**Defence Research Paper**

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“A MIDDLE EASTERN MARE’S NEST”? ASSESS THE DILEMMAS FACING WESTERN GOVERNMENTS ON POLICY TOWARDS EGYPT, LIBYA AND SYRIA

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Abstract

The ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011 has not lived up to its hope-filled billing. This paper investigates the post-2011 development of Western foreign policy positions on Egypt, Libya and Syria. Combining examination of policy statements with analysis of Western governments’ responses to events, it identifies and assesses the dilemmas behind them. It finds that the West faces dilemmas over: its approach to democratisation; the roles of political Islam and religion more generally; and differing attitudes to sovereignty. Linking these themes, it concludes that Western foreign policy suffers from a growing mismatch between its idealist aspirations and the degree of influence available to implement them. The paper ends with the assessment that the mare’s nest of conflicting interests in the Middle East is symptomatic of a world in which the West, no longer globally pre-eminent, faces a profound challenge to its way of thinking.
Introduction

Since Mohammed Bouazizi’s December 2010 self-immolation in protest at his treatment by Tunisian officials, the Middle East and North Africa have been thrown into turmoil. The wave of public uprisings that followed was labelled the ‘Arab Spring’ by hopeful observers as the long-anticipated unshackling of Arab peoples from oppression appeared to get under way. Dictators fell and political reforms were won, but four years on, optimism has evaporated and the seasonal metaphor of choice is the ‘Jihadi Winter’. The Syrian civil war continues toward a fourth year; Libya and Yemen have descended into chaos; the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have become increasingly assertive in response to perceived threats from Iran; and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has seized territory and captured headlines with its barbarity.

This paper, limited to consideration of Egypt, Libya and Syria, does not seek to tackle the panoply of factors behind the regional imbroglio, yet the reason for offering such a broad overview will become clear. In our analysis of the dilemmas behind Western foreign policy, five major themes will emerge: First, Western governments continue to be torn in their approaches to political Islam, on the one hand viewing it as a legitimate expression of its supporters’ beliefs, on the other an ideology that threatens key regional allies and domestic cohesion. Second, relationships between Western states and allies including Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia weigh upon policy options elsewhere due to those states’ distinct attitudes towards political Islam. Third, the traditional foreign policy debate between ‘values’ and ‘interests’ strongly favours the latter in practice, although the language of the former persists in London and Washington, sometimes putting those capitals into a bind. Fourth, differing priorities among Western states with regard to Libya are already causing tension within the European Union (EU), and with respect to Syria have the potential to cause significant transatlantic divergence should an incoming United States (US) administration take a different position on Israel or Iran. Finally, Western governments’ reluctance to engage with ideological aspects of the challenge presented by ISIL presents problems both domestically and abroad.

Methodology

The general thrust of recent Western policy towards our three states has differed: diplomatic interventions in Egypt, multinational military intervention leading to regime change in Libya, and abortive military intervention followed by proxy warfare in Syria. However, this is not intended to be a comparative study, or a line-by-line analysis of published or inferred Western foreign policies. Instead, it focusses on the dilemmas – that is, decisions between unpalatable alternatives – that lie behind those policies. The paper does not seek to offer prescriptions or solutions to the dilemmas examined. Instead, it analyses how Western governments approach them, and assesses whether any are particularly or universally prominent.
No formal theoretical framework will be applied to this work. It is subdivided into three case studies, treating each of the subject states individually. Each case study begins with a brief account of pertinent historical details and previous Western policy decisions to provide the essential context for the analysis that follows. Thereafter, selected aspects of recent and current Western policy are examined in order to assess the issues being addressed. The paper will not systematically examine every dilemma present in each case; instead, it will focus on those most pertinent to the state in question. Only by taking the case studies together will an overall picture of the conflicting factors be seen. One example of an omission arising from this approach is the lack of detailed treatment of the ISIL presence in Libya; the dilemmas posed by the group are instead examined as part of the Syria case study.¹

For the purposes of this paper ‘the West’ is considered to consist of the US and the member states of the EU, which will be treated individually or collectively as appropriate to the issues being discussed. While this approach excludes states such as Canada and Australia, it does not affect the findings because the paper does not aim to systematically examine each case study from the perspective of each and every Western state. Instead, where Western perspectives remain broadly aligned, the assessment will be focussed upon the Western state or states with the greatest involvement and exposure to the country in question. Hence, the US perspective will predominate in the Egyptian case study, the Libyan case study will see most emphasis placed on the EU, and the Syrian case study will be phrased in more general terms due to the relatively low level of direct involvement by the West. However, where differing perspectives between Western states create a dilemma in themselves, this will be highlighted and discussed.

**Western approaches to foreign policy**

Before moving on to the first case study, generalised Western approaches to foreign policy will be described to provide context for later discussions. First, an idealist approach applies the state’s domestic political philosophy to its foreign affairs, leading to policies such as promoting and assisting the spread of democracy, implementing free trade agreements and protecting human rights. Possible idealist measures might include humanitarian interventions or enforcement of trade sanctions against states whose conduct fails to comply with Western moral norms. A prominent contemporary advocate of idealism is the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, whose writings on liberal interventionism were an influence on US President Barack Obama during his time as a senator.² Another influential American, Senator John McCain,

¹ Commentators view the ISIL presence in Libya as less significant than that in Syria or Iraq. See, for example, Jason Pack, quoted in Farouk Chotia, “Islamic State Gains Foothold in Libya,” BBC News February 24, 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-31518698 (accessed May 1, 2015).
expressed the logical extreme of the idealist position: "our interests are our values, and our values are our interests".³

Second, a realist approach uses foreign policy to pursue national interests rather than moral imperatives. If conflicts overseas have no direct impact on national interests, realists advocate inaction or, if the spread of conflict poses a threat, containment. Western realists accept the occasional requirement to support autocratic or illiberal regimes, following Morgenthau: "this being inherently a world of opposing interests and of conflict among them, moral principles can never be fully realized, but at best approximated through the ever temporary balancing of interests and the ever precarious settlement of conflicts."⁴ Besides well-known American examples such as Henry Kissinger, notable realists have included former British Prime Minister John Major, who was reluctant to intervene in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s due to the perceived absence of British interests.

These two doctrines have been in competition since the Second World War, most notably in the US, whose presidents have explored both ends of the spectrum. The thrust of arguments employed by each side against the other are that realists "struggle to define the national interest", a weakness that McCain sought to exploit in his equation of American values with American interests, while idealists "seek to re-make the world in their own image without regard to the limits of American power".

The notion of American exceptionalism, captured in the idea invoked by presidents from Kennedy to Obama of the "city on the hill", was a powerful influence for idealism in Washington. European states, by contrast, tended towards realism during the inward-looking years of the Cold War and the long economic recovery from the Second World War. However, as the EU increased in size, economic strength and degree of political integration, it sought a more outward-looking role on the world stage:

\[ \text{The peaceful unification of our continent has been our great achievement, and now our main challenge is to act as a credible force for good. From a continental agenda, we should move to a global agenda. From building peace in Europe to being a peace-builder in the world.}^5 \]

The EU's foreign policy has been strongly associated with Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, "getting others to want what it wants" by promoting the attractiveness of its ideas, culture, institutions, ideology and so on. However, as Nye points out, "soft power is not automatically more effective or ethical than hard power."⁶ Using soft power to spread democracy fits an idealist

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agenda; using it to secure trade deals or procure insurance against threats comes naturally to a realist. Attempts to identify a "third way" for Western foreign policy, based on the application of soft power, risk conflating the tools with the intent.⁷

Egypt

The principal policy dilemma facing the West in Egypt concerns its position on Egyptian democracy following the military's ejection from power of elected President Mohammed Morsi, the repeated postponement of parliamentary elections under the former coup leader and (now) elected President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, and the sentencing to death of Morsi for participating in a 2011 jailbreak. The terms of the dilemma are familiar from the history of US foreign policy. Condoleezza Rice, speaking in Cairo as US Secretary of State in 2005, captured the choices:

For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East - and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course. We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people.

Historical context

Insofar as they related to Egypt, Rice’s words encapsulated thirty years of American support for the regimes of President Anwar Sadat and his successor, Hosni Mubarak. Founded upon Egypt’s peace with Israel and the resumption of access to the Suez Canal after an eight-year hiatus, Washington’s support additionally kept Soviet influence at bay until the end of the Cold War. Thereafter, Mubarak exploited western concerns over an increasingly militant Islamic revival to portray his regime as a bulwark against extremism, ensuring the continued flow of economic and military assistance.

