Introduction

Ever the historian of nineteenth century British politics, William Hague took the opportunity during his first major speech as foreign secretary to compare his experience of the job to that of his predecessor Viscount Castlereagh. Whereas Castlereagh became the first foreign secretary to travel overseas to meet a counterpart when he attended the Congress of Vienna in 1814, Hague reported that twenty-first century foreign ministers speak to each other all the time, “through formal notes, highly frequent personal meetings, hours a day on the telephone to discuss and coordinate responses to crises, and quite a lot of us communicate by text message or in the case of the Foreign Minister of Bahrain and I, follow each other avidly on Twitter” (Hague 2010b). That Hague chose to use Bahrain as an example was no accident. He took a close interest in the small Gulf nation throughout his time as the Conservative Party’s top man on foreign policy, both in opposition and in office. He visited regularly, meeting with key decision-makers and speaking at the annual Manama Dialogue organised by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. That personal interest mattered. It shaped the government’s decision-making during the Arab Spring. It helped deliver Britain a permanent foothold in a strategically important region. And it signalled the government’s broader commitment to its security allies and commercial partners in the region.
This paper seeks to understand the interaction between the personal and the political in Britain’s foreign policy towards the Middle East during the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010 to 2015. It puts forward three interpretations of the roles key individual policymakers played, demonstrating each using an empirical case study. The paper firstly uses David Cameron and William Hague as proxy figures for the tensions at the heart of the government’s overall foreign policy approach, known as “liberal conservatism” (Cameron 2006). This section assesses the two leaders’ respective personalities, and identifies two distinct approaches Britain took to the ‘Arab Spring’, one more ‘liberal’, the other more ‘conservative’, with Cameron and Hague respectively. While this identification does not precisely track the influence each man had over the different policy responses, it does make effective use of the personal as a heuristic device. The paper secondly looks at the instrumental role individuals played in policy implementation. This section focuses on how face-to-face meetings, Hague’s personal interest and the initiative shown by Lt. General Sir Simon Mayall, the government’s Defence Special Advisor for the Middle East, combined to bring about the December 2014 agreement between Britain and Bahrain allowing the Royal Navy to open a permanent naval base at Mina Salman, near Manama. By shifting the focus of Britain’s global security presence back ‘East of Suez’ this step both signalled and executed a substantial re-orientation of the country’s broader international role profile. The paper finally considers the symbolism associated with personal relations among leaders. This section highlights how much time senior figures spent on purely ceremonial face-to-face meetings in the pursuit of more prosaic commercial deals, especially with the UAE and Qatar. It nevertheless notes that ceremony and substance go together, reinforcing each other.

Over the course of these three case studies, which do of necessity overlap somewhat, the paper also applies a note of caution. The coalition’s period in office saw several major
developments in Britain’s foreign policy stance towards the Middle East. Britain supported revolutionaries in Libya and the autocratic regime in Bahrain. It built good links with the Egyptians who overthrew Hosni Mubarak, and then with those who kicked out Mohammed Morsi and returned the country to military rule. It revitalised ossified security relationships in the Gulf and significantly increased regional commercial activity. All of these policies involved individuals at some stage. But all also involved responding to broader structural pressures. It is dangerous to neglect the structural dimension when studying the role of individuals (Dyson 2009, 18). Britain has considerable material interests in the Gulf. As then-Middle East Minister Alistair Burt put it, “In 2011 [notably at the start of the coalition’s time in office] we estimate that the value of British exports to the region topped £20 billion…this is as much as we export to China and India combined; it is three times more than we export to Russia; it is five times more than we export to Brazil” (Burt 2012). While the security threats that concern Gulf states probably need not concern Britain directly, meanwhile, it does have nearly two hundred thousand citizens working in the region and it is heavily dependent on natural gas imported from Qatar (Roberts 2014, 670-672). Any British government, in other words, would be likely to think the Gulf region significant simply for material reasons. They would also come under social pressure to place a regional role. Britain tends to see itself, and to be seen by other states, as something of a great power (Morris 2011, 326, McCourt 2014, 168), and great power status means great power expectations, including some sort of role in promoting international order beyond your immediate surroundings. In the past Britain has played the role of regional protector for Gulf states, and many would like it to resume that responsibility (Kelly and Stansfield 2013, 1219, Roberts 2014, 667), especially as the US ‘pivots’ to Asia. Indeed, David Cameron himself framed Britain’s closer engagement in the Gulf under his premiership as “our own pivoting” (Cameron 2014, 23). To understand the
significance of the personal drivers shaping Britain’s Middle East policy during this period, then, we must also be constantly aware of the power of the political.

