The Historical Materialist Perspective on British Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa: Implications for the Arab Uprisings

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Introduction

In his annual keynote speech at Mansion House in May 2011, the Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

“The eruption of democracy movements across the Middle East and North Africa is, even in its early stages, the most important development of the early 21st century, with potential long term consequences greater than either 9/11 or the global financial crisis in 2008” (Hague:2011).

One of the key concerns of historical materialist theory is to explain the relationship between states of the global north (the developed world), such as Britain, and states of the global south (the developing world), such as those in the Middle East and North Africa. North-south relations are understood as being defined by the capitalist international political economy, and as a form of imperialism maintained by a transnationally oriented elite in both the north and the south. Therefore, mass movements demanding democracy in the south are expected to be treated by such elites, and by states of the global north, as a potential threat to established relations of power and class. Such threats are particularly grave if manifested in the Arab world, a region of major strategic significance. Hence, the developments described by Hague are of direct significance to this theoretical perspective.

The Arab uprisings, which commenced in Tunisia in December 2010 and quickly spread across the Middle East and North Africa, remain very much an on-going process. This is true not only in Syria and Bahrain, where popular challenges to authoritarian governments continue, but also in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, where the fall of the previous regime has opened a new historical chapter in which various social and political forces contest the future of the state. These struggles could take many years to resolve, and it is probably too early to draw any firm conclusions in terms of the extent to which a given theory of international relations can explain the nature of Britain’s response to them.
Instead, what this paper will set out is, firstly, an account of the way in which the historical materialist theory of international relations applies to British foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa, and secondly, some suggestions regarding how we will be able to tell if Britain’s response to these uprisings and their outcomes conforms with the expectations of the theory. Readers will then be able to take this theoretical perspective and its hypotheses away with them, to bear in mind as we watch these events unfold over the coming months and years.

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**Historical Materialism and British Foreign Policy in the Middle East**

This section will describe how historical materialist theory applies to British foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa, and generate from there a broad theoretical expectation of how Britain will respond to the Arab uprisings.

In summary: historical materialism sees British foreign policy as committed to a capitalist international political economy, managed by a transnationally oriented elite under the auspices of the United States, to whose leadership Britain is closely allied. As a key energy-producing region, the Middle East is seen as a major strategic prize, highly valued by the system of power of which the British state is a part. Britain therefore helps to maintain a US-led, conservative regional order conducive to the interests of that broader international system. Challenges to the rule of regional allies, including from pro-democracy movements, are regarded as threatening to the extent that they raise the prospect of the states in question moving off in an independent direction. Therefore, in response to the Arab uprisings, historical materialism expects Britain to maintain its support for the status quo, or to influence any reforms and transitions that do occur so as to protect its interests, by helping to limit the reach of popular democratisation where necessary. Uprisings against non-allied regimes will be viewed more positively, to the extent that they may result in the emergence of more friendly replacements.
This section will begin by defining what is meant by historical materialism, set out its core propositions, and explain how these are applied to the inter-relation between globalisation, imperialism and the state. It will then describe the manifestation of these relations in the present day, as defined by the “Pax Americana”, and identify Britain’s role within it. A description of the nature of US and British foreign policy towards the Middle East and North Africa will then be set out, and from this will be derived a historical materialist expectation of how Britain will respond to the Arab uprisings.

Defining historical materialism

For the present purposes, historical materialism should not be understood as referring exclusively to Marx’s or Marxism’s conception of the term, but rather as embracing any scholarship that, as per Herring’s definition,

“…sees human history, politics and subjectivity as being influenced within historical epochs (currently capitalism) by particular forms of the ownership and control of the production of goods and services and associated class conflict. [Historical materialism] sees the economic and the political as inseparable, does not assert that economics determines everything else, considers the possibility that human subjectivity plays a significant role, produces historically specific analyses rather than supposedly universal generalisations and draws on the insights of other theoretical perspectives” (Herring:2010:1)

Overbeek identifies the key features of the historical materialist view of international political economy as follows (Overbeek:2000):

