The United Kingdom was among the major supporter of the NATO intervention in Libya, and one of the earlier critics of Muammar Qaddafi’s crackdown on the protests that erupted in Libya in February 2011. London did not respond to the events of the Arab Spring in other countries, Bahrain for instance, with the same intensity. This was the result of its historical duality in dealing with the country of the region. This selective approach was particularly evident in dealing with the Arab Spring in Libya. Despite the rapprochement of the past years, the relations with Qaddafi remained burdened by mutual diffidence and lack of trust, given the troubled relations that the Jamahirya and the UK shared since the outbreak of Qaddafi’s revolution in 1969. In the post-Qaddafi, the UK wants to support Libya in strengthening its sovereign capacities, avoiding however a direct intervention, wary of the Libyan diffidence over foreign intervention. London wants to avoid a greater destabilisation of the Mediterranean space since the stability of this areas, as well as of its shipping lanes, remain fundamental in the British geopolitical calculations.

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Great Britain, the Arab Spring and Libya: the selective support for change

Historically, Britain has been one of the European countries most involved in the dynamics of the Middle East and North Africa. Its role has been particularly important in shaping the current configuration of the region, and its rivalry with France represented one of the key elements of the geopolitical and diplomatic landscape of this space over the past two centuries1. However, originally, the interest in the wider Middle East and North African region was somehow complementary and functional to another, major interest: preserving the stability of the British colonial empire by controlling way of communication between London and its overseas territories2.

The decision to grant independence to India in 1947 and the emergence of the Cold war, with all the limitations imposed on third countries by the strategic box of bi-polar confrontation, had two major effects. On the one hand, Britain placed an ever greater emphasis on the region, since it appeared the region was the last piece of the old empire where British influence remained relatively strong. On the other hand, there was a greater convergence of British and American interests in the region, namely: keeping sea-lanes free, especially guaranteeing a continuous access to the strategic bottleneck represented by the Suez Canal; maintaining access to oil resources in the region; protecting commercial and economic interests; and containing the spread of communism3.

Paradoxically, this convergence was somehow strengthened by the Suez Crisis in 1956. That was a powerful reminder of the new limits that Great Britain had to face in the region, after one and a half century of strong freedom of action. As such, challenging the US would have harmed British interests, more than serving them. Thus, this limit was a further element in forging that special relationship that would represent a cornerstone of British foreign policy.

In the post-cold war, the UK enjoyed a greater freedom of action, which allowed London to differentiate slightly itself from Washington, although the core of the special relations remained untouched and, most of the time, interests converged. With the rise of New Labour to power, there was an increasing characterisation of Britain as a force for good in the world, and in its foreign policy values and interests had to merge, with a

greater rhetoric characterisation in terms of ideals and normative actions\textsuperscript{4}. Yet, this greater normative oriented commitment was selective: while with Saudi Arabia the UK was less vocal in pushing forward the agenda for reforms and greater democratization, burdened by the impact of the Al Yamamah deal on this relationship. In other contexts, such as Iran for instance, the UK was much more critical in calling upon Tehran to change its behaviours\textsuperscript{5}.

In regard to Libya, the UK had a rather historically troubled relationship. In the colonial configuration of the Middle East and North Africa, Libya somehow represented an exception. In the nineteenth century, it was the target of the first action undertaken by the Ottomans to regain a more direct control over its Maghrebi territories, with the removal of the Qaramanlis by the Sultan of Istanbul in 1835\textsuperscript{6}. The territories now forming Libya did escape the colonial Franco-British colonial duopoly and became the target of Italian ambitions later. Its colonial history thus started in 1911, with Italy trying to assert its control over these territories, an attempt that would become more assertive under the Fascist regime\textsuperscript{7}. However, with World War II this situation changed. That was the time in which the UK also emerged as a direct Libyan player. The UK occupied Tripolitania and Cyrenaica and the Brits trained Libyan fighters, especially from Cyrenaica, who supported the efforts of the allied powers against Italy and Germany. As such, the UK enjoyed a very close and strong relationship with the new country and was one of the major allies of the Sennussi monarchy. This brought to a series of problems once Qaddafi and the free officials overtook power in Libya in 1969. According to Qaddafi’s memories, as stated in a dissertation written in the 1970s by who would become the head of the Libyan intelligence agency and the last Foreign Affairs ministry of the Jamahiriya, Moussa Koussa, he started having bitter feelings against the UK after he was sent to the country in 1966. He went to complete his military training, and during his four-month stay he was allegedly insulted by British Army officers whom he accused of oppressing him for days\textsuperscript{8}. This personal element interlocked with the wider ambition of Qaddafi of being a sort of “new Nasser”, with his anti-imperialist and anti-western rhetoric. Two years later, Libya nationalized the 100 per cent of British Petroleum (BP) assets in Libya.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., pp. 24-42.  
For about 30 years, relations between Libya and the UK has been very troubled. Qaddafi was an active supporter of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), supplying weapons to them. The UK broke off relations with Libya in 1984, after the killing of Yvonne Fletcher, a police member staff, outside the Libyan Embassy in London. This factor also played a role in the British support of the American bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi in response to the attack at La Belle discothèque in Berlin, as stated by Margaret Thatcher when she addressed the House of Commons about that9. In 1989, the bombing of the Pan Am Flight 103, that killed 259 on the plane and 11 more people on the ground, hit by pieces of the aircraft crashed into Lockerbie in Scotland, represented an all-time low in the Anglo-Libyan relationship.

