 47\textsuperscript{60} & 134 \\
Libya & 54,583,388 & 72 & 49 \\
Syria & 143,867 & 1 & 3 \\
Tunisia & 7,062,299 & 1 & 51 \\
Yemen & 64,784 & 0 & 10 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table*}
King Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa of Bahrain in 1984. Perhaps significantly, since Saudi Arabia intervened in Bahrain as part of the GCC forces, Britain hosted an official state visit for Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud in 2007. Controversially, the rulers of both Bahrain and Saudi Arabia were guests at a lunch for the Queen’s sixtieth jubilee in 2012. Following the visit, the Bahraini royal family donated £3 million to the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

In the cases of Egyptian and Syrian elites, some family links did exist with Britain. Suzanne Mubarak—the wife of the ousted Egyptian president—is one-half-British; and Gamal Mubarak, their second son and formally deputy secretary general of the National Democratic Party, was a dual citizen and self-proclaimed “Anglophile.” The Syrian ruling family also holds connections with Britain. In particular, Bashar al-Assad studied ophthalmology in London and married Asma al-Akhras, a British citizen of Syrian extraction in 2006.

Beyond the ties of blood and family interest, there are regular elite visits between parliamentarians and officials from each country. For example, while prime minister, Tony Blair holidayed in Sharm el-Sheikh, at least one visit paid for by the Egyptian regime. One indicator of elite interest in a particular state is the existence of an All Party Parliamentary Group, facilitating links between MPs and the state in question. Of the six countries, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria have groups; Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen do not. In the parliamentary vote on military action in Syria in August 2013, nine Conservative MPs who voted against the government had received hospitality from the Syrian government in the previous decade.

Yemeni governments have had formal diplomatic support from Britain and regular interaction at the highest level. In January 2010 at a London meeting, the Friends of Yemen group emerged to promote international interest and action on Yemen’s security, governance, and development needs. From the involvement of 20 states at the March 2010 meeting, it grew by 2013 to 39 states and international organizations. Yet there is less evidence of familial or cultural exchange compared to the other states in question. For the Tunisian elite, engagement was primarily with France as the former colonial Power.

Civil society links between Britain and Libya were sparse, fragmented, and controversial. Britain had hosted opposition figures, including members of the Libyan Islamic Fighters Group. As part of its diplomatic effort to bring Libya back into the international community, the British government had supported cultural and educational relations. In 2008, Gaddafi’s son, Saif al-Islam, received a PhD from the London School of Economics [LSE]. Months later, a charity run by Saif al-Islam pledged a donation of £1.5 million to the School. In addition, the Woolf Inquiry into the affair recorded that the commercial subsidiary of the LSE was awarded a £2.2 million contract to train Libyan civil servants by the Libyan Economic Development Board.
same period, the University of Huddersfield also trained 103 Libyan police officers in forensic science. However, due to the legacy of antagonism between Libya and Britain, bilateral relations were limited and did not reach a critical mass reflecting significant cultural interchange. In other words, it remained a loose network based on opportunity rather than any broad based desire to increase interactions.

The size and nature of diaspora communities in Britain has a bearing on foreign policy decisions. The British government does not provide country-based statistics on the economic prosperity of immigrant communities, but the Office for National Statistics does give an estimate of the number of British residents born in each country. In 2011, this was: of Bahraini origin 6,000; Egyptian 29,000; Libyan 20,000; Syrian 10,000; Tunisian 9,000; and Yemeni 16,000. The small size of these communities makes it unlikely that they could have a significant impact on British policy.

Egypt ranked fifty-third and Bahrain fifty-fifth in terms of numbers of visitors to Britain. The other four countries are not recorded, which suggests that the quantity is insignificant. Combining length of stay, number of visits, and average spending, Egypt ranks fifty-fourth and Bahrain sixty-third. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Egypt was the most popular destination for Britons with around 1.5 million visitors in 2010. Tunisia attracted 420,000 visitors in 2010. Data regarding Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, or Syria are not obtainable, suggesting a low number of British visitors. These figures indicate that substantial numbers of British people have visited Egypt and Tunisia, thus, gaining some personal experience of their cultures and societies. For its size, Bahrain is a significant net contributor to tourism revenues but is low in the list of overall numbers of visitors to Britain and average spending compared to other countries globally.