- Socio-economic classes are formed through relations of economic production;
- The class interests of the dominant group are articulated through a political ideology which becomes the “common sense” of the prevailing discourse;
- The hegemony of the ruling class is achieved through a balance of coercion and consent, with the dominant ideology forming the basis of the consensual element.
The freer the society in question, the greater the hegemonic reach of that dominant ideology will have to be in order to bind people to the social order in sufficient numbers so as to keep that order stable. Coercion becomes necessary to the extent that consent does not exist;

- State structures and civil society configurations are formed and reformed in accordance with the dominant ideology and with the given balance of coercion and consent;
- The dynamics described above generalise internationally, producing additional layers wherein systems of global governance (the Bretton Woods institutions, NATO, etc.) and powerful states emerge to play a hegemonic and disciplinary role in the transnational system;
- These various elements are seen as mutually constitutive, continually reproducing each other, rather than being linked by unidirectional, linear chains of cause and effect.

Globalisation, Imperialism and the State

Historical materialist theory integrates particular conceptualisations of globalisation, imperialism and the state. In terms of globalisation, as Michael Cox notes, “the apparently novel thesis that national economies have become mere regions of the global economy and that the productive forces have expanded far beyond the boundaries of the nation state, is not novel at all”, its fundamentals having been set out by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in “The Communist Manifesto” (M.Cox:1998:451; Marx & Engels:2004). Subsequent historical materialists established the basic proposition that the globalisation of capitalism is an imperialist project, intimately bound up with and driven by the interests of economic elites and the leading states of the global north (Lenin:1995). This stands in contrast to the more benign, liberal conception of internationalism and free-trade (Linklater:2005:138).

Historical materialists regard the state as being integrated into and thus reflecting the balance of social power in the broader capitalist political economy. The state is penetrated by ruling class interests and yet, while playing a role complementary to those interests, does
so in a distinct and autonomous way. Specifically, the state manages class conflicts, absorbs challenges to the system, and performs a management function in the interests of the system as a whole (Linklater:2005:136; Dunleavy & O’Leary:1987:203-270; Hay:2008, and for a UK-specific analysis, Miliband:1969 and Miliband:1982). The leading states and inter-state institutions of the global north perform this role at an international level.

Robert Cox describes globalised capitalism, imperialism and the state as tied together in an international system comprising a three-level configuration of social forces, states and world orders, with each element acting and developing in such a way as to reproduce the others, and the system as a whole (Cox:1986). The relationship between productive and class relations, governing institutions, and the balance of power internationally is a mutually constitutive one. Central to this, as noted above, was the Gramscian notion of consent, whereby the system holds together because it has acquired a sufficient degree of legitimacy, not merely within the state and ruling class of the leading nation, but across a range of power-centres, decision-makers and social classes internationally. Arrighi takes up this theme, describing how the global political economy has passed, in the modern era, from one period of hegemony to another, with the pax britannica of the nineteenth century being replaced by the middle of the twentieth century with the pax americana. The pax americana epoch of global capitalism is the historical framework under which modern British foreign policy towards global south regions such as the Arab world occurs, according to historical materialism (Arrighi:1994; see also Arrighi & Silver:2003).

**British foreign policy under the Pax Americana**

Historical materialists have documented the imperial nature of US power from its inception, first in the North American continent, and later throughout the Western Hemisphere and into the Pacific (Chomsky:1993; Grandin:2006; Zinn:2005). Stokes notes that, with Washington finding itself in a unique position of strength at the end of the Second World War, “the post-war US national interest was articulated around a dual vision; the maintenance and defence of an economically open international system conducive to capital penetration and circulation coupled with a concomitant global geo-strategy of
containing social forces considered inimical to capitalism, including but extending far beyond alleged Soviet-aligned communists” (Stokes:2005:221; see also Chomsky:1991:45-64).

Echoing Arrighi and Robert Cox, Stokes describes how “US planners constructed a liberal international economic order integrated with (and largely beneficial to) other leading capitalist powers under the tutelage of the US state……US hegemony relied upon consent as well as force” (Stokes:2005:222). The balance between consent and coercion was radically different from the global north to the global south. In the latter, largely acting through “pre-existing state structures and local ruling classes”, the US was prepared to act forcefully to deal with the threat of “indigenous nationalisms that looked likely to terminate the incorporation of markets on terms favourable to Western capital or to present potentially alternative models of non-capitalist development” (Stokes:2005:222-223; see also Chomsky:1991, Grandin:2006 with reference to Latin America; and Blakeley:2009 on the use of state terrorism to advance such policies). So while broad consent is recognised by historical materialists as a crucial element of US hegemony, their view remains at odds with the more benign view held by liberals of the nature of Western power. Relations between the capitalist core and the global south (of which the Arab world is understood to be a part) are seen as often exploitative, coercive and violent.