However, after the 9/11 attacks, neoconservatives of the George W. Bush administration came to view repressive Arab states such as Mubarak’s Egypt as breeding grounds for anti-western sentiment due to the inequality and privation suffered by the poor. This concern gave rise to the idealist ‘freedom agenda’ to which Rice spoke in 2005, and to which Mubarak responded by permitting rivals to stand against him in that year’s presidential election (hitherto, these had been simple referendums on his rule). The election was unfair and the principal challenger was soon imprisoned, but Mubarak did not have to wait long for Bush’s enthusiasm for Arab democracy to wane: Hamas’s victory in the Palestinian Authority election of 2006 and deepening sectarian divisions in the elected Iraqi government prompted a hasty and hypocritical retreat from the ‘freedom agenda’.

Barack Obama, campaigning for the US presidency, had positioned himself as a foreign policy realist, at least partly to distinguish himself from his party rival, Hillary Clinton, who had adopted a

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9 Condoleezza Rice, Speech at American University, Cairo, 20 Jun 2005.
liberal interventionist stance on the Iraq War. Obama maintained a realist perspective after taking office; however, as Fawaz Gerges notes, his rhetoric was often loaded with idealist references. Most notable in the context of this paper was his address at al-Azhar University in 2009:

*I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq. So let me be clear: no system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other. That does not lessen my commitment, however, to governments that reflect the will of the people … America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election … These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.*

Cutting through the flourishes, Fouad Ajami summarised Obama’s speech as the renewal of US partnership with friendly autocracies and the abandonment of the wider Middle East to its furies. Yet, Obama called upon Mubarak to step down in February 2011, making good upon the idealism that had often infused his rhetoric.

Even before his election to the presidency, commentators anticipated that el-Sisi would embark upon an autocratic trajectory, returning Egypt to the *status quo ante* of the Mubarak era. Events since then have done nothing to dispel the idea. The acceptance of such an outcome by the West would raise a question of consistency: since Mubarak’s rule had eventually been rejected, for how long should el-Sisi be indulged if he adopted repressive tactics in pursuit of political survival? In order to assess the democracy dilemma facing the West in Egypt today, we will reflect upon decisions since 2011 in order to identify factors that continue to influence the framing of Western policy.

**The right side of history?**

Firstly, it must be recognised that Obama’s decision to press for Mubarak’s departure was very much a product of its circumstances. The US’s response to the Tunisian revolt had been flat-footed, with an explicit condemnation of regime violence being issued only after President Ben Ali had fled. Obama was determined not to repeat the mistake as unrest gripped Egypt. Sensing a political earthquake in the region, and determined that the US should be seen to have been on the

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12 Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist”.
14 Barack Obama, Speech at al-Azhar University, Cairo, June 4 (2009).
‘right side of history’, he went further than any of his advisers or secretaries had recommended by calling upon Mubarak to stand down.¹⁸

With history’s headlines now being written elsewhere, is it enough for the West to take an absence of protest against el-Sisi’s rule as justification for quiet acceptance of its fact? The increasing repression of political dissent in Egypt today renders this premise questionable, yet the West appears to have adopted it.¹⁹ The reasons why can be grouped under three headings: influence, interests and alternatives.

Influence

Despite the US’s long-standing ties with Egypt, its influence has declined. William Taylor showed how despite the sending of Obama’s public message to Mubarak and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’s private telephone calls to Egyptian Army leadership, the Army’s institutional interests were the guide for its actions during the 2011 revolution.²⁰ It occupied a privileged position within Egyptian society and the economy, sometimes described as the ‘deep state’; its members filled many non-military government posts and its business interests accounted for some thirty to forty percent of national production.²¹

Similarly, the 2013 revolution could better be described as a ‘popularly-demanded coup’. Morsi had begun to threaten the Army’s interests by packing the government with Muslim Brotherhood figures in place of military men. He made himself extremely unpopular when he responded to difficulties with Egypt’s Supreme Court by issuing a constitutional declaration that consolidated a range of powers into the Presidency. Finally, he sacked several key members of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, including its head. The military bided its time until June 2013, when popular protests against Morsi offered the chance to force his departure. Obama warned that democratic rule should be respected and threatened the withdrawal of US economic and military assistance; nevertheless the military went ahead with the overthrow of Morsi on 3 July, imperilling its relations with the US and indicating with absolute clarity the limits of the West’s influence.²²

Interests

Obama’s muted response to the violent suppression of protests in Bahrain, only three days after Mubarak’s fall, showed that he could still adopt a realist perspective when it suited vital US interests. Bahrain hosted the US Fifth Fleet and was closely allied to key US ally Saudi Arabia, whose relations with Washington had themselves been strained by the perceived betrayal of

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¹⁸ Gerges, Obama and the Middle East, 106.
²¹ Ibid., 135.
mutual ally Mubarak. The difference in his approach towards two near-simultaneous protests might suggest that less was at stake for America in Egypt than in Bahrain, despite the presence of the Suez Canal and Mubarak’s support for peace with Israel.

However, the idea the US’s interests in Egypt would henceforth be worth risking for democracy is shown to be false by Obama’s decisions since the July 2013 coup. He fulfilled his pre-coup threat by withdrawing US military assistance, which continued to be withheld after el-Sisi’s election to the Presidency pending the as-yet-unheld parliamentary elections. However, US concerns over Russian influence in Egypt grew after el-Sisi visited Moscow to sign a $3.5bn arms deal in September 2014. The emergence of ISIL in Libya was the final catalyst for the full restoration of US military assistance to Egypt in March 2015, despite el-Sisi’s failure to meet conditions on the restoration of democracy. Hence, only four years after the ‘Arab Spring’, US policy on Egypt has come full circle. Stability is once again valued over democracy, and worries over Moscow’s influence recall the Arab nationalist era. The US appears to have settled its position on the ‘stability versus democracy’ dilemma, which now leads us to the question: what did it fear about the alternative?

**Alternatives**

Asked by an aide for his hoped-for outcome during the fall of Mubarak, Obama had replied “what I want is for the kids on the street to win and for the Google guy to become president.” The “Google guy” was Wael Ghonim, a middle-class manager at the internet firm who had been prominent in the organisation of the protests. Obama’s hopes were dashed only one week later when Ghonim, expecting to share a stage with the Muslim Brotherhood cleric Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi in front of hundreds of thousands of grateful Egyptians, was turned away at the steps by the Sheikh’s guards.

The Muslim Brotherhood was the best-organised opposition group in Egypt. Secular, liberal groups had been harshly suppressed under Mubarak but the Brotherhood had been tolerated to allow an outlet for political dissent. Its grassroots operation ran Islamic welfare programmes and cultivated a support base. Although kept from power in Egypt’s parliament by election-rigging, it remained best-placed to take advantage of the 2011 revolution thanks to its eighty years of political experience.
Wishing to avoid provoking Western concerns over the rise of an Islamist party, it deliberately kept a low profile during the protests, coming to the fore only after Mubarak’s departure.\(^29\)

The only political organisation that could have challenged the Brotherhood was the former president’s National Democratic Party, but it was dissolved by court order not long after Mubarak’s downfall. The fragmented remains of the party, plus elite figures prominent in the West such as the former International Atomic Energy Agency head Mohammed ElBaradei, tried to compete but could not mount a coherent challenge. Indeed, as John B. Alterman notes, the events of 2011 showed the West that Arab liberal elites were disconnected from their ‘home’ societies and proved far less influential than had been hoped.\(^30\)

Mubarak’s final telephone call with Obama ended with the Egyptian leader issuing a last-ditch warning over the ‘threat’ posed by the Brotherhood. Obama’s disregard of the warning, and the substantial American support provided to Brotherhood-led Egypt during Morsi’s presidency, have been described by the journalist David Ignatius as a “cosmic wager” on the Brotherhood’s “peaceful intentions”.\(^31\) This was a wager for which Obama had been prepared since his Cairo speech in 2009, as we shall now see.

**Western attitudes to political Islam**

The Muslim Brotherhood has been banned in Egypt by el-Sisi. However, Western attitudes towards the Brotherhood and political Islam (or Islamism) in general remain highly relevant to this paper, and will be referred to in the case studies on Libya and Syria.

Western attitudes to Islamism are varied, but divide broadly into two schools of thought. The first, “neo-Orientalist” school draws upon the work of Bernard Lewis\(^32\) and Samuel Huntington\(^33\) and views the ‘Islamic Revival’ that followed Egypt’s humiliation by Israel in 1967’s Six-day War as a rejection of the Western cultural influences that had been present in the Arab nationalist movement. Seeing an essential incompatibility between the doctrine of Islam and Western notions of plurality and democracy, it considers that any increase in Islamist influence within a government unavoidably reduces the West’s influence in that state. Critics of this school argue that its polarising narrative leads to policies that ensure fulfilment of its own predictions.\(^34\)

The second, "neo-Third Worldist" school derives from postcolonialism and views Islamist movements as a vehicle for the expression of political desires by those suffering poor socio-


economic conditions, often under repressive governments whose legitimacy is undermined by their failure to deliver services. Adherents of this school are willing to distinguish between moderates, content to seek change through peaceful action, and militant extremists. They consider that Islamists may reject Western values, although incidentally to their belief rather than as an end in itself. Critics of this school argue that its adherents drastically underestimate the influence of religious ideology on individual and group behaviour.