**Personality as a heuristic**

Long before taking office, David Cameron and William Hague set out the set of beliefs to guide their approach to foreign policy in government. Early in his time as Conservative Party leader, Cameron used a speech to the British-American project to declare “I am a liberal conservative, not a neo-conservative” (Cameron 2006). He argued, in essence, that Tony Blair and George W Bush had had the right objective when they argued for the global application of democracy, but the wrong means when they tried to spread Western values by force. A Conservative government would do things differently, standing up for what it believed to be right but acting cautiously and proportionately. Cameron essentially built on Blair, while adding a post-Iraq dose of humility (Beech and Oliver 2014, 105, Gilmore 2014, 541). To some extent the inclusion of a liberal dimension in a traditionally conservative framework marked a greater break between Cameron and Major or Thatcher than between Cameron and Blair (Beech 2011, 348, Gilmore 2015). Cameron himself has been personally associated with this shift, with the introduction of liberalism playing a similar role in foreign policy to his environmental and social positions in domestic policy (Beech and Oliver 2014, 103). The ‘conservatism’ part of the doctrine was supposed to be about showing the “modesty” long sought by critics of Blair’s approach (Barder 2001, 371), and indeed about reclaiming the “pragmatism” and “isolationism” that characterised much of Britain’s engagement not just with the Middle East, but with the world, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hadfield-Amkhan 2010, 6, Oppermann 2012, 6). As Daddow put it, “for ‘conservative’ in ‘liberal conservative’ read ‘realist’” (Daddow 2013, 116).
When we look at Britain’s response to the Arab Spring, however, the framework apparently established by the doctrine of liberal conservatism begins to break down. This is why the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee called the Arab Spring “both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity to date for this Government’s foreign policy” (Foreign Affairs Committee 2012). It is true that “Cameron has been much more cautious than Blair in setting down conditions for violations of the Westphalian notion of state sovereignty that might lead to a form of moral crusade that mired Britain and the United States in Iraq” (Daddow and Schnapper 2013, 333). It is also true, however, that Cameron proved just as ready as Blair to ignore his own conditions when the opportunity arose for military intervention in the Middle East. The Coalition’s entire national security doctrine assumed Cameron would not repeat Tony Blair’s liberal interventions (Vickers 2011, 212, Clarke 2012, 7-8, Gannon 2014, 219). Despite this, and apparently more for ethical than material reasons (Honeyman 2012, 131), the prime minister ordered military intervention in Libya and tried to order it in Syria before parliament vetoed his proposal. In practice the ‘liberal conservatives’ proved unexpectedly active in terms of military interventions (Honeyman 2012, 133-134). This might reflect the fact that both liberalism and conservatism point towards international activism, just in different ways (Reifler, Scotto and Clarke 2011, 263, Bevir, Daddow and Hall 2013, 167-168). It also, however, points towards an inconsistency between the key individuals leading the coalition, and especially to an apparent split between the approaches favoured by Cameron and Hague. For while Cameron organised intervention in Libya and failed to get parliamentary approval for action in Syria, Hague explicitly acknowledged the likely trade-off between values and self-interest involved in dealing with the wider Middle East (Ralph 2014, 18). Most observers agreed that “the impetus to get involved – to ‘do something’ in the face of Qadhafi’s escalating brutality – came from Downing Street directly” (Clarke 2012, 8). Cameron appeared as “the most
hawkish person in the room” in contemporary accounts, pushing back hard against contrary military and legal advice (Byman 2013, 305). Hague, by contrast, kept faith with the monarchical Sunni regime in Bahrain as it drew on Saudi support to put down protests from amongst the country’s majority Shia community (Leech and Gaskarth 2015, 142). There appeared to be a split, in other words, between the ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ dimensions of liberal conservatism. By looking at Cameron and Hague’s personalities, we can begin to suggest how this split came about.

Most foreign policy analyses using leaders’ personal characteristics to explain decision-making begin with work done by Margaret Hermann. Hermann posited that key individuals’ “beliefs, motives, decision style, and interpersonal style” fundamentally shape foreign policy, though she acknowledged that they matter more when leaders show a greater interest in foreign affairs, and less when they have greater training and experience in the field (Hermann 1980, 8, 13). Hermann essentially built upon Alexander George’s cognitive theory of “operational codes”, though she paid somewhat greater attention to the instrumental than to the philosophical side of George’s framework (George 1969). She noted that many foreign policy decisions do not directly involve senior policymakers, meaning that the personal characteristics of lower-level officials matter too (Hermann, Hermann and Hagan 1987, 311). She also pointed out that personal characteristics do not just shape the kinds of decisions leaders make, they shape the kinds of issues they identify as requiring a decision in the first place (Hermann 2001, 53). Stephen Dyson has made good use of Hermann’s “leadership trait analysis” framework in his analysis of the personal role played by Tony Blair in British foreign policymaking. While there is insufficient space in this section to conduct a full analysis of where Cameron and Hague fall on Hermann’s framework, a comparison to Dyson’s work on Blair does help us identify differences between the two which in turn help explain Britain’s somewhat inconsistent overall approach to the Arab Spring. Dyson found
Blair possessed “a high belief in his ability to control events, a low conceptual complexity, and a high need for power”. Based on these characteristics, Dyson predicted Blair would prefer pro-active policies, simplistic definitions of situations, quick answers based on rapid information searches, and an informal and personalised decision-making structure (Dyson 2006, 289, 295-296). Anyone who has studied Blair’s foreign policy, especially in the Middle East, for any length of time will recognise these characteristics at work. Oliver Daddow, for example concluded in line with Dyson that Blair’s pro-activity distinguished him from his predecessors and played a significant part in affecting his overall foreign policy approach (Daddow 2013, 113).

