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"Little Britain" ~ the New Coalition Government and the Middle East

LSE Ideas

By Matthew Hinds

With party deal-making and cabinet resignations so far making the headlines, scant attention has been paid to what the future policy of the new Con-Lib coalition government will be in key areas where British diplomatic and military involvement has been so prevalent in recent years: The Middle East, including the Arab-Israeli conflict, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. This may be considered a reflection of the fact that the heartbeat of British politics in recent months has been unusually local and insular for British standards, focusing squarely on the drama of the recent election, the continuing expense scandal and the poor shape of the economy. However, domestic concerns will not insulate the coalition government from having to address a number of vital policy questions centred on the Middle East in particular.

Looking at the Middle East from a British perspective, the damaged legacy of the Bush-Blair era is still sharply felt. For ten long years, the Labour Government has grossly overstretched the country's armed services and weakened its diplomatic standing in the Middle East. This week's Mavi Marmara flotilla incident has once again turned everyone's attention to the Middle East at an inopportune moment for the coalition government. The new Foreign Secretary, William Hague, publically stated that the Gaza blockade is "unacceptable", knowing that Israeli actions have undermined a key British strategic priority – convincing Arab states to support broader sanctions against Iran. With that being said, an intervention by the British military in Iran is almost unthinkable at a time when British forces in Afghanistan are scaling back operations, not because of strategy but due to the lack of crucial military hardware, like the scarcity of Chinook helicopters, which had jeopardized Operation Panther Claw in 2009.

Although it has been announced that there will be no withdrawal date for the 10,000 British military personnel in Afghanistan, the biggest challenge faced by the coalition is financial. Presently, the Ministry of Defence is running a deficit of 36 billion pounds, and the government would eventually like to cut the MoD's running cost by 25%, thereby putting severe restrictions on Britain's military capabilities internationally. The fact that Prime Minister David Cameron has already put into place a new US-style National Security Council does not point to Britain returning to the grand stage of international affairs as a world power. Rather, for the time being, it will be a cheerless forum in which the cabinet can discuss the shrinking of British power with the National Security Adviser, FCO mandarin Peter Ricketts and the Chief of Defence Staff, Sir Jock Stirrup. Discussions will include key questions such as whether Britain can afford to be involved in conflict zones like Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention other fragile states that are considered to pose a threat to international stability – of which Yemen is prime example in the Middle East. To answer these sensitive questions, the coalition government has begun a Strategic Defence and Security Review that will publish a new National Security Strategy shortly.

A note of encouragement for leaders Cameron and Nick Clegg of the Liberal Democrats is that unlike the noted dissonance over the European Union, it is unlikely that the coalition's Middle East policy will be a deal-breaker. It is indeed true that the Liberal Democrats have been more vocal than the Conservatives in their criticism of Britain's bloody engagement in Helmand Province in Afghanistan. As recently as this past September, eyebrows were raised at the Liberal Democrat party conference when a motion was tabled stating that Britain should have "tea with the Taliban" in the hope of finding a quick exit out of Afghanistan. Moreover, out of the three major parties in British politics, the Liberal Democrats have been most consistent in their critique of Israel as shown by the party's support for the Goldstone Report, which censured Israel for committing war crimes in the Gaza War of 2008. Looking farther back, the revival of the Liberal Democrats political fortunes converged with the outset of the Iraq War in 2003 when the party outshined the Conservatives in their denunciation of the Labour Government's belligerency along with its supine compliance with the Bush Administration.

It could be argued that the Liberal Democrats' general opposition to the Bush-Blair era was an instructive political lesson for David Cameron. Over the past several years he has sought to recast the Conservative Party's attitudes towards Britain's role in the world, particularly pertaining to the Middle East. Speaking to an American audience on September 11, 2006, Cameron outlined his vision of "Liberal Conservatism," where he stated that supporting the aims of democracy, freedom and humanitarian efforts are imperative, but it is folly not to recognize the limits of the utopian schemes that go with remaking the

Middle East. Cameron poignantly stated: "Liberty grows from the ground; it cannot be dropped from the air by an unmanned drone." Simply put, the leader of the Conservative Party's reflective analysis would go down pretty well at any Liberal Democrat student society.

In some Liberal Democratic circles, there is a fear that the new team of William Hague as Foreign Secretary and Liam Fox as the Minister of Defence constitutes a Thatcherite outpost that is operating at the centre of the coalition. To some extent this may be true. However, it should be noted that when speaking of the former, Hague happily articulates the broad concept of "Liberal Conservatism" more eloquently than the Prime Minister himself, a feat unsurprising when considering that the Foreign Secretary is a keen student of British history having written biographies with equal passion on the liberal Wilberforce and conservative Pitt the Younger.

One political circumstance that will work to the benefit of keeping the Coalition Government together is the stance of the United States under Barack Obama. When the next crisis unfolds in the Middle East, the Liberal Democrats' traditional skepticism of the Atlantic Alliance as an expression of British policy will be less of an issue given the general consensus that the Obama Administration, in stark contrast to the Blair-Bush era, has little interest in Britain serving as a junior partner to the United States. With the Conservatives dominating foreign policy, it will be the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg's job to make sure that the leftwing backbenchers of his party do not become an impassable roadblock to the coalition's efforts in the Middle East.

What Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in the coalition cabinet can firmly agree on is that that Britain's long-term engagement in the Middle East and the world, hinges principally on the country's economic recovery. As such, Cameron is right. There will be no room for "utopian schemes"- even with the aid of an ally like the US – because Britain simply cannot afford it. After the blatant mismanagement of the Blair and Brown years, the only choice that the Con-Lib coalition has at the moment is a policy of "temporary retrenchment." It is the challenge of combating deficits, debts and national insolvency that will be the driving narrative of this coalition, not political or military adventurism in the Middle East.

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