The Clinton administration adhered to the latter school in its dealings with Islamism during the Balkan conflicts and its abortive attempt to reconcile moderate Islamists with the Algerian government. Later, although George W. Bush was at pains to say that his “Global War on Terror” was not a “War on Islam”, this was nevertheless the impression felt by many in the Middle East, and his retreat from the “Freedom Agenda” after Hamas’s victory in the 2006 Palestinian election strengthened the perception that Bush had shifted the US administration firmly into the “neo-Orientalist” school.

Obama used his 2009 speech in Cairo to extend a hand of friendship to the Islamic world and clearly frame US foreign policy within the "neo-Third Worldist" school. Yet as we have seen, the Muslim Brotherhood felt the need to remain in the background during the 2011 revolution. One possible reason for this is the nature of the US foreign policy establishment. Israel was especially wary of the Brotherhood due to its links with Hamas and its historic criticism of Egypt’s peace treaty, while Washington’s pro-Israel lobby is one of its most powerful. Indeed, as we have seen, Obama went against the advice of the foreign policy staffs when he called upon Mubarak to go. By 2013, the firmness of Obama’s support for the (elected) Brotherhood president led anti-Morsi protesters to depict him and the US Ambassador in Cairo, Anne Patterson, as supporters of Islamic extremism.

European states take a more cautious view on Islamism, due partially to their proximity to Muslim North Africa and partially to their large (by comparison to the US) Muslim minorities. France, in particular, has been resistant to democratisation where it risked empowering Islamist governments with no intent to hold further elections. France’s concern over the election of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria in 1991 (later ejected by a coup) was encapsulated later in the words of US diplomat Edward Djerejian, who declared “we are suspect of those who would use the democratic process to come to power, only to destroy that very process in order to retain power and political

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37 Ibid.
41 Marr, “The United States, Europe and the Middle East”, 93.
dominance. While we believe in the principle of ‘one person, one vote’, we do not support ‘one
person, one vote, one time’.

Islamism and democracy

In view of these concerns over the relationship between Islamism and democracy, a brief
comparison of the Islamist governments elected in Tunisia and Egypt following the ‘Arab Spring’
will provide useful further context for the West’s position on the Egyptian democracy dilemma, and
on Islamism-related dilemmas in the case studies to come.

Tarek Masoud concludes that democracy in Egypt ultimately failed because it “lacked the balance
of political forces necessary in order for democracy anywhere to work”. The inevitable domination
of the first elections by the Muslim Brotherhood caused the secular opposition to abandon hope of
redress via the ballot box, becoming “revolutionary and irreconcilable” by the time of the July 2013
coup; it is worthy of note that Morsi called for elections before standing down. The one-sided
electoral situation was a legacy of the suppression of secular politics by Mubarak, and the agrarian
nature of the economy which meant an absence of social infrastructure, such as labour unions,
around which political thought could quickly coalesce after his departure.

By comparison to Egypt, Tunisia was more urbanised and had a stronger civil society, including the
militant General Tunisian Union for Labor. Hence, while the Islamist Ennahda Party won the first
post-Ben Ali parliamentary election, it did not dominate the political scene to the extent of the
Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Islamists were again the largest party in the assembly that
created Tunisia’s new constitution, but when parliament was re-elected during 2014, secular
parties now formed the largest grouping. A democratic transfer of power away from an Islamist
party had taken place, suggesting that Western concerns over a doctrinal conflict between
Islamism and democracy may have been overstated. Egypt and Tunisia indicate that the structure
of society is the important factor, but these are only two examples. More are likely to be needed to
convince Western sceptics.

International linkages

Islamic monarchies have long been nervous of the Muslim Brotherhood, due to the fact that its
model of Islamic governance presents an alternative to the ideological underpinnings of their own
dynasties. Most hostile is the bitterly anti-Islamist United Arab Emirates (UAE), while Saudi Arabia
moved from caution to hostility after Morsi’s Egyptian government entered a détente with their
great rival, Iran. As a result, Saudi Arabia backed the coup against Morsi and has stood firmly
behind el-Sisi, providing him with foreign aid. On the other hand, Qatar and Turkey have both been

42 Edward P. Djerejian, “The US and the Middle East in a Changing World” (address at Meridian House International,
44 Ibid.
firm supporters of the Brotherhood and Islamist groups more generally – Qatar in an attempt to wield its growing soft power, Turkey in pursuit of a leadership role in the Sunni Muslim world, and both in competition with Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

These relationships have complicated Western foreign policy, as we shall see in Libya and Syria. In addition, the existence of Western branches of the Brotherhood means that they have the potential to affect domestic politics. The "Jenkins Review" into the Brotherhood's activities in Britain was completed during 2014; according to one government minister "The work involves a number of Government Departments to consider all the findings ... It is also complex. There is a domestic angle to it. There is an international aspect to it, with ramifications." Indeed so sensitive do the findings appear to have been that it was withdrawn from release on the morning of its expected publication. Questions relating to Islamism are tricky ground for Western governments, given public concerns over immigration, extremism and integration of religious minority communities. The freedom granted to groups such as the Brotherhood in the West is also a potential source of tension with regional allies who ban or control them.

Among adherents to the neo-Orientalist school of Western-Islamist relations, there can be frustration at the apparent reluctance of Western leaders to contemplate, let alone acknowledge, a link between Islamist doctrine and extremist acts both in the Middle East and elsewhere. President el-Sisi won plaudits from this community when he spoke to Egypt's senior clerics at al-Azhar University, calling for reform of Islamist teachings. He was forthright: "It is inconceivable that the wrong ideas which we sacralise should make the entire umma [Muslim community] a source of concern, danger, killing, and destruction for the whole world. This is not possible." It is hard to imagine that mainstream Western leaders would dare express such sentiments, yet el-Sisi's comments won him a Nobel Peace Prize nomination. In taking such a stance, el-Sisi has increased his value to Western leaders concerned about extremism; he can say the 'un-sayable'. Western governments harbouring private concerns over Islamism in general might, therefore, take a more benevolent view of el-Sisi's continuing rule.

With a new King in place, and its proxy conflict with Iran intensifying, Saudi Arabia is backing away from its aggressive posture towards the Brotherhood and attempting to draw the Sunni Arab community closer together. What this means for the future of the Brotherhood in Egypt is, as yet, unclear. If Saudi pressure were to force el-Sisi to legalise it, then Egyptian political opposition

might re-emerge – and this would force the West to re-assess its position on the ‘stability versus democracy’ dilemma in Cairo.

**Egypt - Conclusion**

Events have shown the West that its influence in Cairo is limited. Egyptians had quickly grown disaffected with the Morsi government’s failure to address economic issues, and by June 2013 Obama’s insistence that the Egyptian military respect the election result – in line with his advocacy of Muslim democracy – turned crowds against him. So despite lavish American aid, and despite Obama’s efforts to change perceptions of American power, the US is still not widely perceived as a benevolent ally by Egyptians.

Governance in Egypt today looks remarkably similar to that which prevailed in the Mubarak era, minus an elected Parliament. Yet Obama restored American aid, helping Egypt’s deep state maintain its grip, when a potential new threat to US interests emerged, and Mubarak’s appeals to Western fear over extremism have been replaced by Sisi’s pronouncements on Islamic reform. Obama’s guarded idealism now appears to have been a luxury that could be afforded in early 2011, but no longer; given the tumult which has engulfed the region since, the stability of Sisi’s Egypt has once again become the attribute most prized by Western governments. It seems likely that advocating the proper functioning of the Egyptian democratic system will take a back seat until more pressing matters are resolved. The framing of Egypt's entry in Obama's 2015 National Security Strategy suggests so:

> [The US] will maintain strategic cooperation with Egypt to enable it to respond to shared security threats, while broadening our partnership and encouraging progress toward restoration of democratic institutions.\(^50\)

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Libya

Matters are certainly more pressing in Libya. A total collapse of government authority has rendered it a failed state on the Mediterranean. Although expedience leads politicians to avoid the term, there can be no mistaking the symptoms – an internationally-recognised government forced to flee the capital and take refuge on a car ferry, a rival parliament established, no semblance of a state monopoly on violence, the use of Libyan territory as a base for jihadist attacks into neighbouring Egypt and Tunisia, and the existence of a lucrative people-smuggling trade in Libya’s Mediterranean ports. Bernardino Leon, Head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), came the closest of any international figure to using the ‘failed’ label when he told the EU’s Foreign Affairs Committee in December 2014 that Libya had moved from being a dictatorship to being a non-state.\(^5^1\)