The mere fact we need to study Hague alongside Cameron suggests the latter showed a far lower ‘need for power’ than Blair. Blair centralised foreign policy decision-making in Downing Street, cutting out the Foreign Office (Bevir, Daddow and Hall 2013, 163) which, for example, had no Minister for the Middle East between May 2001 and June 2003, a fairly important time period for Britain’s relations with the region (Hollis 2010, 61). Cameron agreed with the substance of much of Blair’s Middle Eastern policy, but he rejected his centralisation and personalisation of decision-making (Honeyman 2009, 174). He and Hague had a far more equal relationship than Blair had with any of his foreign secretaries (Dodds and Elden 2008, 348, Daddow 2013, 115). Lord Butler noted how the Cabinet Committee on Defence and Overseas Policy “did not meet” during the year leading up to the Iraq War, while “over the period from April 2002 to the start of military action, some 25 [informal] meetings attended by the small number of key Ministers, officials and military officers most closely involved provided the framework of discussion and decision-making within Government” (Butler 2004, 174). Cameron, by contrast, established a formal National Security Council as a committee of Cabinet shortly after taking office. He later told service personnel returning from action over Libya that the Council met 68 times during the course
of the campaign (Cameron 2011b). This was not just a response to the greater need for cross-governmental consultation during a period of coalition. The NSC fulfilled a Conservative manifesto promise (Conservative Party 2010, 105). Hague meanwhile spoke up regularly for the importance of the Foreign Office and its secretary of state as the central drivers of British foreign policy. This suggests a higher need for power on his part, though this observation must be qualified by the fact Hague had previously held the leadership of the Conservative Party and made clear he did not want to do so again. He was able, therefore, to assert his own right to set much of the agenda for Britain’s response to the Arab Spring without appearing to threaten the prime minister, and the prime minister was happy to let him do so, while reserving matters involving the potential use of force to himself. This partnership opened the way for apparent variations in terms of Britain’s overall response to the wave of unrest that swept the Middle East from early 2011 onwards.

The activism Cameron showed in those areas he did take charge of suggests a similar level of belief in his own ability to control events to Blair’s. In some ways Cameron’s personality is difficult to pin down. He has, across various policy areas, shown signs of being both a reserved pragmatist and an ideological crusader (Hayton 2014, 6). One the one hand, Cameron told interviewers before coming to office that he admired Palmerston, a great historical proponent of British overseas activism and gunboat diplomacy (Dodds and Elden 2008, 350). On the other, contemporary observers remarked how in his early days in Downing Street he showed little interest in international affairs beyond efforts to boost prosperity through trade (Stephens 2011a). Dyson labelled Blair “the ‘waringest’ prime minister in British history” (Dyson 2009, 3). But Cameron proved almost as willing to use force overseas, and did so earlier in his first term, authorising a major military campaign in Libya just ten months after entering Downing Street. His spectacular parliamentary defeat over the question of intervention in Syria is difficult to square with his wider reputation for
“innate caution and usually sound political instincts” (Matthijs 2013, 10). Again a comparison to Blair might be instructive. Blair showed limited interest and an instinctive caution in foreign affairs during his early time in office. It was only after Kosovo, and the experience of apparently being proven right against the advice of those around him and in the face of considerable international pressure, that he adopted a more activist stance (Daddow 2009, 548). We might treat Libya as Cameron’s Kosovo. Certainly he seems to have underestimated the difficulty of winning parliamentary support for action in Syria in part because he found it easy for action in Libya. Similarly we might treat Syria as another key shift, with Cameron becoming more cautious again thereafter, for example by holding off on action against ISIS during the early stages of the US campaign (Strong 2015). Contemporary observers, in clear contrast to both Blair and Cameron, saw Hague as “pragmatism incarnate”, as more a manager of events than a shaper of them (Bagehot 2010). Just as the fact Cameron allowed Hague more space to run foreign policy than Blair, for example, allowed his foreign secretaries established space for distinct interpretations of liberal conservatism to affect different parts of Britain’s response to the Arab Spring overall, so too Cameron’s apparently greater belief in his own ability to influence events perhaps explains the more activist ‘liberal’ approach he took with regard to Libya and Syria compared to Hague’s more cautious ‘conservative’ stance with regard to Bahrain.

Both Cameron and Hague displayed a greater level of conceptual complexity in terms of their approach to foreign policy in the Middle East than Blair. Blair maintained that “doing nothing is not an option” with regard to Iraq’s alleged development of Weapons of Mass Destruction (Hansard 2002, Col. 23). Cameron, by contrast, acknowledged that “doing nothing is a choice” in the face of Syria’s alleged use of Weapons of Mass Destruction on civilians, though he insisted “it is a choice with consequences” (Hansard 2013, Col. 1434). This was a far more nuanced argument, albeit also a less successful one. As Cameron pushed
for a limited intervention in Libya to protect civilians and uphold UN Security Council Resolutions, Hague argued it would be “the height of folly” to burn otherwise well-functioning historical relationships in the Gulf in response to a comparatively low level of repression (Hansard 2011, Col. 1139). Both men tried to strike a balance in dealing with Bahrain in particular, publicly calling for reforms and restraint on the one hand, and praising the regime’s efforts to lead the process on the other. Hague spoke directly to the Bahraini foreign minister early in the unrest, urging him to minimise the use of force against protestors (Hansard 2011, Col. 1135). Cameron spoke directly to the King of Bahrain on 20 February, offering support for his efforts to promote a “national dialogue” (HM Government 2011a). He followed this up on 16 March when he “personally called on the King of Bahrain to end the violent suppression of street protests” (HM Government 2011b). By December 2011 Cameron felt confident enough to combine his calls for reform with efforts to “boost trade co-operation between the two countries and the opportunities for British business to invest in Bahrain, particularly in the infrastructure sector” (HM Government 2011e). Critics called Britain’s willingness to tolerate Bahraini efforts to resolve protests while criticizing other states “hypocrisy for the history books” (Amirahmadi and Afrasiabi 2011). Hague and Cameron appear to have viewed it more as a matter of pragmatism.