A further indication of societal links between Britain and these six states is the number of times the media mentions each. To gain a sense of this element, the Lexis library search of British broadsheet newspapers between 1 January and 31 December 2010 is helpful. Although not comprehensive, this data can offer a snapshot of how much each state figured in public discourse prior to the Arab Spring: Bahrain received 903 mentions, Egypt 1000, Libya 1066, Syria 1141, Tunisia 561, and Yemen 1209. Considering the large number of British visitors to Egypt each year, the fact that more mentions were made of Yemen, Syria, and Libya is surprising. Bahrain also attracts considerably more attention than Tunisia, perhaps reflecting the closer relationship in security networks and, at the elite level, more than the actual level of interactions between citizens of these countries.

The last snapshot of societal inter-actions between Britain and the six states is NGO attention. NGOs are often portrayed as important civil society actors that help frame foreign policy discourses. The relative attention that each state receives from prominent NGOs may be a further indication of
underlying social networks. To gain a sense of NGO attention to each situation, the websites of Amnesty International [Amnesty] and Human Rights Watch [HRW] are helpful to see if differing levels of NGO attention between 2010 and 2011 correlate with British government responses.

For 2011, the Amnesty UK website lists 32 statements that directly discuss the crisis in Bahrain as well as references to the Bahrain crisis in 10 other statements. Amnesty also made direct or indirect reference to Britain’s Bahrain policy in several of its statements. On Libya, it published 42 statements in 2011 and mentioned the crisis in several other reports. Between January and September, the majority of Amnesty’s statements discussed apparent human rights abuses by the regime and called for the protection of civilians. Prior to the beginning of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation military intervention, Amnesty claimed that the British government might have failed in its responsibility to ensure British-produced weapons would not be used for the abuse of human rights and that the international community had failed the Libyan people through neglect.

Amnesty’s website had 42 pages on Egypt in 2011. These were generally critical of human rights abuses under both the Mubarak regime and following his removal, when the military governed Egypt. Amnesty is critical of both American and British supply of weaponry and materiel to Egypt. On Syria, Amnesty produced 50 statements and was consistently critical of the regime. However, Amnesty directed the vast majority of its statements regarding the role of external actors at international institutions such as the UN or the Arab League. Based on the number of webpages dedicated to each crisis, Amnesty showed considerably less interest in Tunisia (10 pages) and Yemen (16 pages). In short, Amnesty lobbied harder on the cases of Bahrain and Egypt than the others. It may be because Amnesty supported British policy in other cases—Syria and Libya—or paid them less attention, as in Tunisia and Yemen.

Meanwhile, HRW produced the following number of statements on the six countries during 2011: Bahrain, 60; Egypt, 86; Libya, 114; Syria, 61; Tunisia, 32; and Yemen, 52. The majority of these tended to report on events occurring within those states and the main lobbying target was the United States, not Britain. However, HRW issued an audio statement on British policy in November, and it made submissions to the FAC that highlighted potential conflicts between ministerial support for arms sales and the British government’s commitment to human rights.

Looking at the broad trends of reporting by these NGOs, there does seem to be a correlation with the British government’s responses. Tunisia and Yemen attracted less attention from Amnesty and HRW than the others did. Libya was the subject of much comment by both organisations and was the focus of considerable British action. The situation in Syria was reported more prominently by Amnesty than HRW, with the latter paying relatively
more attention to Egypt. Given the overall emphasis on Egypt, one might have expected more commentary on this situation from Britain.

However, Bahrain is more anomalous. In evidence to the FAC, David Mepham, the London director of HRW, complained that Britain had “not been tough enough, frankly, on Bahrain,” stating, “the UK is also a little bit selective. It puts more emphasis on Syria than it does on Bahrain or Yemen.” Bearing in mind the death tolls in each case—Table 4—this conclusion perhaps makes sense. Yet Amnesty and HRW both gave the situation in Bahrain considerable attention suggesting that it was a real concern of human rights advocates. In that light, British support for Bahrain stands out as contrary to these efforts.

Taken together, these brief explorations of societal links between Britain and the six states produces variations in the nature of networked relations. Clearly, Bahrain has very substantial elite interactions. Whilst Bahrain’s diaspora is small, NGO attention was strong on this issue, implying that it should have had considerable salience with policy-makers, who would have had to manage elite expectations about maintaining their links with a government that was not living up to Britain’s expressed human rights standards. Societal links with Syria and Yemen were sparse, and Libya’s compromised by the Gaddafi regime’s support for terrorism. Egypt and Tunisia were prominent tourist destinations but do not seem linked to Britain into tight societal networks, perhaps because other states—the United States and France—were preferred partners.

This analysis explored Britain’s response to the Arab Spring and questioned how far this might have been shaped by its security, economic, and societal networks with the region. Six states stand out as experiencing a different order of protest: Bahrain, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen. Britain gave Bahrain’s government substantial political support despite criticism from NGOs and the media. By contrast, for Libya and Syria, it offered strident criticism of the regimes and sought diplomatic and military action. With regard to Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, it offered little substantial action at all. Hague had promised a networked foreign policy for a networked world. This analysis aimed to determine if any correlations could be found, either within or across these networks, with British government policy.