**Historical context**

2011’s UN-backed multi-national military intervention in Libya removed the veteran dictator Muammar Gadaffi from power after forty-two years. This apparent success was consolidated in July 2012 by the country’s first free and fair elections, creating the General National Congress in Tripoli. Following adjustments to the constitution and a change of title to Council of Deputies, the body was re-elected in June 2014. However, amidst violence and boycotts the Islamist parties suffered from a drastic reduction in vote share at this second election; pointing to low turnout they declared the election to be illegitimate and set up a rival parliament in Tripoli. The Misratan militias joined this camp under the banner of Libya Dawn. Supporters of the Libya Dawn seized control of Tripoli, forcing the Council of Deputies to flee to the eastern city of Tobruk, where a reduced number of delegates conduct government business in a hotel conference room. Although Libya’s Supreme Court subsequently declared the Council of Deputies to be unconstitutional, the Deputies rejected the verdict as being influenced by Libya Dawn.\(^5^2\) The Tobruk parliament, now led by the secular Operation Dignity coalition, thus remains the internationally-recognised government. Civil war has gripped the country ever since, with Dignity-backed militias battling their Libya Dawn rivals. Organised criminals and jihadist groups have exploited the space created by the stand-off to expand their operations, exporting instability into neighbouring countries and migrants into the Mediterranean Sea.

The question of how to stop the flow of refugees through Libya into the Mediterranean has risen near to the top of the EU’s foreign policy agenda in recent months, and is the most prominent dilemma facing the West in our second case study. But beside this immediate and practical matter there are more profound questions for the West to grapple with. Western notions of statehood and legitimacy are challenged by the division of power between Libyan factions, and differing priorities

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\(^{51}\) [http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/12/03/](http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/12/03/)

among EU member states have demonstrated the inherent difficulty in putting forward an effective, unified European foreign policy. Allies of the West can be found supporting both of the principal protagonists in the Libyan power struggle, placing it in an invidious diplomatic position while calling into question the limits of its influence. And coming face-to-face with the consequences of 2011’s military intervention has raised questions over the efficacy of such actions that will resonate in our final case study.

Questions of legitimacy

The Western approach to Libya’s crisis centres on resolution of the dispute between the rival parliaments and the creation of a national unity government, codified in UN Security Council Resolution 2144 and implemented by UNSMIL:

As an immediate priority, ensure the transition to democracy, including through promoting, facilitating and providing technical advice and assistance to a single, inclusive and transparent national dialogue, to Libyan electoral processes and to the process of preparing, drafting and adopting a new Libyan constitution.53

UNSMIL’s most recent attempt at a draft power-sharing agreement was rejected by Libya Dawn, although this was unsurprising: even UNSMIL’s Head anticipated a poor response to the proposal.54 Jason Pack argues that UNSMIL’s inability to frame a political settlement acceptable to both sides stems from the Operation Dignity government’s perception of legitimacy granted by its international recognition, which emboldens it into taking an excessively robust stance in the dialogue with Libya Dawn.55 Symptomatic of this dynamic was the bombing of Tripoli airport during March 2015 by air forces thought to be controlled by Dignity’s rebel General Khalifa Haftar, which targeted Libya Dawn delegates as they travelled to UNSMIL talks in Morocco.

Pack and others have argued that de-recognition of the Operation Dignity government would better incentivise it to reach a compromise acceptable to Libya Dawn.56 So why, despite Bernardino Leon’s acknowledgement that Libya had become a ‘non-state’, does the West maintain its recognition of Dignity? One answer may lie in a Western preference for the concepts of sovereignty and statehood as the best means of resolving civil war, seeking an answer to Richard Betts’s question “who rules?”57 And an instinctive attachment to elections as the best means of legitimising post-conflict government would lead the West to support the winners of the most recent

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56 Ibid.
contest, namely the Dignity coalition.\textsuperscript{58} Thus the West’s own prejudices over modes of governance may unconsciously be contributing to the impasse.

Even as UNSMIL pursues a unity government, some have expressed concern over the possibility of a \textit{de facto} partition of Libya, most recently a Lebanese government minister returning from a fact-finding visit.\textsuperscript{59} A brief history of Libya explains why this idea gains traction. The state was born of three provinces: Tripolitania to the west, Cyrenaica to the east and Fezzan to the south. In 1934, whilst part of the Italian Empire, all three were brought together under the title of ‘Libya’. On gaining independence in 1951, the three provinces were governed federally under Western-backed King Idris. However, the discovery of oil in Cyrenaica in 1959 unbalanced the Libyan economy, and tensions over the division of power and resources between federal and provincial governments were eventually resolved by the dissolution of the provinces and the creation of a unitary state in 1963.

Muammar Gaddafi overthrew Idris in a 1969 coup. His self-styled concept of ‘rule by the masses’ was assessed by Dierderik Vandewalle to have “\textit{cultivated a disdain for centralised civil government}. [...] \textit{Sharing little by way of common experience aside from Italian rule, Libyans tended to identify themselves as members of tribes or clans rather than citizens of a state},”\textsuperscript{60} and thus the old provincial identities might be expected to linger – especially in Cyrenaica, the ancestral territory of the exiled King and his descendants. As a further indicator of division, the majority of members of the ‘social leadership committee’ through which Gaddafi ran Libyan domestic affairs were officers representing distinct tribal groupings within the military.\textsuperscript{61} The lack of national cohesion among these leaders was evident in the defections of entire regional commands to the anti-Gadaffi rebellion in 2011.\textsuperscript{62}

The West’s pursuit of a single, sovereign Libya might appear futile in the light of this history and the existence of rival parliaments. So why does it persist? Chaim Kaufman summarises the reasoning: ‘partition’ has long been a dirty word among most international organisations, Western leaders and scholars.\textsuperscript{63} Despite the short history of Libya as a sovereign state, and its still shorter history as a unitary state, the West is pursuing its default position – preservation of the existing borders.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.  
Political Islam, revisited

Alternative interpretations of the divisions within Libya offer greater hope for the UNSMIL approach. For example, the political split between the Tripoli and Tobruk parliaments is along Islamist – secular, rather than provincial lines. Jason Pack adds that the dispute proceeds not only along ideological grounds, but also on the place of former members of the Gadaffi regime in public life. Pack points to the example of Tunisia, where Islamist and secular parties cooperated and former Ben Ali regime actors were allowed into positions of responsibility, as a model for Libyan reconciliation.64

Beneath this analysis lies a second possible reason for the West’s reluctance to de-recognise the secular Operation Dignity parliament: its troubled relationship with political Islam. The EU and its constituent states are the dominant Western actors in Libya, with interests including oil, trade, prevention of migration and, in the case of Italy, former colonial links. The US’s interest in the state is limited, as evidenced by President Obama’s initial reluctance to participate in the 2011 intervention.65 Therefore it is to be expected that European perspectives would predominate in the West’s approach towards Libya, and as we have seen in the Egyptian case study, European states tend to be warier than the US of political Islam. The Europeans’ Islamist dilemma reinforces the wider West’s prejudice towards the ‘election-winning’, ‘sovereign’ Tobruk parliament, making it even more difficult for European governments to take the step of de-recognising it.

Nevertheless the Tunisian example does give some grounds upon which to hope for a positive outcome; Libya’s small population and rich resource base offers an opportunity to build a stable society, although social and cultural fissures would need to be healed. The presence of ISIL-affiliated jihadist groups, threatening secular and Islamist politicians alike, is also held up as a motivating factor for reconciliation between the parliaments.66 In the absence of alternatives, the West’s desire to see a unitary sovereign state emerge from the crisis is likely to ensure its continued backing for UNSMIL towards this end; the EU’s High Representative on Foreign Affairs declared “we are fully convinced that there is no military solution to this conflict, only a political solution can provide a sustainable way forward.”67

Troublesome allies

Unfortunately for the EU, not all of its members’ allies agree. As we have seen, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt have been opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood due to the threat it poses to them domestically. Hence all three states have provided support to Operation Dignity-backed militias in

65 Fawaz A. Gerges, Obama and the Middle East (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 111.
66 Pack and Toldo, “Why Picking Sides in Libya Won’t Work.”
their conflict with Libya Dawn. The UAE went as far as launching air strikes against Islamist militias as they seized control of Tripoli following 2014’s disputed election, while Egyptian concerns over ISIL and other jihadist groups have led it to conduct its own operations over Libyan territory with Tobruk’s approval. In response to the Tripoli bombing, the US, France, Italy, German and the UK issued a joint statement that ended “we believe outside interference in Libya exacerbates current divisions and undermines Libya's democratic transition”.68

Meanwhile Qatar continued supporting Islamist militias that it had backed during the rebellion against Gadaffi, despite concerns expressed by UN envoys and commentators that its actions were potentially destabilising.69 Turkey’s Islamist President Recep Tayyip Erdogan backed a similar agenda, albeit one motivated as much by competition against Egypt for regional influence as by ideology.70 The resulting tensions are evident in recent attacks by Tobruk-backed forces on Turkish ships entering Libyan territorial waters.