Britain and its foreign policies are understood by historical materialists in the context of the UK’s position as a member state of the consenting core of major capitalist powers under US hegemony. The nature of the relationship is illustrated by the way in which the transition from the pax britannica to the pax americana proceeded. Andrew Gamble though not a historical materialist himself, describes that process in a way that historical materialists would certainly recognise (2002).

“As collaboration between [Britain and the US] developed [in the first half of the twentieth century], an influential strand of British political opinion came to designate the United States not just as Britain’s partner but as its natural successor to the leading role in the world system”
“These elites were motivated partly by cultural and ideological affinities, but also by the perception that both states shared an interest in promoting the conditions for a liberal international order. There [was] … sufficient common ground [between them] to make collaboration possible and to encourage the idea, particularly on the British side, of a project to transfer the role and responsibilities which Britain had once exercised as a hegemonic power to the United States. In this way, a transfer of hegemony was engineered between the two powers, which rested on collaboration rather than conflict. …. The decisive historical choice, which Britain made in 1940…was in favour of …. an open world economy – which required the acceptance of United States leadership. … The importance of being at the heart of an expanding world economy was in the end judged more important than the preservation of a regional sphere of interest” (Gamble:2002).

London has sought to maximise its influence within the new US-led order in the post-war era in a number of ways. The City of London remains at the heart of global finance, and HM Treasury and the Bank of England have worked in concert with the financial sector to promote the latter’s interests internationally (Baker:1999). Britain’s membership of NATO, its role as a leading arms exporter, its status as one of the main second-order military powers, and its possession (with crucial American assistance – see Plesch:2006) of nuclear weapons, all afford it a seat at the table in respect of major global security issues (Curtis:2003:101-119,180-206; Ritchie:2010). Its simultaneous membership of the EU and closeness to Washington also give it a central role in discussions between the core capitalist states (as this applies to the Middle East today, see Hollis:2010:36-37).

As the leading contemporary historical materialist focusing on British foreign policy today, the historian Mark Curtis has documented the role Britain has played in the global south during this period, dealing coercively with threats to the US-led order as and when they arise, and advocating in the international economic forums for the advancement of global capitalist interests and the integration of the south into that transnational system (Curtis:2003; Curtis:2004: Curtis:2010). British foreign policy in the Middle East falls under
the heading of its relations to the global south, and, as ever, the role that it plays is complementary to US strategy. Next, I will outline that American strategy, and then describe how British policy fits into it.

**US strategy in the Arab world, and the British role**

Achcar quotes Chomsky summarising the historical materialist view of the significance of the Middle East to US imperial strategy:

“…the major interest lies in the energy reserves of the region, primarily in the Arabian peninsula. A State Department analysis of 1945 described Saudi Arabia as “a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in world history.” The US was committed to win and keep this prize” (Chomsky cited in Achcar:2004:18).

The exceptional material and strategic value of this region means that maintaining US influence and power there is key to Washington’s ability to wield power on the global stage (Achcar & Chomsky:2007:54-55; Stokes:2005:230). To the extent that it values American pre-eminence in the world, Britain shares this strategic goal.

The US-led order in the Middle East comprises of two layers, the first having been put in place by the British in the early part of the twentieth century, and described by foreign secretary Lord Curzon as an “Arab façade”, whereby states with conservative and repressive Arab rulers would be governed in the interests of the British Empire and its allied local elites, rather than by the populations of those countries (Curzon quoted in Achcar & Chomsky:2007:55; see also Curtis:2003:253-269, Hollis:2010:5-16 and Onley:2005). The United States later added a second layer of “peripheral gendarmes”, comprising Turkey, Israel and Iran under the Shah: militarily powerful non-Arab states capable of deterring moves towards independence in the region. Israel in particular demonstrated its worth in this regard when it dealt a devastating blow to President Nassar’s Egypt in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war (Achcar & Chomsky:2007:56; see also Achcar:2004:19-24).
From the mid-twentieth century, Britain’s regional interests increasingly aligned with those of Washington (Curtis:2003:253-284; Hollis:2010:17-29). As Curtis notes,