The nature of Britain’s security networks with each state bears a much closer correlation with government policy than with each of the other two networks. For instance, in relation to the question: why did Britain not react to Bahrain’s suppression of protests by either remaining neutral or adopting a more critical attitude as in the other cases? There existed a substantial security relationship and heavy interaction at the elite societal level. Whilst Britain’s economic networks with Bahrain may be small and wider societal links less significant, that this security relationship is valued at the highest echelons of British society is longstanding and a concern in the “high politics” arena of security perhaps explains its duration despite human rights concerns.
Conversely, with regard to the active condemnation of the Syrian and Libyan governments, perhaps the looseness of societal and security ties between these states and Britain enabled this reaction. Although Libya had faltering interactions at the elite level, they were highly controversial. Its economic and security relations with Britain were significant but relatively new and perhaps constituted a “loose network” of an opportunistic nature. Moreover, the key individual security contact, Moussa Koussa, abandoned the Gaddafi regime in March 2011; and through this link, British officials may have been aware of the fragility of support for Gaddafi.

Meanwhile, the more passive British response to the Egyptian protests is understandable given the backseat that Cairo had taken with regard to security links. The sheer number of British visitors to the country, NGO attention, and size of the economic relationship between Egypt and Britain relative to the other states would seem to have required a more firm response to the crisis. That it was not forthcoming is perhaps telling with regard to which networks were most significant in shaping policy priorities at this time.

Overall, then, the nature of the security network in each case correlates more closely with the British government’s response to each situation than the economic or societal networks, implying that security priorities more than economic or social pressures shaped British policy towards the region. However, there is little evidence that such links are co-ordinated by central government in the instrumental fashion implied by Hague’s idea of a networked foreign policy. It is possible that the ad hoc nature of British policy was a reflection of both London’s dialogue with each state and how the target state was likely to respond to different forms of persuasion. A more convincing explanation seems to be that these networks are resistant to governmental influence and that policy failed to identify and pursue a coherent set of interests within them. Although each network has been explored separately here, in reality they intersect and permeate each other in ways that undermine efforts to co-ordinate any one of them in the service of a state’s policy goals. The result is that networked foreign policy, arguably, is no policy at all.

NOTES
British Foreign Policy and the Arab Spring

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3. These are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq—excluding the autonomous Kurdish region—Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine—the areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority—Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Excluded are Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, and Somalia.


6. The definition of policy statements excluded purely technical matters such as travel advice or explanations of evacuation arrangements. Rather, the text had to offer some value judgment, a political comment on the situation in each country, or an explanation of Britain’s policy position.


20. Ibid.


24. Ibid.
25. Roderick Rhodes, Understanding Governance: Policy Networks, Governance, Reflexivity and Accountability (Buckingham, Bristol, PA, 1997).


32. Ibid.


42. House of Commons Debates, Hansard (12 October 2009), Column 41W: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm091012/text/91012w0009.htm#09101240000628.


48. Foreign Affairs Committee, Foreign and the “Arab Spring,” 56.
49. All data in the following three paragraphs retrieved from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs website. UK Trade Information: https://www.uktradeinfo.com/Statistics/Build YourOwn Tables/Tables.aspx.


55. Foreign Affairs Committee, Foreign Policy and the “Arab Spring,” 40.

56. The government issues both Standard Individual and Open Individual Export Licences. This data relates only the standard licenses. The report notes, “the Government does not provide values for OIELs because of their open nature.” House of Commons, Committees on Arms Export Controls: Memorandum from the Chair to the Committees, Volume 2 (1 July 2012), 208: http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/other-committees/committee-on-arms-export-controls/publications/.

57. Ibid., 205.

58. Ibid., 490–566.

59. Thirty-six were licences for Bahrain, 2 were licences to Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and 4 were licences to Bahrain/Egypt.

60. Forty-three were licences to Egypt, 4 were licences to Bahrain/Egypt.

61. Ibid., 42–43.


64. “Sandhurst Accepts Bahrain Donation,” Gulf States Newsletter (13 September 2012).


72. Ibid., 24.


74. Wilson Center, Global Europe Program, “Four Types of Diaspora Mobilization: Albanian Diaspora Activism for Kosovo Independence in the US and the UK,” (Washington, DC,

75. This data derives from http://www.visitbritain.org/insightsandstatistics/.


78. The authors are grateful to Amanda Southam for obtaining this data.


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