Western states have strongly criticised the partisan involvement of external actors, which incentivises the continuation of civil war by supplying arms and ammunition and by arranging shipments of Libyan oil (both parliaments are seeking control over the trade).71 This poses a dilemma for the West because of its web of alliances and wider interests on both sides of the extended conflict. Arms sales, military access and basing are the key issues that limit its ability to apply pressure on its Gulf state allies in regard to Libya. Meanwhile, Turkey is a member of NATO, and Europe in particular needs to preserve political capital with Ankara to ensure its support in the battle to prevent extremism spilling over from within Syria. Even inside the EU itself there are conflicting linkages: Germany traditionally maintains close links with pro-Islamist Turkey, while the UK has a defence cooperation agreement with the pro-secular UAE. In sum, while the West is aware that its allies’ interventions are contributing to the ongoing conflict, it appears to have insufficient influence to deter them without placing its other interests at risk.

In response to the flow of Qatari aid, the Libyan Foreign Minister called for the international embargo on arms sales to be lifted to help the internationally-recognised government fight jihadists; the request was roundly rejected, citing concerns that weapons could fall into the wrong hands.72 This response lends further support to the notion that the West has all but de-recognised the Tobruk government, and remains fully committed to the UNSMIL prescription of agreement between the two factions. The difficulty of its position is that, as in Egypt, pro-secular movements

feel that the West has transferred its support to the Muslim Brotherhood. Should secular parties eventually gain control of Libya, their relations with the West could be strained as a result, as has been seen in Egypt.

**European (dis)union?**

The limits of the West’s ability to influence events in Libya have become keenly felt in Europe due to an escalating migration crisis. Libyan militias have exploited the absence of law enforcement, using people-smuggling to generate revenue in support of the civil war. In 2010, just 4,500 migrants reached Italy and Malta; this rose to 40,000 in 2013 and 170,760 in 2014 – numbers swelled by the tide of refugees fleeing conflicts in Syria, Iraq and South Sudan, and economic migrants leaving Mediterranean rim countries and Eritrea. The Italian Navy’s *Mare Nostrum* rescue operation recovered many thousands of migrants from overcrowded, unseaworthy boats, but nevertheless over 3,000 migrants perished at sea during 2014. The rescue operation itself became a source of controversy: the cost of around £6.5m per month was borne entirely by the Italian government, which grew frustrated at the unwillingness of other European states to contribute and cancelled the mission in October 2014.

The cancellation of *Mare Nostrum* highlights the difficulties that lie ahead for the EU’s European External Action Service as it seeks to develop the Europe’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. Perspectives on the migrant crisis differ widely between northern and southern European states. Malta and Italy, who process survivors’ asylum claims and bury the dead, view the lack of collective European commitment to a rescue operation as an outrage – the Maltese prime minister likened it to ignoring genocide. Despite this the northern states, including the UK, continue to treat the crisis as an unfortunate but remote issue.

For as long as the EU consists of separate sovereign states, facing onto different oceanic or continental boundaries, such a divergence of views and degrees of interest is likely to hamper implementation of the values-led aspects of the EU's foreign policy ("action… guided by… respect for human dignity"). For example, *Operation Triton*, the EU’s replacement for the cancelled Italian operation, did not receive funding from all member states. It operated on one-third of the budget of its Italian predecessor and was consequently limited to Italian territorial waters, focussing solely upon border protection.

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75 Mark Rice-Oxley, “It is our not caring that is the real killer,” The Guardian, 20 April 2015
76 Willan, “Europe accused of closing eyes”.
An ethical dilemma

The people smugglers’ operating model had been based upon the assumption that the occupants of grossly overloaded boats would be rescued before their craft foundered, but this no longer held after the cancellation of Mare Nostrum. The result was a spate of maritime disasters during April 2015 that brought the refugee crisis to the top of the European political agenda, with a fifty-fold increase in migrant deaths compared to the same period one year earlier. However, despite the anguish expressed by European leaders and calls for action by the UN and a range of NGOs, the issue stubbornly refused to gain traction with a European public more concerned with the adverse effects of immigration than with migrant welfare.78

Europe’s leaders face an ethical dilemma presented by the continuing tide of migrants, whilst being constrained by their electorates and unwilling to diverge from the UNSMIL process. Commentary has focussed upon the need to treat root causes rather than symptoms in order to achieve a long-term solution. Root causes fall into two categories: the lawlessness within Libya which permits the flourishing people-smuggling trade, and the steady flow of migrants away from conflict, poverty or oppression. Addressing the manifold hardships afflicting Africa is both beyond the scope of this paper and the immediate capacity of the European External Action Service: a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on 20 April 2015 resolved only that “EU diplomacy will … focus on the root causes of migration, including conflicts, poverty and human rights violations”.79 So the migration crisis is yet another clear incentive for the EU to increase pressure upon the Tobruk parliament, because a political settlement would allow the re-establishment of the rule of law in Libya’s Mediterranean ports. The fact that European governments still cannot agree to do so is still further indication of the complexity of the web of interests in which they are tangled.

In the absence of opportunity for significant action on the root causes of migration, European leaders have been reduced to arguing over strategies for tackling the symptoms. Advocates of a proactive policy, led by Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, called for a centrally-funded mission involving naval forces from across Europe. However, others feared that search and rescue operations provided perverse incentives for people-smugglers to grossly overload their vessels, and furthermore encouraged additional migrants to risk the journey.80 Despite the recent announcement of a European naval task force, leaked draft EU military planning documents suggest that the latter position holds sway, indicating that the task force’s information strategy should “avoid suggesting that the focus is to rescue migrants at sea but emphasise that the aim of the operation is to disrupt the migrant-smuggling business model.”81 It remains to be seen whether this leaked draft is representative, and if so, how the policy would be implemented. However, even

78 Mark Rice-Oxley, “It is our not caring that is the real killer”, The Guardian, April 20 (2015).
79 EU Foreign Affairs Council, Main Results, April 20 (2015).
81 https://wikileaks.org/eu-military-refugees/EUMC/eu-military-refugee-plan-EUMC.pdf
before the official *modus operandi* of the EU Mediterranean task force has been announced or received UN Security Council approval, there has been criticism of its presumed intent to destroy smugglers’ boats rather than rescue migrants or address root causes. Such a policy would present risks for the EU. In port, it would be challenging to distinguish smugglers’ boats from legitimate fishing vessels; inadvertently destroying the latter or causing casualties would significantly harm the EU’s credibility as a proponent of soft power. At sea, rescuing migrants and sinking their vessels would do little to deter either the migrants or the smugglers.

Australia’s policy of repatriating migrants to their point of embarkation has been held up as a successful method of discouraging illegal migration. However, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, told the UN Security Council that *“no refugees or migrants intercepted at sea will be sent back against their will”* during the forthcoming operation, citing concerns over migrants’ Geneva Convention rights. Mogherini’s stance provoked further dissent within the EU, with British Home Secretary Theresa May stating that it would encourage additional migration.

As with *Operation Triton*, the EU’s response to the latest phase of the Libyan migration crisis risks being undermined by the compromise necessary to secure consensus. Neither an expanded rescue mission nor an Australian-style repatriation operation appear to have been collectively acceptable, yet it is by no means clear that the presumed ‘third way’ of destroying smugglers’ boats will deliver meaningful results at acceptable political cost to the Union.

**The wisdom of hindsight?**

With Gadaffi’s downfall having bequeathed such a set of problems, some have asked whether 2011’s military intervention should have been undertaken in the first place. While the point is now moot in relation to Libya, the debate inevitably informs policy-making on Syria, and so we shall briefly highlight the arguments. Alan Kuperman’s verdict was a resounding ‘no’. Citing evidence that Gadaffi’s military operations and rhetoric had been narrowly focussed against rebel fighters rather than civilians, he argues that the rebellion, on the point of being quashed, appealed for Western help and presented a version of events deliberately manipulated to ensure intervention. The cost, Kuperman claims, was a several-fold increase in deaths and the conversion of an ally in the war on terror into a failed state harbouring militant Islamists.

