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Inaugural Jubilee Dialogue

The Arab Spring two years on

Marrying values and interest
to deliver long term benefit

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Monday 25 March 2013 | WP1253



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The first Jubilee Dialogue examined perspectives on change in the region, two years since the onset of the “Arab Spring.” Participants challenged the UK’s approach in marrying values and interests in its foreign policy in the region, and explored innovative ideas on how the UK can best support long-term sustainable change in the region. The Jubilee Dialogue is a series of discussions in which external experts provide their views to Government on a key foreign policy subject.

Introduction

1. The region today faces deep challenges. Some pre-date the ‘Arab Spring’ and others, notably the Syrian conflict, are a direct consequence of the change that has swept parts of the region. Transitions are proving complex, and despite some early, remarkable achievements, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya face critical economic, political and security issues.
2. Over the past two years, through the Arab Partnership, the UK has supported political and economic reform across the MENA region. This support is based both on our values and the understanding that in the long-term a more stable prosperous MENA region will be one that is based on genuine citizen participation and legitimacy. Yet there can sometimes be a difficult tension between these values and the UK’s immediate interests in national security and prosperity.
3. By engaging with regional experts, the FCO hopes to develop its understanding of the role the UK can play, what should be done next and how the UK can use its influence by building policy which supports the region.

Political Aspects

4. Following transfers of power, the ‘second chapter’ of the “Spring” process involves elections, constitution-writing and institution-building. It may be the most difficult period. The political polarisation of all areas of public life permeates the overall political and economic environment; there is no concept of shared power and vested interests remain intent on keeping people apart. Discovering which mechanisms in each country can bring people together remains critical, as does reducing the fear on handing power over, eg among the militias in Libya.
5. Much of the discussion revolved around Egypt. It is the biggest economic and political power that has undergone revolution and has considerable regional influence.
6. Egypt is suffering the consequences of a sixty year dictatorship. This legacy is felt at all levels of government and civil society. People want change, but institutions are fragile

and remain on the verge of breakdown. Under Mubarak, the state was functioning well at a certain level, ie tourism, but there was a huge disparity of wealth and the country had been on the brink of collapse for some time. A democratic process necessary to marshal the anger from the Mubarak era is underway but serious challenges persist. The government is not in control and institutions are resistant to change. Government conspiracies regarding the persistence of the old regime are a reality and the opposition does not accept freely elected Islamist parties. The “deep state” persists in fact and in the popular perception of government. Unemployed youth are exploited by all sides and need to learn the mechanisms of lobbying (as does the wider opposition) as an alternative to street politics.

7. The President is not in control of security sector reform and the army “makes a mockery of the President,” for example, ignoring curfews. Anger within the police force relating to their own fatalities throughout the revolution informs their behaviour and it is felt that they support neither the current Government nor the former regime. The judiciary is engaged in a power struggle with the Government – a factor the UK has neglected thus far. Both the judiciary and the Army are Mubarak supporters and remain opposed to the elected Government. This has contributed to the forestalling of parliamentary elections.
8. Overall, every sector within Egypt is highly politicised including human rights monitoring and advocacy. The UK must support the creation of apolitical professions and institutions. We must acknowledge the damage done in transition to bodies such as the police who retain their old patterns of behaviour. The reorganisation of professions is required in a number of transition countries in order “to pass the democratic test,” ie to change public perceptions of institutions from being a tool of the state to protectors against the abuse of power.
9. Despite high levels of education within some elements of government and society, there is a distinct lack of political skills. Parties are formed around egos and personalities *in Cairo*. The UK has great experience in “how to do politics,” ie building networks, organising, etc and is able to provide support of a technical rather than political nature, focused on institutional reform.
10. An additional variable that influences the progression of the “Arab Spring” which is not greatly understood is the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shi’a populations and related regional hegemonic aspirations.