Oil is, of course, the fundamental Anglo-American interest in the Middle East, and was described by British planners in 1947 as “a vital prize for any power interested in world influence or domination”. “We must at all costs maintain control of this oil”, British foreign secretary Selwyn Lloyd noted in 1956. ... Oil is designated to be controlled by Western allies in the Middle East to ensure that industry profits accrue to Western companies and are invested in Western economies. A traditional threat in the past has been that the nationalist regimes would use oil wealth primarily to benefit local populations and to build up independent sources of power to challenge US domination over the region. Traditionally, such regimes have been overthrown or prevented from arising by British and US power. (Curtis:2003:15-16)

To this end, historical materialists such as Curtis note that Britain has long supported the conservative order in the Middle East – both the core Arab states and “peripheral gendarmes” - not least with arms sales and training of local security states (Curtis:2003:253-269). It has intervened where nationalist challenges threatened that order, notably in Iran in 1953, Egypt in 1956, Oman from 1957-1959, Yemen from 1962-1970, and Aden from 1964-1967, (Curtis:2003:270-284, 303-315; Curtis:2004:288-309).

**Democracy promotion**

Historical materialists dispute the notion that the US and Britain sought to promote democracy in the Middle East during the era of George W Bush and Tony Blair. Robinson argues that, while the notion of “...‘democracy promotion’...plays a key legitimating function” in Western foreign policy, what is favoured, in effect,
“...is more accurately termed polyarchy ... a system in which a small group actually rules on behalf of (transnational) capital and mass participation in decision-making is limited to choosing among competing elites in tightly controlled electoral processes” (Robinson:2006:441,442).

For historical materialists, the post-2003 Iraqi state and governing elite was formed under Western occupation and tutelage in such a way as to be penetrated by, and thus to represent, the will of the United States and the interests of the globalised economic order in Iraq (Herring & Rangwala:2005; Klein:2008:323-382). A government representing the sovereign will of the Iraqi people would be undesirable since, as Achcar observes:

“There are no reliable US allies in Iraq with any real credibility among, not to speak of ideological hegemony over, the great Arab majority of the population. Iraq, like other Middle Eastern countries, thus only confirms what Samuel Huntington called “the democracy paradox: adoption by non-Western societies of Western democratic institutions encourages and gives access to power to nativist and anti-Western political movements””.

Achcar continues: “This is a “paradox” in any event only in the eyes of those who believe that democracy goes hand in hand with submission to the West”. Given the history, and the current backing for non-democratic regimes, he says, “it is entirely natural that if the majority of the people could express itself freely and truthfully at the ballot box in Muslim countries, it would elect governments hostile to Western domination” (Achcar:2004:42-43). This observation is of fundamental importance to expectation of the British response to the Arab uprisings formulated under historical materialist theory.

How historical materialism would expect Britain to respond to the Arab uprisings

The following expectation of how Britain might respond to the Arab uprisings can be generated from the above review of historical materialist theory as it pertains to British foreign policy in the Arab world
Given Western power’s lack of legitimacy amongst the Arab peoples – as described by Achcar - calls for democracy in the Arab world will be treated as a potential threat to Western interests, be they Britain’s own interests or the broader interests of the US-led capitalist system to which Britain is committed. The danger is that governments reflecting or vulnerable to the will of their populations are likely to act increasingly independently of Western preferences.

Historical materialists would therefore expect Britain to act to buttress the conservative order where possible (without wishing, for reasons of legitimacy to be seen to be doing so). This may even include a degree of acquiescence towards repression carried out by non-allied regimes, where post-revolutionary alternatives are viewed with greater suspicion, Saddam’s crushing of a popular uprising in 1991 being a notable precedent (Achcar:2004:29-30).

Where change does occur, historical materialists will expect Britain to act to defend its interests, working with the United States in an “attempt to groom new transnationally-oriented elites....to incorporate the Arab masses into a civil society under the hegemony of those elites, [to ensure] the region’s further integration into the global economy through liberalization and structural adjustment, [and]... preventing the rise of any regional military challenge to the emerging US/transnational domination” (Robinson:2006:442. See Robinson:1996 for more detail on how such policies were pursued in Chile, Nicaragua, Haiti and the Philippines).