Responding to this verdict, two members of Obama’s 2011 National Security Council pointed to the nature of the evidence available to decision makers at the time and accused Kuperman of indulging in hindsight, a charge against which he defended himself by referring to his March 2011

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85 Kuperman, “Obama’s Libya Debacle”.

Of course, the politics behind the decision to intervene was far more complex: Gadaffi’s unpopularity with Arab and African rulers, a rare consensus for action within the Arab League, and activism by the French and British governments all weighed into the process. Yet the points raised by Kuperman cannot be dismissed, for they illustrate what Roland Paris calls the structural problems inherent in military action under the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P). We shall return to them as counter-examples during our case study of Syria, where to date there has been no military action under the doctrine.

**Libya – Conclusion**

Just as the US’s influence has been found wanting in Egypt, so too has Europe’s in Libya. With willingness to employ hard power lacking, Europe has been reduced to treating the sea-borne symptoms of Libya’s failure while it awaits a reconciliation that may never arrive. The West could take steps to try to break the impasse, but neither alternative fits comfortably into its worldview: de-recognising the Tobruk parliament would require it to take the risk that Islamist groups gain power, while overtly supporting Tobruk could push Libya towards unmentionable partition into Islamist and secular states. As interference by its Turkish and Arab allies pushes settlement still further into the distance, questions must be raised over the West’s, and in particular the EU's understanding of its ability to wield influence. The compromises inherent in establishing a foreign policy palatable to twenty-eight states have led the EU to what is effectively a realist's position on Libya; the gap between words and action is stark.

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86 Derek Chollet, Ben Fishman and Alan Kuperman, “Who Lost Libya?” *Foreign Affairs* 94, no.3 (May/June 2015), 154-159.
Syria

Syria’s four-year civil war has killed over 220,000 people and rendered over half of the population of 23 million in need of humanitarian assistance. The forces of Bashar al-Assad’s regime have lost control of much of Syria’s territory, creating space for jihadist militant groups to operate and for ISIL to claim creation of a caliphate. Despite the completion of an international effort to destroy Syria’s chemical weapons arsenal, improvised chlorine bombs continue to be dropped into civilian-occupied areas. Locked at the centre of a stand-off between rival powers, the Syrian state has been torn apart from the inside. From a Western perspective, it is a truism that there are now "no good options on Syria". This final case study will examine why.

Historical context

The 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement determined the borders of the post-Ottoman mandates of Lebanon and Syria (under French control) and Palestine and Iraq (under the British). The lines were arbitrary in nature, enclosing many diverse ethnic and political groupings. Syria is home to Muslims, Jews, and Christians; Druze, Alawites, Circassians, Turkomans, and Kurds; and Ba’athists, Islamists, pan-Arabists and Westernists. It briefly formed part of the United Arab Republic in political union with Egypt, but during the latter part of the Arab Nationalist movement in the late 1960s it underwent a series of coups and eventually settled under the rule of Hafez al-Assad after the 1970 Corrective Revolution.

Upon Hafez’s death in 2000, his son Bashar took over the Presidency. Until late 2001, there was a degree of hope in the West that Bashar would allow the opening of civil society, speculating that his British education and London-born wife Asma might offer openings for the employment of Western soft power. However, reassertion of previous regime norms terminated this fledgling ‘Damascus Spring’.

The Syrian uprising began relatively late in the ‘Arab Spring’, with the first major protests occurring in March 2011, after Western military intervention in Libya was under way. Armed conflict broke out in July 2011 after a small number of army officers defected to create the “Free Syrian Army”. Despite appeals by protesters for a no-fly zone to be established, there was no Western intervention and the conflict continued to escalate. Sustained on both sides by support from external powers, the war continues today. To begin our analysis of Western policy dilemmas in Syria, we will examine the major decisions taken since 2011. The first set concerns the al-Assad regime, an understanding of which is crucial to the appreciation of the problems facing the West.

The al-Assad regime

During the early stages of the ‘Arab Spring’, and perhaps hoping for a resumption of its ‘Damascus’ predecessor, Western leaders initially left open the prospect of al-Assad staying in power. Obama stated in May 2011 that al-Assad “can lead that transition, or get out of the way”. As the brutality of al-Assad’s forces increased over the summer, the EU and US worked together to tighten sanctions on Syria; over 25% of Syria’s trade during 2011 was with the EU, making it a far more important player in this regard than the US. However, on 18 August, the continued escalation of violence led Obama to state:

*The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.*

Similar messages were issued by a number of Western governments in a coordinated diplomatic assault. However, despite the trade links between Syria and the EU, the West had insufficient influence over the regime for these calls to have any effect. The reason why is provided by the nature of the Syrian regime and its alliances.

The al-Assad family are members of the Alawite minority sect of Shi’a Islam, a group which forms around 13% of the Syrian population; the majority (around 74%) of Syrians are adherents of Sunni Islam. Alawite control of the military was gradually established by purges during the successive coups during the 1960s, and control of the regime followed in 1970. However, it would be wrong to have characterised either the regime or the military leadership as Alawite-dominated. In fact, Sunni and non-Alawite minority individuals could hold posts of significant importance, but al-Assad ensured that Alawite ‘watchdogs’ were placed in closely-subordinate or -related positions. This system was relaxed slightly by Bashar al-Assad, but remained extremely effective at keeping the apparatus of state loyal to the regime, both up to and during the ‘Arab Spring’.

The Alawites’ Shi’a connections have shaped Syria’s foreign relations. Syria is Iran’s closest ally and strategically-valuable link between Iran and Lebanon, and thence Hezbollah, the Shi’a militia which has been Iran’s principal vehicle for attacks upon Israel. Russia is another firm ally of al-Assad’s, with a long history of arms sales and the maintenance of Russia’s Mediterranean port complex at Tartus. More recently, Iran, Syria and Hezbollah have become collectively known as the “Axis of Resistance” – a term intended to refer to their anti-Western, anti-Israel alignment and

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marking a contrast between themselves and the pro-Western, Israel-ambivalent stance of most Sunni regimes.\textsuperscript{95} Hence, calls by the US and others for al-Assad’s departure were always unlikely to have any effect given the strong backing he received from Tehran and Moscow.

**Sectarianism**

Syrian demographics and the nature of the regime explain the intensification of the civil conflict and the lack of Western ability to influence it. As with other ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings, the protests had initially been concerned with poor economic conditions and youth employment prospects. However, as conflict intensified, it divided along increasingly sectarian lines. Minorities such as the Druze and Christians aligned with the al-Assad regime and the Alawites, fearing the consequences of domination by a Sunni majority.\textsuperscript{96} Al-Assad encouraged this narrative by appointing a Christian defence minister and focussing military operations upon Sunni districts.\textsuperscript{97}

Nevertheless, it is too simplistic to describe the conflict as falling along entirely sectarian lines; the minorities are insufficient in number to run the state alone. Many Sunnis, especially those benefitting from state employment or living in cosmopolitan urban areas, are co-opted to the regime. The relationship between Alawi and elite Sunni is represented at the very top by al-Assad’s Sunni wife.\textsuperscript{98} Such regime supporters have a strong motivation to remain loyal as they risk being targeted in revenge attacks by extremist Sunni groups.\textsuperscript{99}

Earlier in this paper, we have noted Western politicians’ reluctance to associate conflict with religion. Here, again: their willingness to acknowledge the (admittedly nuanced) sectarian aspect of the conflict sometimes appeared questionable. Britain’s Chief of the Defence Staff found “a failure in some senior establishment circles to accept that the Sunni-Shia split was as serious as I and many experts viewed it. This did not help them see the regional implications of the fast deteriorating situation in Syria.”\textsuperscript{100}

It can be argued that open discussion of such issues can become self-fulfilling by sharpening divisions, and so there is merit in taking a restrained approach to religious issues in public. Yet the UN’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria still saw fit to acknowledge the sectarian aspect of the conflict in December 2012.\textsuperscript{101} This prompted criticism from those adamant that apparent sectarianism could reflect political, rather than religious divisions.\textsuperscript{102} Al-Assad’s actions in encouraging religious division point to an element of truth in this, but once sectarianism

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\textsuperscript{95} David Blair and Richard Spencer, “Syria: Iran vows it will not allow Assad to fall,” *Daily Telegraph*, August 7 (2012).

\textsuperscript{96} Taylor, *Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings*, 109.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid, 96.


\textsuperscript{99} Michael Pizzi and Nuha Shabaan, “Sunnis fill rebel ranks, but also prop up Assad regime”, *USA Today*, August 1 (2013).