Economic Aspects

11. The economy is a key concern for both investors and local publics. Two years on there are not only major difficulties in growth recovery and unemployment but also a growing dependency on international fiscal support. Addressing critical economic and political issues must go hand-in-hand.
12. In Egypt, economic investment is needed, debatably from the Gulf States. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia have reservations related to their own internal fears of Muslim Brotherhood influence. This is unjustified as the Brotherhood in Egypt remains focused solely on their domestic situation. The UK could play a role in leveraging further investment and in the alleviation of concern.
13. In terms of aid, the strategic approach to transition countries focuses on structural reform as opposed to the provision of material resources. There is debate surrounding how much leverage aid brings and there is a lack of political consensus regarding conditionality. Over \$12 billion in aid has been distributed across Egypt and Tunisia over the past two years (much of it from the Gulf), however the economic situation has not improved and private capital has shrunk. Aid must be well-coordinated and there is added-value from a wider range of donors.
14. The question for the international community is whether or not to let situations

deteriorate further (providing more funding despite a lack of progress in reforms), and there is a lack of understanding within the region as to why certain conditions are imposed. The UK must lead bilateral dialogue to change perceptions of how the West gives money and create a new narrative that challenges the negative perceptions of conditionality.

15. Similarly, the UK must not fall into the trap of supporting governments who are “too big to fail,” in other words, rather than see the region fall into chaos; the UK and the West more generally, may tend to support regimes despite an unacceptable lack of progress in reform programs. This is neither conducive to private capital, investment, or to the credibility of the West.
16. Economics (and more specifically, jobs) provide a fundamental challenge to many countries; however, for example in Tunisia, the governing party, Al-Nahda is focused on its attempt to reconcile Islamism with democracy. Economics is not their priority and internal politics has become all-consuming.
17. Education reform will also be critical in improving the quality of workers entering the market, especially in Iraq, Egypt and Saudi Arabia where demographic shifts will see an influx of working-age individuals over the coming years. Education reform will help to avoid the erosion of future growth, stabilise an otherwise volatile situation, and encourage private capital.

Human Rights and Values

18. In countries where there is no change, a balance must be struck between the outspoken approach of human rights organisations and a perhaps “too polite” approach of the UK Government. The Olympics highlights a unique way in which the UK can utilise its influence, eg in enforcing the IOC rule that athletic teams must include women.
19. Moreover, UK engagement with countries that have not been through significant change also presents an opportunity to marry values and interests. For example, in Algeria, where there has been limited UK engagement generally, a response such as intelligence cooperation is not going to satisfy the values-side. Interests, however, remain the key concern for business and the UK could be more explicit about its interests. In transition countries it may be easier to be driven by values, whereas in countries such as Saudi Arabia this may be less of a viable foreign policy option.
20. From a values perspective, Saudi Arabia systematically denies certain rights to its citizens, especially girls, women and its population of nine million foreign workers. Its criminal justice system is flawed as highlighted by summary executions and the imprisonment of human rights activists.
21. In Bahrain, it is accepted that human rights issues are a high priority for the British Foreign Secretary, however there is a tendency for the UK to be overly positive about the progress of reform. Many activists remain imprisoned and are therefore not engaged in the National Dialogue. The UK should maintain pressure on the Government to grant the Shi'a population more rights in terms of housing, employment, etc which critically underpin their pursuit of power-sharing. Might the consequence of this be the undermining of existing economic and business relationships with Saudi Arabia?
22. In the UAE, freedom of expression and assembly is regularly quashed as seen through the arrests of Islamists over the past year. Similarly, Egypt is likely to pass the “Association law” which will severely limit and curtail NGO activity. In Syria, the UK (and international community) must not forget the peaceful protesters who sparked the revolution and remain in Damascus, subject to random imprisonment. They still need support and focus should not just be on “the guys with the guns.”
23. In order to re-structure the public debate, the media across a number of transition

countries needs to undergo radical change moving away from state ownership.

Recommendations for UK Action

24. The group recognised the limits of the UK's sphere of influence in the region however provided the following recommendations.