In the 1990s, Libya started to distance itself from its sponsorship of terrorism, providing key information that satisfied the British government concerning its links to IRA. Moreover, in 1999, Libya handed the suspects of the Lockerbie bombing to Scottish authorities, marking a major political and symbolic turning point. As such, in that year the UK decided to restore full diplomatic relations with Tripoli, an activism that was seen with a grain of suspicion in Washington10. In the following years, it also helped Libya on its way to international rehabilitation, above all after Qaddafi’s pragmatic moves, such as giving its non-conventional weapons programme, to exploit the post 9/11 war on terrorism to reestablish positive relations with many Western countries, whose investment were needed to support the ailing Libya oil industry, while trying to reform a weakened economy11. Thus, Tony Blair visited Libya twice, in 200412 and 200713. In that year, BP also signed a USD900-million exploration and production deal with Libya, 36 year later the nationalization of its Libyan assets, with also a series of allegations this deal was linked to the releasing of Abdel Baset al-Megrahi occurred in 200914.

However, with the eruption of the Arab Spring, this rapprochement with Qaddafi ended, and the UK was among the toughest countries against the crackdown that Qaddafi operated against the protests in February 2011. The approach of the UK on the Arab Spring in general, and Libya in particular, was consistent with its actual historical engagement with the region, as London was a selective supporter of the revolts, showing again the duality typical of its regional role. Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in September 2011, Cameron said that: “the Arab Spring is a massive opportunity to spread peace, prosperity, democracy and vitally security but only if we really seize it”\(^\text{15}\).

Indeed, in Libya, Cameron was among the most active leaders in pushing for an armed intervention against Qaddafi. In a way, this engagement had some features resembled the historical role played by the UK in this country. Civil war in Libya was triggered by groups active in Cyrenaica. Groups in the eastern part of Libya was largely sidelined under the Jamahiriya, as the 1969 revolution – and the following moves to consolidate power by Qaddafi – were almost entirely based on the actions political, social and tribal groups based in the West. The UK provided active support to these forces. At the times of World War II, forces from Cyrenaica were active in supporting, and were trained from, British troops against the Italians and the Germans. In a way, the post-Qaddafi relations of the UK with Libya restated where they were interrupted in 1969, with the UK closer to Eastern-based elites.

Instead, in Bahrain, another major hotspot of the Arab Spring, the UK adopted a much rather low-profile stance. The meeting at 10 Downing Street\(^\text{16}\) with Bahrain prince, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, in May 2011, only a few weeks later the beginning of the crackdown over Bahraini protesters and the Saudi intervention in the country, signalled the existence of a significant difference in the way Britain perceived the different revolts. This difference should be seen through the prism of the Anglo-Saudi special relationship and the fears that the revolts in Bahrain would have created an advantage for Iran. This duality was consistent with its long-standing imperatives in the region: the search for stability and the access to oil. In this specific case, the first element was more important than the second one. As paradoxical as it may sound, this was the case.

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The UK and post-Qaddafi Libya: stability, more than simply oil

As mentioned above, oil concerns have played historically a role in driving British moves in the region. Yet, it was only a part of the wider picture. Its importance should be always framed in the right context. Sometimes, the need to guarantee access to oil resources is simply overestimated. The Libyan case could provide a good example in case.

As noted earlier, after years of a rather troubled relations under Qaddafi, the UK and Libya started what was defined a new relationship. This new era of rapprochement was also signalled by the return of BP in the Libyan oil market in 2007. Following the end of the civil war, BP decided to resume its Libyan activities after the freezing of the 2009 agreement. Yet, after that there have been major problems and in 2013, BP started rethinking about its engagement in Libya. In November 2013, the Wall Street Journal reported that the company was negotiating a deal with the National Oil Corporation (NOC) to transfer a stake in its two Ghadames blocks to the NOC subsidiary Arabian Gulf Oil Company (AGOCO)\. This partial disengagement from Libya is due to a series of circumstances: disappointing drilling results; the security volatility of the country, and the In Amenas psychological burden on all the BP activities in North Africa. Moreover, the Libyan oil sector continues to be burdened by a series of legal, technical and logistic problems that makes this country, despite the high quality of its crude, a problematic market for many international oil companies.