\textsuperscript{102} Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “Stop trying to make Syria’s war into a sectarian conflict”, *The Atlantic* March 15 (2013).
had been unleashed, by incitement or otherwise, it seems even more counter-productive to dispute or deny its relevance. In the privacy of strategic planning meetings, reluctance to accept uncomfortable advice on issues fundamental to conflict could lead to ineffective or counter-productive strategies being followed.

How to address matters of religion, therefore, appears once again to be a dilemma for Western governments steeped in the separation of state and church. Failure to appreciate the highly-polarised nature of the conflict meant that the West’s call for al-Assad to stand down was doubly unlikely to be heeded. As William Taylor notes, both the regime and its security services were highly motivated to fight for survival because they were “scared to death of what’s going to happen if Alawite control ends in Syria.”

To intervene or not to intervene?

In the absence of sufficient influence over al-Assad or his backers in Tehran and Moscow, Western governments gave consideration to intervening under the R2P doctrine to stop the bloodshed. However, any potential for action was blocked at the UN Security Council by Russia and China. Andrew Garwood-Gowers offered three perspectives on their reasons for doing so: first, as a diplomatic rebuff to the West in retribution for the perceived abuse of its mandate to ‘protect civilians’ under UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which was used to support anti-Gadaffi rebels in Libya; second, in protection of their national interests within Syria; and third, as a result of divergent views on national sovereignty and the right of a state to defend itself against armed rebellion.

The first perspective highlights an important structural issue with R2P, characterised by Roland Paris as the “mixed motives” problem. After the West’s decision to consolidate its successful prevention of genocide in Benghazi by supporting the overthrow of Gadaffi, many important non-Western powers (including India, Brazil and South Africa) have been highly sceptical of Western attempts to invoke the doctrine of R2P, suspecting colonial, regime-changing behaviour. Indeed, as R2P advocate Rakesh Thakur notes, even the use of the term ‘humanitarian intervention’ to justify military action “provokes a neuralgic rejection politically from the global South based on their traumatic colonial history”. Thakur advocates the use of different terms to avoid provoking such reactions; clever wordsmithing may reduce diplomatic friction but it cannot disguise the basic reluctance among many independent states to compromise on the notion of sovereignty. Thakur’s invocation of ‘colonial history’ as a factor in this equation also reminds us that non-Western states

103 Taylor, Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings, 113.
can take a very different view on the relative weight to be attached to theoretical concepts as opposed to culture and customs.

The third perspective raises an interesting counterpoint to conflicts elsewhere in the world. In Eastern Europe and in the South China Sea, norms of sovereignty and territorial integrity are being challenged by Russia and China, yet those same parties resolutely defend them at the UN Security Council in relation to Syria. This observation reveals the two powers to be less concerned with the international rule-book than with their own interests and demonstrating the limits of Western power. Syria does not appear to be sufficiently important for the West to stand up to the challenge; only the US has chosen to operate inside Syria without a UN mandate, and even then only against ISIL. The West has evidently calculated that it does not have enough at stake in Syria to risk further damage to the fabric of international law by directly attacking the Syrian government without UN Security Council approval.¹⁰⁷

Supporting the opposition?

Having settled upon the position that al-Assad had to go, but blocked at the UN and unable or unwilling to conduct military operations in defiance of Russia and China, the West faced up to a dilemma with which it still grapples today. Providing anything short of overwhelming support to Syrian rebels risked prolonging civil conflict and increasing the death toll – precisely the outcome diagnosed by Alan Kuperman after the Libyan intervention. But no Western nation had the appetite for the major investment in training and equipping Syrian rebels that would be required to secure a decisive victory. The option forming the other horn of this dilemma was to refuse any support to the rebels – effectively, to let al-Assad win. British General Sir David Richards suggested just this course of action after the lack of appetite for decisive support became clear, a stance that earned him the labels ‘cautious’ and ‘purist’. It was “politically unthinkable” for al-Assad to remain in power.¹⁰⁸

Richards viewed the compromise option – provision of money and non-lethal aid to anti-Assad rebel forces – as “the worst of all worlds… doing enough to exacerbate the humanitarian situation… but not enough to have the decisive impact… our approach to Syria was inimical to our humanitarian purpose.” The general even took his concerns to the Attorney-General during the summer of 2013.¹⁰⁹ Against the support provided by Iran and Russia to the Syrian government, it is unsurprising that the limited amount of aid provided to rebels by the West was insufficient to tip the balance.

When Western leaders called for al-Assad to step down on 18 August 2011, they were effectively endorsing Obama’s 31 July declaration that the Syrian leader had joined Ben Ali, Mubarak and

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 21.
¹⁰⁸ Richards, Taking Command, 320-322.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
Gaddafi on the “wrong side of history”. Al-Assad’s forces were known to have conducted atrocities by that point, and the death toll stood at around 2,500 – indeed there was a far stronger case for intervention than had been the case in Libya. But the West’s repeated writing of future history in its own image would be its undoing in Syria. Despite the horrors inflicted upon Syrians by the al-Assad regime, there was still capacity for worldwide shock at the video of a rebel solider eating the heart from an Alawite corpse – a point that Russian President Vladimir Putin made to the evident discomfort of British Prime Minister David Cameron during a G8 summit in 2013. Such barbarity reinforced the Russian and Chinese perspective that al-Assad was entitled to use extreme force in his war of national survival.

**Which opposition?**

The Sunni opposition itself fragmented into Islamist and jihadist elements. The latter took centre stage on 9 April 2013 when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the merger of the Islamic State of Iraq (an affiliate of al-Qaeda) with the Jabhat al-Nusra, a relatively new Syrian jihadist group, and declared himself Caliph of the newly-established ISIL. ISIL’s barbarity towards fellow Muslims was such that it was quickly disavowed by al-Qaeda.

The next dilemma for the West was ‘which opposition’? To help answer the question, the US Central Intelligence Agency stationed operatives in Turkey to assess which Syrian opposition groups should receive arms from US allies Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The major risk was that ever-shifting allegiances would result in foreign arms ending up in the hands of extremist rebel groups or ISIL. This risk was the principal reason for the US’s decision not to directly arm any groups itself; the other reason was that the US feared being dragged deeper into the regional proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

**Alliances**

As in both previous case studies, the extraordinary web of alliances in the Middle East affects proceedings in Syria. In fact, it is the principal battle-ground for the Saudi – Iran conflict. We have already seen that the al-Assad regime receives support from Iran and its Lebanese militia, Hezbollah, fighting for the Shi’a “Axis of Resistance” [to the US and Israel]. On the Sunni side, motives are more diverse. However all agree on the overthrow of al-Assad, to be replaced by a Sunni leader of the Sunni-majority state.

Turkey’s secondary agenda is the restriction of Kurdish ambitions. Kurds in Iraq and Syria have taken advantage of the regional strife to expand their territories and prepare the ground for

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partition, and Turkey is wary of secessionism and terrorism among its large Kurdish minority in eastern Anatolia. Turkey’s stance became highly controversial in the West when it refused to intervene in the town of Kobane, just across the border in Syria, to help Syrian Kurds defend the town against a determined ISIL assault. Pictures of Turkish tanks parked overlooking the border while US air strikes rained down prompted awkward ideological questions about the lack of concern shown by a NATO ally towards ISIL.114

Qatar’s intent in Syria has been to expand its soft power base and counter Iranian influence by winning influence over the presumed Sunni successor to al-Assad. It sponsored both Islamist and secular Sunni groups.115 Saudi Arabia, in Syria first and foremost to counter Iran, began by sponsoring only secular groups during the period of increased tension between the Saudi royal family and the Muslim Brotherhood. However, as noted earlier, the Saudis have recently warmed their relations with the Brotherhood and have started to support Islamist groups in Syria.116

**Western relations with Sunni Muslims**

Because all Western states are anti-Assad, there is no confliction in allegiance between the West and the Sunni states with regard to the Syrian leader. The strength of this network of alliances is principal reason why, even if Western strategists wanted to switch to support of al-Assad, they could not do so at reasonable political cost (next on the list would be the humiliation of climbing down in the face of Russia and China). Thus, the West is tightly bound into the Saudi – Iran conflict by its position on al-Assad, even while its leaders negotiate with Tehran over Iran’s nuclear research programme, and while the US tries to juggle the strategic inconsistencies of supporting the Tehran-backed government of Iraq.