We can, then, interpret Britain’s somewhat varied response to the Arab Spring using three individual-level factors. First, the fact the government apparently adopted a different balance between the ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ dimensions of liberal conservatism reflects the scope for difference established by Cameron’s more collegiate approach to foreign policy and Hague’s greater freedom to assert himself compared to the position during the premiership of Tony Blair. Second, we can then understand the apparent split between the government’s military activism in Libya and (though ultimately thwarted by MPs) in Syria, and relative passivity elsewhere, as a product of the contrast between Cameron’s belief in his
own ability to control events and Hague’s scepticism. Finally, we can interpret the levels of
nuance shown across the board as a consequence of both Cameron and Hague’s higher
conceptual complexity compared to Blair. These observations do advance our understanding
of how Britain responded to the Arab Spring, and demonstrate the heuristic utility of
interpretations based on individual personalities for studying foreign policy. This is especially
important given the difficulties associated with understanding Britain’s approach from a more
structural perspective. Leech and Gaskarth looked at security, economic and societal ties
between Britain and the states affected by Arab Spring protests. Only the security dimension
offered a consistent account, and even that depended on distinguishing between younger and
older security links (Leech and Gaskarth 2015, 142). The personal dimension thus appears to
add something useful to our understanding overall.

**Personality as a tool for policy implementation**

An appreciation of policymakers’ personalities can aid our understanding of foreign
policy decision-making. But foreign policy is about more than just decisions. A proper
account of Britain’s policy stance towards the Middle East during the coalition government
should also consider policy outputs and outcomes (Clarke and Smith 1989, 172), and the role
individuals play in linking them together. Individuals may have limited scope at the decision
stage, but they can potentially exert a greater influence over how decisions are implemented
(McCourt 2014, 176). The inconsistency apparent in Britain’s response to the Arab Spring
underlines this point (Gaskarth 2014, 559). Dyson argued that individuals matter because
“first, individuals set the goals and objectives for the state…Second, individuals can choose
the means by which these goals are to be pursued. Third, individuals can shape the process of
decision-making” (Dyson 2009, 14). Adding their role in implementation means taking a
logical next step. The remainder of this paper uses the distinction between “instrumental” and “expressive” policy activities (Baldwin 1985, 16), with this section highlighting the former and the final section the latter. An instrumental approach treats personal links among policymakers as potential tools for policy implementation, while an expressive approach treats such links as more symbolic than substantive, though no less important for it.

Both Cameron and Hague commented before coming to office on the Labour government’s apparent neglect of the Gulf region, and promised to reverse it in office (Cameron 2010, Hague 2010a). The government as a whole saw direct face-to-face meetings between senior policymakers as a critical tool for reversing this apparent neglect (HM Government 2014a). Between 2011 and 2013 the FCO successfully established ‘strategic partnerships’ with five of the six key Gulf states identified by its 2011 business plan, with Saudi Arabia the lone holdout (Foreign Affairs Committee 2013, 20). By the time Alistair Burt stepped down as Middle East Minister, he was able to report that “Ministers and others have made 260 individual visits to the region since 2010, including some extremely high-level visits” (Hansard 2014, Col. 318WH). This volume of traffic was, to Burt, both a cause and an indication of the government’s success in the region. Its most stark consequence arrived in December 2014, when Philip Hammond, Hague’s successor as foreign secretary, signed a formal agreement with the Bahraini government establishing a permanent Royal Navy base at Mina Salman in Manama. This brought Britain back ‘East of Suez’ for the first time since 1971. It was an important step. The original withdrawal was both a “massive policy failure” and an “impetus for profound policy change” (Hood 2008, 184). It reflected in part, as McCourt put it, a “realisation that Britain’s desire to play a meaningful world role no longer required, nor could include, the construction of the specific role ‘East of Suez’” (McCourt 2009, 454). If the ‘East of Suez’ role is now being reconstituted, that suggests a further overhaul of what it means for Britain to act as a great power internationally. General
Sir David Richards, Chief of the Defence Staff, gave an early indication that the government and the military were planning to rebalance Britain’s defence commitments ‘East of Suez’ in his 2012 RUSI lecture (Richards 2012). Both contemporary observers (Norton-Taylor 2012) and later scholarly accounts (Kelly and Stansfield 2013, 1215) thought Richards’ speech particularly significant. Indeed, one called it “the visible tip of an iceberg of wider discussions and planning involving the Ministry of Defence, Downing Street and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office” (Roberts 2014, 663). Press coverage of the December 2014 announcement noted “military chiefs are understood to have been working towards the move for around two years” (Press Association 2014), presumably a reference to Richards’ speech. A personal element is visible in this development, as it presumably built upon “a UK-Bahrain Defence Cooperation Accord (DCA), which was signed in London during the visit of Bahraini Foreign Minister HE Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa” (Foreign Affairs Committee 2013, 86).