The key interest that pushed the UK in supporting an intervention in Libya was related to security and should be analysed through the imperative of stability that, as noted earlier, has always characterized the British interests in the region. Although it could sound somehow contradictory, the current situation of Libyan severe domestic instability is in a way more functional to the imperative of regional stability than the other possible outcome of the civil war: an eventual survival of Qaddafi’s regime. This option would have represented a major problem for the stability of the entire Mediterranean basin. The potential for destabilisation of a reinvigorated Qaddafi’s regime able to handle and destroy a domestic revolt would have been enormous. Aside from the risks of a Libyan return in supporting terrorism, this option could have also created major risks of the safety of maritime routes and shipping lanes in the Mediterranean that, although the UK is not anymore the imperial power that used to be, London continues to consider fundamental for its national interests.

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However, although being the best possible options among two rather worrisome scenarios, the current situation in Libya represents a challenge for all the countries interested in the stability of the Mediterranean basin and the wider Middle East and North African region. The Arab Spring has triggered a some dynamics of fragmentation with some observers even describing some of its partial outcomes as symptoms of the “end of the Sykes-Picot order in the Middle East”, especially in reference on what is going on in Syria. To what extent these dynamics are either structural, or only temporarily, can be a matter of debate. Yet, these dynamics of fragmentation in Libya are rather strong, for a series of reasons. First of all, the distinct geopolitical and geo-cultural orientations that have always characterised the three provinces that in 1951 merged to create the Libyan nation-state is a major factor of weakness in terms of national cohesion. Moreover, political power and social mobilisation in Libya has historically been declined on a local and micro-scale, and the weight that local forces had in triggering revolutionary dynamics is a further confirmation of this element.

However, in British perceptions, a Libyan disintegration represents a major element of concern. This explains why the UK is particularly committed to support the Libyan government in its attempts to strengthen its sovereign control over the country. In September 2013, Ali Zeiden met with Cameron in London. The British prime minister stressed that “he was proud of the role Britain had played helping Libyans get rid of Qaddafi” and that “Britain remains deeply committed to helping Libyans build a new, more stable, democratic and prosperous Libya, free of terrorism”.

The UK represents one of the most significant external partners in supporting the rebuilding of Libyan security forces. London has already agreed to train about 2,000 Libyan military personnel in Britain as part of the wider training package for 8,000 servicemen agreed with other NATO members on the sidelines of the G8 summit in the summer. The two countries also completed an agreement worth GBP62.5 million, the Security, Justice and Defence Programme (SJD). In the words of the British Minister for International Security Strategy Andrew Murrison, this programme will “cover all aspects of security to enable Libya to guarantee the security of the state from any form of threat” stressing that

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“We have an on-going commitment to Libya – at all levels... but the solution has to be a Libyan one”\textsuperscript{22}.

Conclusions

Stressing the importance of a \textit{Libyan solution to Libyan problems}, Murrison acknowledged the importance of avoiding significant external interferences in a country historically diffident of external actors. For the UK, getting rid of Qaddafi was the primary interest in dealing with the Libyan spring. Despite the rapprochement of the 2000s, the lack of trust and the fears concerning a strengthened, post-revolution Jamahiriyia were far too strong. As such, supporting the rebels were a major strategic imperative, despite the fears of a post-Qaddafi chaos. This showed once again the existence of a sort of \textit{consistent inconsistency} in the British foreign policy in the region: while the normative rhetoric of its action is clear, its actual deployment is rather selective. Historically, this has been true in the relations of London with Saudi Arabia and Iran. This duality was at work also in the different way in which London responded to the revolts in Libya and Bahrain. In supporting the Libyan rebels, the search for stability was a much greater incentive than securing access to Libyan oil: that result has been already achieved with the return of BP in Libya at the end of the 2000s. Although the current developments may contradict this view, the British moves in Libya were dictated by the need to preserve some sort of stability in the Mediterranean. This may have been in danger in case of a Qaddafi emboldened by a successful crackdown on the revolution. A post-Qaddafi chaos, as such, was the \textit{less worst case realistic scenario}. Now, the imperative for, and the efforts of, the UK are all oriented in strengthening Libyan sovereign capabilities and its effectiveness in regain the control of its territory and the plethora of militias operating in the country. The southern shore of the Mediterranean resembles now a long arc of instability, stretching from Tunisia to Syria, with the external appendixes – Turkey and Algeria – facing significant political challenges. This puts the stability of the Mediterranean at stake. Moreover, Southern Libya is emerging as a major hotspot for African terrorist groups, and this may have an impact on the stability of many countries of the region. Although the UK is not anymore the Mediterranean power it used to be, the stability of the basin and of its shipping lanes remain two among its fundamental goals. As such, working to strengthen Libya will serve these aims: the actual drivers of the British action on Libya, and the overall Middle East and North Africa space.