Political Recommendations

25. The UK must engage civil society *and* government in transition countries through technical assistance and institutional reform. UK intervention should focus on providing technical assistance where possible as opposed to attempting to influence politics, eg support for network building and political *organisation*, knowledge transfer and transferring skills.
26. The UK should recognise that it does not deal with 'governments' per se, rather a small number of key people or "elites" in transition states. Furthermore, UK power is often over-estimated by the fact that support for change is often sought from us. In this context, the UK should use with greater determination, opportunities in meeting high-level foreign delegates to influence their behaviour.
27. Following a decade of intervention in Afghanistan, stakeholders have noted their biggest mistake in not listening to Afghans. The UK must listen more to those on the ground and pursue sound advice on *who* to talk to.
28. UK focus should be on states and societies where there is a poorer track record. The UK can take a positive role in structuring the political debate, ie non zero-sum game training and promoting open debate on issues such as corruption.
29. The UK should contribute to the construction of a non-partisan civil society across Arab Spring countries, utilising the (particularly Arab) experts involved in the Jubilee Dialogue. The UK is a highly organised society, a further area through which positive engagement could occur, ie the use of successful practitioners such as judges, doctors, etc in training. The UK is also in a unique position to mobilise the many Diaspora communities in order to develop nuanced understanding of the countries in question.
30. For the UK, the objective must be to marry values and interests especially given the regional perception that interests are generally put ahead of values. Arab Transitions have presented an opportunity to re-engage with values at the forefront as highlighted by the renewed UK relationship with Tunisia. A broad UK foreign policy goal should be to promote good governance in addition to or as a priority over democracy particularly as it is felt by some that democracy cannot be stable without a foundation in good governance. Tackling issues such as accountability and corruption is key.
31. The UK's Arab Partnership Initiative was created with a budget of £110 million to use over a four-year period. Whilst originally based solely in London, it is now principally-run in country through British Embassies. This helps to engage actors on the ground and has proven much more effective in responding to fast-changing situations. It is not the UK's role to create solutions *ab initio* but to respond to innovation and ideas from within country. There are however means of utilising what leverage the UK does have, eg through the G8 Presidency, initiatives such as the Asset Recovery plan; processes that address specific grievances.
32. Where the UK has not been effective over past years has been where it lacks credibility. There is a mixed message in encouraging investment in a Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt whilst also calling for the creation and encouragement of political opposition. In this sense, language is critical. This is also in relation to the heterogeneous nature of the region and subsequent policy differences, for example between North African countries and the Gulf States. Concepts of governance and the language attributed to them need to be subtly adjusted in order to maintain consistency and credibility.

Human Rights Recommendations

33. Reform efforts should be framed within an international human rights law context. Set within current mechanisms and treaties, the promotion of reform can be accessed via a defined benchmark that is not perceived as the imposition of Western values but universally agreed and accepted.
34. The UK should be consistent and public in its opposition to human rights abuses carried out by its allies, particularly Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. It must defend the space for activists and civil society campaigners who are often at great risk.
35. The UK must push for accountability in the region, particularly for and from those involved in abuses, eg the police in Egypt, both the regime and the opposition in Syria.

Economic Recommendations

36. The UK should use its leverage with regional allies such as Saudi Arabia to promote cooperation and break the economic impasse in countries such as Egypt. However, this may undercut the effectiveness of conditionality from other sources of funding, such as the EU.
37. A diversity of resources is needed; technical, human, financial. The UK should partner not only NGOs but also small and medium-sized businesses who seek joint enterprise in order to develop skills such as management. Creating a 'network of mentors' as set out under the G8 Presidency will be a significant contribution.
38. The UK must engage in bilateral economic dialogues aimed at changing perceptions of how the West provides funding (ie conditionality), using positive case studies and expertise from states that have experienced transition, eg Eastern Europe and the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD).
39. Leverage and capital must become decentralised and focus not just on the capital city but on the provinces. Resources cannot remain within Government (which would only create public reliance on the state for employment). Is there a role for the private sector to help?

Conclusion

Change in the MENA region over the past two years has been led from within. The UK's policy must focus on how it can best support those in the region leading positive reform, working with a wide range of both governmental and non-governmental actors. There is a valuable role for the UK to play by drawing on its technical expertise in areas such as parliamentary systems, as well as the leverage the UK exerts within the international community, for instance to better coordinate donor funding and support from the International Financial Institutions. Change within the region will be a long process, and the international community needs to maintain patience, providing support whilst being clear on the importance of democratic, inclusive values underlining political and economic systems.

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