Some coverage of the new base’s announcement focused on its positive strategic dimensions, highlighting for example the pressure from Gulf states’ expectations (Spencer 2014, Coughlin 2014) and the need to compensate for the US pivot to Asia as key driving forces (Dickinson 2014). These are both notably structural rather than agent-driven explanations for the British decision. Some coverage proved more critical. The Independent’s front page news story highlighted suggestions from Bahraini activists that “this base is a reward to the British government for the silence they provided on human rights abuses in Bahrain, and for their continued support of this tyrannical and corrupt regime” (Merrill 2014). A follow-up piece by Patrick Cockburn in the Independent on Sunday complained that “The agreement will identify Britain as an old colonial power strongly supporting the Sunni monarchy in Bahrain that mercilessly crushed demands for democracy and civil rights from the island's Shia majority during the Arab Spring in 2011” (Cockburn 2014). Seumas Milne
in the *Guardian*, meanwhile, concluded that “we can have no doubt where the British government stands: behind autocracy and ‘enduring interests’” (Milne 2014). These criticisms may well have had some merit. There is evidence that the Bahraini government threatened to withdraw military co-operation in response to Britain’s perceived criticism during the unrest of early 2011, and the British ambassador was replaced, apparently because he lost the trust of the regime by talking to opposition leaders (Foreign Affairs Committee 2013, 86, 75-76).

Both scholarly and press reports agree that the government’s Special Advisor for the Middle East, Lt. General Simon Mayall, played a leading role in pushing for the shift back ‘East of Suez’ and in negotiating the agreement that saw the Mina Salman base established (Kelly and Stansfield 2013, 1209, D. Blair 2014, Coughlin 2014). Defence Secretary Michael Fallon later confirmed in the House of Commons that Mayall “was responsible for negotiating this agreement” (Hansard 2015, Col. 592). Mayall had wide and regular access to officials in both the UK and the region. UK court circulars regularly reported his meetings with senior members of the royal family, while the local press (especially in the Gulf) noted his sessions with senior ministers and military officials. We can infer that Mayall had David Cameron’s personal approval from his later appointment as “direct representative of the prime minister in Kurdistan” (Wintour 2014), “authorized…to hold talks with Kurdish leaders over what support they need, as well as providing military advice” (N. Morris 2014). In early 2014 Mayall accompanied then-Defence Secretary Hammond to the Bahrain air show and to a meeting with the Bahrain Defence Forces Commander-in-Chief (who Mayall regularly met on his own). At the latter meeting Field Marshall Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Khalifa “highlighted the importance of such meetings in consolidating the existing distinguished bilateral ties” (Bahrain News Agency 2014a). Mayall also led a senior security delegation who were “the first Western visitors received by Egypt's newly sworn-in president
Abdel Fatah El Sisi” (Intellinews 2014). In November 2014 Mayall made a visit to Bahrain that appears to have cemented the details for the accord signed at the Manama Dialogue the following month. On this trip, and unusually for him, he met the King as well as the Minister for Defence, the Commander-in-Chief, the Commander of the Royal Guard and the Interior Minister (Bahrain News Agency 2014b).

Hague’s good personal relations with Manama seem also to have helped smooth the process towards the December 2014 accord. His refusal to meet with opposition figures during the Bahraini protests appears to have endeared him to the regime somewhat (Economist.com 2012). But he had shown an interest in the region and dedicated time to meeting key Bahraini figures much earlier. He was an established participant in IISS’s Manama Dialogues, first appearing in the printed report of the second Dialogue in 2006, taking part in a televised debate on Al-Arabiya in 2008, participating in a panel discussion in 2012 (the first dialogue after the 2011 crackdown) and giving the keynote address in 2013. Apparently as a result of Hague’s personal involvement, British participation in the Dialogues underwent a significant step-change after 2010. Hague himself spoke in 2012 and 2013, and both Hammond and Defence Secretary Michael Fallon spoke in 2014. Hammond signed the formal agreement creating the Mina Salman base in the fringes of the 2014 Dialogue (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2014, 6). In his 2013 keynote, Hague told his hosts “We will be a staunch friend to you, supporting the sustained comprehensive reform you’re seeking and calling on all sides to play a constructive role in political dialogue”. He also noted “One of our first decisions as a government, a new government in Britain in May 2010 was to reinvigorate British diplomacy in the Gulf and to reverse what we saw as the neglect by previous ministers of crucial relationships” (Hague 2013). Philip Hammond echoed these sentiments precisely in his own speech the following year, while also announcing “I was delighted last night to sign a memorandum of understanding with His
Excellency Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, in the presence of His Royal Highness the Crown Prince. That arrangement will put the long-standing presence of the Royal Navy in Bahrain on a permanent footing” (Hammond 2014). It is unclear whether this agreement shows that Hague and Hammond approached Bahrain from a similar perspective, whether Hague had successfully established a policy focus on Bahrain that Hammond simply adopted, or whether both individuals were responding more to structural factors. There is however evidence to suggest that Britain need not have chosen Bahrain as a site for its renewed presence in the Gulf region (Foreign Affairs Committee 2013, 86).