These expectations will be narrowed, specified and refined in the next section of this paper.

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Historical Materialist Hypotheses on Britain’s Response to the Arab Uprisings

In summary, historical materialism expects Britain to maintain its substantive support for regimes that are integrated into the US-allied regional order, or to influence any reforms and transitions that do occur so as to protect as much of the status quo ante as possible, particularly in the economic, military and diplomatic realms. Uprisings against regimes independent of or hostile to this regional system will be viewed more positively, to the extent that they may result in the emergence of more friendly replacements.

The extent to which states lie are or are not a part of the regional system to which Britain is committed can be analysed in a number of ways. Allied states are very likely to be customers of the British arms industry and the US arms industry. Either Britain or the US may play some role in training the armed forces of the state in question. A substantial part of the trade and investment flows in and out of the country will be accounted for by the US and Britain, as well as other states within the regional system, and states integrated into the US-led liberal economic order internationally. In diplomatic terms, these states are highly likely to support the US and British positions on key issues at the UN and within the Arab League, though alignment will of course not be perfect.

The broad expectation of the nature of Britain’s response to the Arab uprisings, outlined above, can be narrowed into a more specific set of hypotheses, which in the case of any given Arab state will be defined by where that state sits relative to Britain in the international system. These hypotheses will not be exhaustive, and cannot by themselves substitute for a holistic, qualitative analysis of the empirical record, undertaken at the appropriate stage in the future. However, they will provide a working indication of the extent to which historical materialism is able to explain Britain’s response to these events, until such time as a more complete analysis is possible.
Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1

In terms of a public call from Britain for the end of the regime or the resignation of the head of state challenged by a popular uprising, historical materialism would expect Britain to be reluctant to abandon an allied state to which it had strong military and economic ties and/or which was well integrated into the regional order and the capitalist world economy. Any criticism of the state and its response to such protests will be hedged and qualified, avoiding calling the legitimacy of the regime into question. Britain is likely to be more forthcoming in calling for the end of non-allied or independent regimes, though this will depend on the nature of the likely alternatives.

Hypothesis 2

Historical materialism would expect the use of coercive diplomacy - e.g. sanctions or a push for a UN Security Council resolution in response to a violent crackdown against an uprising - to vary depending on the economic or strategic alignment of the state in question, rather than being based on a principled commitment to human rights, and reflecting the realities on the ground in a given situation. The strength of any sanctions that Britain pushes for, or the wording of a resolution that it recommends or signs up to, will depend on material rather than moral considerations.

Hypothesis 3

In the event of a violent crackdown against an uprising in an allied state, historical materialism would expect any subsequent restriction of arms sales and/or training of security forces, if it occurred at all, to be delayed, to come in response to political pressure or criticism, to be minimal in scope, and for such sales and training to resume as soon as possible, even where it is not clear that abuses had ceased and that the causes had been
dealt with. Historical materialism would not rule out Britain continuing or increasing its existing support for a state which violently repressed an uprising against it.

_Hypothesis 4_

Were Britain to support insurrectionists with the supply of arms and/or training, historical materialism would expect these to be fighting a previously non-allied regime, where any potential new government represented a better fit with British interests (as defined by the theory). British support for a post-revolutionary government would be expected if that government were moving into alignment with British interests in the region.

_Hypothesis 5_

Were Britain to itself intervene militarily in a conflict between a regime and its opponents, historical materialism would, again, expect this to happen in support either of a hitherto allied regime, or in support of insurrectionists against a hitherto non-allied regime where any likely new government would be preferable to the status quo. International legitimacy for such an intervention – in the form of a UN Security Council resolution – would be sought, but not deemed essential, and possibly not adhered to if secured. Such military operations may not be conducted in accordance with international law.

_Hypothesis 6_

In terms of the encouragement and/or facilitation of investment, or the withdrawal and/or discouragement of investment to country affected by an uprising, successful or otherwise, historical materialism would expect the strategic and economic alignment of the state to be the determining factor in whether economic relations were encouraged or discouraged, irrespective of the states’ human rights record or responsiveness or otherwise to demands for democratic reform.
Hypothesis 7

In the case of a state in a post-revolutionary situation, historical materialism would expect the nature of any economic reforms and structural adjustment promoted by Britain to be those most advantageous to British and Western businesses, with the effects of such policies on poverty, inequality and development (or their predictable effects in light of past experience) not being of primary concern.