Recently, concerns over Turkish attitudes to ISIL have expanded to encompass Saudi Arabia, which is distracted by its proxy conflict in Yemen and is said to see countering ISIL as a low priority.117 Observers have noted distinct similarities between ISIL’s ideology, which fuses elements from the Islamic schools of Wahhabism and Salafism, and the ideology of Saudi Arabia (where the former is the state doctrine, and the latter is promoted worldwide using Saudi oil money).118 Given how tightly bound the West is to the Sunni side, another dilemma is how to approach this apparent ideological grounding of ISIL. If dealing with Islamism is tricky for Western leaders, then addressing the ideology of ISIL is politically toxic; most have seen fit to dismiss ISIL as unrelated to Islam.119

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115 Khatib, “Qatar’s Foreign Policy,” 422.
116 Trofimov, “Saudis Warm to Muslim Brotherhood”
118 Stern and Berger, ISIS: State of Terror, 268.
119 Daniel Pipes, “Prominent non-Muslims decide what Islam is and is not”
This position seems simplistic.\textsuperscript{120} Egyptian President el-Sisi’s drive to reform Islamic teachings offers a possible way out for Western leaders and, again, makes his rule more valuable.

The decision of the US to bomb ISIL positions inside Syria hides a substantial dilemma. On the one hand, there was a domestic political imperative to respond to ISIL’s reign of terror and to attempt to degrade the group’s capability. On the other, attacking ISIL could have had two counter-productive effects. Firstly, it could have unsettled the West’s Sunni allies, who would see the US finally employing its power directly, but not against their enemy al-Assad. Coupled with US moves towards a deal on Iran’s nuclear programme, this might create the impression that the US was ambivalent on the Gulf states’ rivalry with Tehran. Secondly, attacking ISIL would free al-Assad’s forces to attack moderate Sunni rebels, which could have the effect of leaving ISIL as the only protectors of Syrian Sunnis. Any perceived legitimisation of ISIL in the eyes of non-extremist Muslims would be disastrous for religious relations in the West.

\textbf{Syria – Conclusion}

By declaring itself against al-Assad, the West decided that it knew Syria’s future history and locked itself firmly into the Saudi – Iran confrontation. With these positions set, and lacking any mandate, capacity or willingness for action, Western policy on Syria has stagnated while the conflict has transformed from a brutal regime crackdown into a sectarian quagmire of medieval barbarity. The only room for manoeuvre for Western states has been a choice over whether to attack ISIL – a choice with mixed outcomes on either side.

\textsuperscript{120} Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” \textit{The Atlantic} (March 2015).
Conclusion

In our three case studies, we have seen mismatches between Western foreign policy ambition and Western influence. Egypt's military defied Obama's threat to withdraw aid when it overthrew Morsi in 2013, yet that aid has been restored even as further elections appear a remote prospect under a regime that appears remarkably similar to Mubarak's. The EU can do nothing in Libya besides attempting to sink smugglers' boats, at potential harm to its international image. And the West is paralyzed on Syria, unable to intervene directly due to the objections of emboldened rival powers, and unable to contemplate revision of its first draft of 'history' due firstly to the antipathy of its Sunni allies towards al-Assad and his backers in Tehran, and secondly to avoid a humiliating climb-down in the face of Russia and China.

These outcomes reflect poorly on ambitious foreign policy aspirations, some renewed as recently as February 2015:

*Underpinning it all, we are upholding our enduring commitment to the advancement of democracy and human rights and building new coalitions to combat corruption and to support open governments and open societies. In doing so, we are working to support democratic transitions, while also reaching out to the drivers of change in this century: young people and entrepreneurs.*

The unifying theme behind the dilemmas facing the West as it sets foreign policy in Egypt, Libya and Syria is that the West has, almost entirely, brought them upon itself. The reasons for this can be found partly in the idealist tendencies of its foreign policies, and partly in what Patrick Porter has recently called the "global village myth" – the idea, strengthened especially by Pearl Harbour and 9/11, that the enemies of the West were unconstrained by geography and could spread insecurity like a contagion. As Porter notes, it "is a pernicious mentality because it can tempt even secure states into self-defeating behaviour".

The fact that Egypt, Libya and Syria are on Europe's doorstep does not weaken this argument because the European leaders most active in seeking intervention have been those of Britain and France, both of which enjoy a degree of separation from the countries of interest. It should be noted that Italy, the Western country with the most direct exposure to Libya, was also the most reluctant to become involved in NATO's operation. The risk posed by the combination of idealistic foreign policies with 'global village' thinking is exacerbated if decisions are made by national leaders with short-termist tendencies; a former British National Security Council member described David Cameron with the words "I don't think he is particularly strategic. I think he is...

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highly operational and that he thinks “strategy is what we’re going to do next.” Among elected officials with short terms of office, he is hardly likely to be alone.

So, the first dilemma for the West to resolve is whether it will mitigate its foreign policy ambition to match its declining influence in the Middle East, or whether it will accept the risk of criticism that may flow from a mismatch between words and deeds.125 Faced with the consequences of its policies in Egypt, Libya and Syria – no change, failure and failure respectively – the West might benefit from more of the ‘cautious purist’ thinking for which General Richards was criticised over Syria.

The second dilemma concerns acceptance of Islamism. As we have seen, the West, and particularly Europe, has been wary of a doctrine that refuses to separate state and religion. But a democratic resolution of the crisis in Libya will require Europe to deal in even-handed terms with Libya Dawn, and possibly thereafter with a government led by the Islamist coalition. The difficulty for states with substantial Muslim minorities will be to find a way of dealing with Islamism abroad that does not spark domestic controversy over its place in Western society.

Among the most rash, and certainly most hubristic aspects of the West’s approach to Egypt, Libya and Syria has been to presume to write their future histories; even more so to decide who would be on the “right” and “wrong” side of those histories from a firmly Western perspective. For there is much about the Middle East today that defies Western paradigms. The nature of the state and sovereignty is challenged in Libya and Syria. The relationship between Islam and the state is a matter of conflict in Libya and Syria, and the subject of counter-revolution in Egypt. Sectarianism, however instigated, motivates conflict in Syria. Analogous questions in the West were largely settled by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and the West at times seems reluctant to acknowledge that such ‘medieval’ forces can still be at work in the world. Attempts to understand and resolve the dynamics of these conflicts through a Westphalian prism may be futile; the Middle East has been, and remains, a “veritable mare’s nest.”126

Another failure of Western comprehension concerns the use of force – often extreme force – to defend or expand communities and cultures. It offends Western sensibilities that have come to see the use of force as illegitimate in practically all circumstances. On Libya, Syria (and, incidentally, Ukraine), Western politicians line up to declare that “there is no military solution.” Facts on the ground in all three instances appear to contradict these bons mots, with armed protagonists maintaining control of territory under the backing of external powers.

124 Baroness Pauline Neville-Jones, Oral evidence to House of Commons Defence Select Committee Inquiry into Decision Making in Defence Policy (HC682), February 3 (2015), Q356.
125 See, for example, Ian Black, “David Cameron: UK Arms Sales to Gulf Countries ‘Legitimate’,” The Guardian, November 6 (2012).
The Western view of the utility of force has had two important consequences in the context of this paper. First, it has weakened the resolve of the West to participate in ‘wars of choice’, namely the interventions that flow from idealist foreign policies, when casualties have occurred. Casualty aversion has hampered the effectiveness of recent interventions and made Western publics extremely reluctant to countenance new ones, even when they might have been vital to post-conflict security, thus widening the say - do gap. Second, it has led Westerners to view the domestic use of force by autocratic regimes as illegitimate, creating political imperatives for humanitarian intervention without necessarily understanding the nature of the conflict.

So, the final dilemma concerns the West’s understanding of its place in the world. On the one hand, should it continue with the hubristic notion that its values are universal? Should a US National Security Strategy, published while Syria continues to implode, declare that:

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\text{Strong and sustained American leadership is essential to a rules-based international order that promotes global security and prosperity as well as the dignity and human rights of all peoples. The question is never whether America should lead, but how we lead.}\]

Despite the positive language, this can be seen as an unpalatable option – for it commits the US, and more loosely the West, to perpetual worry over recalcitrant opponents in all corners of the globe.

Alternatively, should the West accept that it is no longer globally pre-eminent, as it felt it was after winning the Cold War? Should it learn to live as one pole of a multi-polar world, in which Russia, China, India and others have an equal right to leadership? Ultimately, should it heed the advice of Patrick Chabal?

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\text{Although the West may think it is special, Westerners need to accept they are but humans. Our theories should be set in their appropriate historical and conceptual framework. And we Westerners need to accept that such theories might have reached their limits, and for this reason have now become so many obstacles to thinking.}\]

This is unpalatable to Westerners who believe in the universality of their values, for whom the scale of suffering in Syria and Libya and political repression in Egypt is a reproach as much to the West as to the direct protagonists, and for whom any such compromise carries the toxic label of moral relativism.

Such a luxurious, principled position looks unsustainable. The limits of Western power and influence have been exposed by the global turn of events since the ‘Arab Spring’, including in

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Egypt, Libya and Syria. Challenges to Western power have brought with them challenges to Western thinking. The West must decide how it wishes to respond.
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