We can also see signs of personal links being used in an instrumental fashion in Britain’s wider commercial engagement with the Gulf. One of David Cameron’s first overseas trips as prime minister took him to the UAE for a defence conference in June 2011. He received Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan the following month in London, and the two established a joint UK-UAE Taskforce oriented towards promoting commercial links which continued to meet regularly throughout the coalition’s time in office (Hague 2010b). By March 2012 Alistair Burt was reporting “commercial initiatives, development cooperation, consular coordination, energy collaboration and increased transport links” emerging from the UAE taskforce (Burt 2012). He would later recommend that his successor, Tobias Ellwood, pursue a solid personal relationship with UAE foreign minister Dr Gargash as a route to further mutual commercial benefit (Hansard 2014, Col. 320WH). Bilateral trade between the UK and the Gulf did increase markedly under the coalition. The Foreign Affairs Committee, for example, reported that “the FCO told us that the UK's bilateral trade with the Gulf had increased by 39% over the last two years, from £21.5 billion to £29.8 billion” (Foreign Affairs Committee 2013, 21). One area that did not really succeed, somewhat ironically, was defence sales. A government statement on Cameron’s visit to the region in November 2012 reported that he was pursuing deals “worth £5.4 billion in annual
exports and sustaining 54,000 jobs - and the Prime Minister will use to the trip to specifically promote the Typhoon fast jet to Gulf leaders” (HM Government 2012c). Cameron invested considerable personal time and effort in trying to sell the Typhoon to UAE leaders (Robinson and Smith 2013). He failed, managing to secure only a ‘dialogue of values’ that presumably did not have £5.4 billion or 54,000 jobs attached (HM Government 2013). Cameron nevertheless did not give up, though his specific discussions on defence shifted after 2014 to focus more on the regional threat posed by ISIS (HM Government 2014c). In June 2014, for example, Downing Street reported:

“The Prime Minister called the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayad Al Nahyan to welcome today’s Emirati investment into housing in Manchester. The PM said that he hoped that the UAE would make more substantial investments in Britain in the near future, given all the opportunities on offer. Both leaders agreed that their respective Ministers should take this work forward” (HM Government 2014b).

At a face-to-face meeting in London during October of the same year, furthermore, Cameron “welcomed recent Qatari investment of over £20 billion in Britain and encouraged the Emir to consider more opportunities across the country” (HM Government 2014d). He was still bringing in money, even if he wasn’t exporting fighter jets.

Personal contact mattered in instrumental terms for Britain’s relations with the Middle East under the coalition. It drove, shaped and ultimately secured closer security co-operation with Bahrain, delivering a significant strategic shift in the process as British forces returned ‘East of Suez’ for the first time since 1971. Personal contact also delivered some commercial benefits, especially in terms of trade and investment partnerships with the UAE and Qatar. Thanks in part to Hague’s established relations with the Bahraini government, and in part to the fact Britain did not go as far as the US in criticising the regime over its handling of protests (Byman 2013, 291), Britain weathered a potentially awkward storm in 2011 without either giving up too much credibility or forsaking productive personal ties (though it did lose
Personal relations as symbols

One of the main ways the coalition government signalled its renewed focus on the Gulf was quite simply by going there, frequently. In the four years from May 2010 to June 2014, David Cameron undertook one hundred and twenty-one overseas visits, and William Hague one hundred and eighty-five. Both visited the Middle East (including Afghanistan) more frequently than any other region other than Europe. Hague, for example, visited roughly once every two months, making twenty-nine trips in total, which was the same number of visits he made to North America and Asia combined. In total 15.7% of Hague’s overseas trips and 19% of Cameron’s were to the broader Middle East. Indeed, former Middle East Minister Alistair Burt proudly told a Westminster Hall debate in early 2014 that “Ministers and others have made 260 individual visits to the region since 2010, including some extremely high-level visits” (Hansard 2014, Col. 318WH). Table 1 shows the total number of trips each individual made, and the relative balance between world regions.

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<td>South America</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>121</strong></td>
<td><strong>0.8%</strong></td>
<td><strong>185</strong></td>
<td><strong>1.1%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 meanwhile shows the balance between different sub-regions within the Middle East. Here what stands out is the importance of the Gulf specifically. Hague visited Gulf states more frequently than any other part of the region, while Cameron visited both the Gulf and Afghanistan eight times over the course of the four years, with the two representing just under 70% of all of his travel to the wider region.