Hypothesis 8

Historical materialism would expect any British efforts to “promote democracy”, or build civil society capacity within a country affected by an uprising, to elements (political parties or civil society groups) most likely to favour aligning the country in question in a way favourable to British interests, as defined by the theory. Britain’s goal would be to assist in the construction of a new hegemonic order within the political economy of the country in question, where, irrespective of elections being held, those areas of policy most of interest to Britain – economic, foreign and military – would be protected.

Sequencing of events and conditions under which they occur

In analysing the extent to which confirmation of any of the above hypotheses can be seen as supporting the broader theoretical perspective offered by historical materialism, attention must be paid to the conditions, and the sequence of events, under which such outcomes occur. To reiterate, the relevant explanatory conditions for historical materialism are the material relationships between the Arab states in question and both Britain and the US-led regional order more broadly. The causal processes under consideration are the uprisings and their outcomes, in so far as they produce a potential challenge or actual change to that state’s orientation.

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Conclusion

Some tentative observations can be made about Britain’s response to the Arab uprisings so far, based on the analytical framework above, although as noted, firm conclusions cannot be drawn at this stage.

In the case of Bahrain, Britain’s support for the regime has essentially endured, albeit some arms export licences were revoked following the violent crackdown on a broadly peaceful, broad-based pro-democracy uprising that began last year (Dawber:2012; Norton-Taylor:2012). Despite the fact that the regime invited the Saudi Arabian military to enter the country and provide back-up during that crackdown (Kirkup:2011), British relations with Saudi Arabia - economic and military - appear to have been broadly unaffected. Hypotheses 3 and 6 above appear to have been confirmed in this instance.

In the case of Libya, Britain intervened militarily to assist an uprising against a hitherto allied regime, contradicting a key element of the expectation set out in hypothesis 5, and of the broader expectations generated from the theory. Other elements of Britain’s conduct in this case however are more easy to reconcile. Britain and its allies went further than the terms of the original mandate granted by the UN Security Council allowed, going beyond the protection of civilian life and firmly into the business of regime change. This accords with other elements of hypothesis 5. After the war, the UK government was very prompt to encourage British firms to get involved in the Libyan economy (Adetunji:2011), certainly before any democratic process to establish the Libyan people’s wishes for their economic future had been undertaken, suggesting that hypothesis 8 may well be confirmed at a later stage. Finally, in terms of the human rights situation in the post-Gaddafi era, Amnesty International accused Britain and its allies of having a “self-congratulatory and complacent attitude” which does not conform to the importance attached to such matters by liberal international relations theory, for example (Stephen & Harding:2012).

In Egypt, Britain and the US were hesitant in withdrawing their support from their long-standing ally Hosni Mubarak, with one subsequent report suggesting that Washington had
toyed with the idea of supporting his replacement with intelligence chief Omar Suleiman (Lizza:2011), whose own record on human rights is thought to be highly questionable (Hajjar:2011). In Syria, Britain has played an energetic role in putting pressure on the Assad regime, in accordance with hypothesis 1, although it must be noted that the scale and viciousness of the crackdown in that country is significant even by the standards of violence set in Egypt, Bahrain and elsewhere. It could be argued that the British response in the case of Syria, as compared to the case of Bahrain, has been more robust because the humanitarian situation there is objectively worse.

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Historical materialism offers an explanation of how Britain, a state which claims a commitment to liberal and democratic values, has come to forge a long-standing and supportive relationship with some of the most repressive and – as has been shown these past eighteen months – violent regimes in the world. While there was much talk during the era of Bush and Blair – in policymaking and academic circles – of Anglo-American efforts to spread democracy in the Middle East, it cannot escape our attention that most of the recent Arab uprisings have involved people taking significant personal risks to wrest their democratic and human rights from autocracies supported and armed by the West. These events, and Britain’s response to them, therefore provide an opportunity to evaluate the nature of Britain’s commitments in the region. This paper suggests one analytical framework which can be usefully employed to that end.
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