Table 2: Overseas ministerial visits, May 2010-June 2014, MENA region only (HM Government 2015).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-region</th>
<th>Cameron</th>
<th>Hague</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gulf</td>
<td>8 34.8%</td>
<td>12 35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>4 17.4%</td>
<td>10 29.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levant</td>
<td>3 13.0%</td>
<td>6 17.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>8 34.8%</td>
<td>4 11.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>0 0.0%</td>
<td>2 5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hague described all this activity as symbolic of “a serious elevation of relationships” between the UK and the Gulf. He also made clear it was entirely deliberate (Hansard 2010, Col. 797). Following on from their establishment of the UK-UAE Taskforce in June 2010, Cameron again hosted Sheikh Mohamed in October (HM Government 2010), while in November the Queen paid a state visit to the Gulf (Kelly and Stansfield 2013, 1209). Journalists covering the royal tour reported that “business are hoping that trade will receive a significant boost” (Kerr and Drummond 2010). Given the Queen has a purely ceremonial role, it is difficult to frame this tour as anything other than a symbolic act, albeit one of particular significance given the fact the Gulf states are monarchies, too. Indeed, the (abortive) bilateral forum established between the UK and Saudi Arabia was named the ‘Two Kingdoms Dialogue’. During a visit to Abu Dhabi in November 2010, for example, Hague signed “a Declaration reaffirming the 1971 Treaty of Friendship between the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates…to recommit ourselves to the relationship between our two countries” (Hague 2010c). The declaration meant nothing substantively, but it sent a
valuable signal. A joint statement on the first year of the UK/UAE taskforce explicitly highlighted the symbolic value of personal visits: “the year has been marked by numerous high level visits between the two countries, symbolising the closeness and importance of the partnership” (HM Government 2011c). In November 2011, Cameron hosted the Qatari PM for lunch in his constituency, another symbolic gesture (HM Government 2011d). In 2012 the government explicitly acknowledged the symbolic role personal visits played in Britain’s Gulf relations, noting that Cameron’s decision to visit both the UAE and Saudi Arabia for a second time in his second year in office “signals the his commitment to cementing long term partnerships with two of Britain’s most important strategic allies in the Gulf” (HM Government 2012c). This activity continued throughout the coalition’s time in office. Cameron signed the ‘sharaka’ bilateral agreement with Qatar when the Emir visited Downing Street in October 2014 (HM Government 2014d). Tobias Ellwood co-chaired the first meeting of the ‘sharaka’ dialogue in Doha in February 2015 (HM Government 2015).

Personal contacts also played a significant symbolic role in Britain’s response to the Arab Spring. Cameron held an early meeting with Prime Minister Abdurrahim al-Keib of Libya not long after the latter came to office (HM Government 2012a). Having built up connections with the governing transitional council in Tripoli, the British government told MPs that it would “continue to leverage its political influence to make the most of the very warm disposition shown by so many Libyans towards Britain. We will achieve this through Ministerial and high level visits and a CEO forum of senior British business people” (HM Government 2012b, 23). On a visit to Kuwait he took part in “Kuwait’s first ever prime ministerial press conference” (Bagehot 2011b). Thanks to what Bagehot called “a happy accident of diary planning Mr Cameron became the first big country leader to arrive in Egypt after the fall of its former president, Hosni Mubarak” (Bagehot 2011a). On this visit he “met Field Marshal Tantawi, Prime Minister Shafiq and Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit, as well as
democratic activists who had taken part in the revolution, and visited Tahrir Square” (Foreign Affairs Committee 2012, 59-60). His meetings with key military officials and figures in the transitional government helped confer international legitimacy on the revolution. It was significant, however, that Cameron deliberately did not meet with members of the Muslim Brotherhood on this visit. As the Foreign Affairs Committee later noted, “the Muslim Brotherhood’s English language website referred to the ‘snub’, and stated that it believed that the UK was ‘mirroring US suspicions because the Brotherhood seeks a democracy based on Islamic principles’” (Foreign Affairs Committee 2012, 61). The government maintained “It would have been inappropriate to meet the Muslim Brotherhood at such an early and delicate stage in Egypt’s transition, a matter of days after the revolution. We could have been open to accusations of taking sides or attempting to influence the course of the political transition” (HM Government 2012b, 18-19). Nevertheless the fact the Muslim Brotherhood candidate eventually became President of Egypt suggested the limits of the government’s concern with symbolism.

Security imagery and ideas run through Britain’s symbolic prosperity agenda in the Gulf. Kelly and Stansfield, for example, noted the way policymakers appeared to use defence ties as a wedge to open up broader trade and investment relations, especially with the UAE (Kelly and Stansfield 2013, 1205). Simon Mayall himself framed the logic of the UK’s overall approach to the Gulf in exactly these terms, suggesting that defence co-operation would lead to defence sales, defence sales to broader economic relations, and broader economic relations to improvements in human rights (Mayall 2013, 9). Gilmore called this argument “disingenuous”, noting that the sales go ahead whether the human rights situation improves or not (Gilmore 2014, 555). But it does seem to explain in some part the way senior British officials view their task in the Gulf, and it is clear that defence and security do form a sort of backbone along which bilateral relations are built up. When Cameron visited Kuwait
in February 2011 (the trip he re-purposed to include a stop in Egypt) he travelled with at least seven representatives of major defence contractors (Leech and Gaskarth 2015, 151). The Foreign Affairs Committee called this a “misjudgement”. “It was a mistake”, the MPs concluded, “for the Prime Minister to be seen to be promoting the UK’s arms trade on a visit to a region undergoing uprisings in which some authoritarian regimes had used force against their own people” (Foreign Affairs Committee 2012, 41-42). Generally speaking Cameron worked hard to signal a middle-of-the-road position. Giving a speech in Kuwait on the same trip, he insisted “is not for me, or for governments outside the region, to pontificate about how each country meets the aspirations of its people” (Cameron 2011a). Bagehot described this section as being “as weasel-like as anything penned by the most shimmeringly-smooth Foreign Office realist” (Bagehot 2011b).

The symbolic dimension of personal contacts cut two ways. They signal positive engagement on Britain’s part, but they can also have more negative implications. This was especially the case with regard to unrest in states with which coalition ministers had already developed strong personal ties. As one commentator put it, “Cameron has deflected some fallout on Libya because it was Tony Blair who sealed the deal in the desert. Oman, on the other hand, is a coalition priority. William Hague has visited (twice I think). The Queen spent three days in Muscat celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Qaboos reign. Cameron was dining in the sultan’s palace only last week” (Barker 2011). In Bahrain, similarly, “the Foreign Secretary had visited Bahrain and held talks with the King just days before the protests began in February 2011” (Foreign Affairs Committee 2013, 74). Personal meetings send signals. They imply a degree of friendship between governments. The coalition used this symbolism to bolster friendly (or potentially friendly) leaders during the course of the Arab Spring. But it also found itself implicated in the domestic repression visible in some states thanks to its existing personal ties. This is one reason why symbolic meetings feed back into
substantive policymaking. Leaders know they will be held accountable if policies turn out badly, even if their own personal involvement does not extend beyond the symbolic. For that reason, they tend to pay more attention to the substance of policies when they are expected to be involved in the ceremonies attached to them (Hermann 2001, 59).

One particularly interesting titbit that comes out of coverage of Simon Mayall’s activities in the Gulf press is the fact that construction work actually began on the UK’s new naval base eight months before the formal signing of the treaty. Mayall was present at a ground-breaking ceremony alongside British Ambassador Lindsay in April 2014 (see Figure 1).

![Ground-breaking ceremony for UK naval base at Mina Salman, April 2014](Gulf Daily News 2014a)

Figure 1: Ground-breaking ceremony for UK naval base at Mina Salman, April 2014 (Gulf Daily News 2014a).

The major announcement staged at Manama in December, then, was purely ceremonial. Observing Cameron in Kuwait in February 2011, Bagehot reflected on “the oddities of diplomatic ceremony”. Formal greetings, photo opportunities, troop reviews and the like played a meaningful if symbolic role, Bagehot thought. They provided imagery to reinforce the rhetoric of friendship and engagement (Bagehot 2011c). That was clearly the purpose of
the Manama Dialogue occasion. That did not make it unimportant. But it was a symbolic and not an instrumental occasion.

Senior policymakers do get real business done when they meet in person, at least on some occasions. But their meetings are always symbolic. That does not make them unimportant. Busy leaders do not travel half way around the world for no good reason. They do it to show they value good relations with certain states. The proportion of Cameron and Hague’s respective overseas travel devoted to the wider Middle East underscores their rhetorical claims to be prioritising the region. It also highlights how far they moved beyond structural imperatives. No British leader could afford to ignore the Gulf. But they need not have prioritised it so substantially. That they did so sent a quite deliberate signal. Britain was pivoting towards the Gulf. It was looking to develop security relationships in Bahrain and build up trade and investment links with the UAE and Qatar.

Conclusion

A complete understanding of Britain’s relations with the Middle East during the coalition era requires an appreciation of the personal alongside the political. This paper has set out three interpretations, each with a different view of the personal at its heart. The first interpretation used policymakers’ personalities as heuristics to explain the apparent divide between the ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ halves of the Conservative Party’s ‘liberal conservatism’ in terms of its response to the Arab Spring. It found the differences in style between Cameron and Hague, combined with Cameron’s willingness to share power in the foreign policy field, useful guides to the different approaches taken with regard to Libya and Bahrain. The second interpretation looked at the instrumental role personal relations play in foreign policy implementation. It found a mixed picture, with Hague’s efforts to build links to
Bahrain and the lower-level work of Simon Mayall helping to deliver a major security partnership and to execute a shift in Britain’s global strategic outlook back ‘East of Suez’. At the same time it found some commercial benefits accruing from both Cameron and Hague’s efforts to promote ties with the UAE and Qatar, including through the work of more junior figures through the UK-UAE taskforce and the more recent ‘sharaka’ dialogue. But Cameron failed to land a contract for the UAE to purchase the Typhoon jet despite lobbying hard in person. The third interpretation treated personal contacts as symbolic devices, designed to signal close relations among states without necessarily achieving much of substance. It found plenty of evidence of symbolic interactions occurring, not least in the amount of time both Cameron and Hague devoted to travelling to the wider Middle East region. It also noted signs that regional states took such signals seriously, and that both sides regarded them as both facilitators of and advertisements for the more prosaic business of inter-state co-operation.

A focus on the personal alongside the political thus adds a great deal to our understanding of Britain’s relations with the Middle East during the coalition period. This suggests that looking at individual characteristics, the role of face-to-face contacts in policy implementation and the symbolism involved in inter-state meetings can advance our understanding of British foreign policy overall. We need always to keep in mind the political, and especially the influence of material and social structural pressures. But we can add to the understandings a political approach generates by revealing, as this paper reveals, the way individuals intervene between structural imperatives and actual policy outcomes.
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