

An analysis of the Tory foreign policy framework toward the Middle East

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Last month, Shadow Foreign Secretary, William Hague, outlined a new foreign policy framework for a future Conservative government to an audience at RUSI - the Royal United Services Institute. Its fundamental premise was the need to preserve Britain's role as a major player on the world stage despite a receding economy and a rejection of recommendations for strategic shrinkage. One of its key proposals was a requirement to leverage UK assets and in particular, to empower the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

In addition, Hague reiterated a commitment to the basic principles that underscore current Conservative policy, including a pledge to ***learn from past mistakes; remain devoted to the Trans-Atlantic Alliance; reverse the neglect of other traditional allies; promote effective reform of international institutions and uphold British values.*** If, as some surveys would suggest, we are headed for a Conservative victory in the upcoming elections, Hague's outline will be duly scrutinised both at home and the world over.

Marginalisation of the FCO

The highly Euro sceptic Hague's speech appears to have allayed the immediate fears of many British diplomats who have been handed a raw deal over the past few decades following their marginalisation under both Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. However, Hague's commitments effectively promise a welcomed return to the traditional practices of British diplomacy whereby career diplomats are allowed to shape policy. Not only did Blair's approach strip the FCO of the requisite authority to shape and drive meaningful British policy abroad, but more significant was the damage inflicted through its politicisation.

This is evidenced no more clearly than in the case of Michael Levy, a private financial donor and major fundraiser for the Labour Party and to whom diplomatic duties were franchised when he was made Middle East envoy in 2000. By using his influence within the Labour Friends of Israel and among other lobby groups and individuals working to promote Israeli interests within the government, Levy was able to raise previously unimagined sums on Blair's behalf and thereby alleviate his dependence on finance from trade unions. This dependence was instead transferred to individuals and organisations with a clear political agenda and interests outside the UK. Levy's activities were brought to a halt in 2006 following the "cash for peerage" scandal.

The most obvious implication of the divided allegiances that result from such a status quo is that Britain is no longer able to act purely in its own interest and its politicians are subject to a form of censorship in accordance



with the wishes of their sponsors. This undoubtedly impacts on British diplomats and limits their scope for action as observed by Sir Richard Dalton, former British ambassador in Tehran and Consul in Jerusalem. In an interview for a Dispatches programmes in 2009, Dalton asserts that lobby groups, which increasingly are the financial backers of politicians, frustrate the activities of diplomats who want only what is best for Britain by “trying to define the debate in order to limit the options that British politicians can choose, to options that would be acceptable to that lobby.”

Learning from Past Mistakes

Ten years ago, in an article entitled "[The man who owns the Tory Party](#)", Peter Osborne exposed the personal responsibility of the controversial offshore financier, Michael Ashcroft, for the financial survival of Hague's Conservatives. One of the key questions raised by the article was how Ashcroft used his influence. The controversy that this article stirred was recently reignited when leaked documents provoked questions about whether Hague knew of Ashcroft's non-domiciled status for tax purposes when he entered the House of Lords and whether the statutory conditions for his peerage were met. Notwithstanding, it was reported Hague gave assurances that Ashcroft would become a full resident and begin paying taxes on his overseas earnings amounting to tens of millions. Hague's subsequent claims of ignorance with regard to both the details of the situation and the tax implications of his promise have failed to stem the tide of speculation about what he actually knew and sanctioned. In addition, accusations of a cynical cover-up over the affair have inevitably brought his integrity into question.

Nevertheless, after becoming Shadow Foreign Secretary, Hague went on to accept donations from board members of the Conservative Friends of Israel, a lobby grouping regarded as "*the largest organization in Western Europe dedicated to the cause of the people of Israel.*" One investigation into the influence of the pro-Israel lobby in Britain, following Hague's use of the word "disproportionate" in reference to Israel's attack on Lebanon in 2006, found he was thoroughly censured by donors and threatened with the withdrawal of funding. It was made clear that such a word must not be used in reference to Israel's actions and that there would be consequences for transgression. In agreement with David Cameron, donor demands were met with compliance.

Clearly, Hague has learnt neither from his own past mistakes nor the bad example of former Prime Minister Blair. And while it may be argued that there is nothing illegal in accepting such donations, surely it contravenes



guidelines set out by the Committee on Standards in Public life which states; "Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might seek to influence them in the performance of their official duties."

A Jewish Chronicle report cited the veteran Labour MP, [Sir Gerald Kaufman](#), who referred to the pervasive role of such donors while addressing a recent meeting convened by Friends of Al Aqsa and the Palestinian Solidarity Campaign, "Just as Lord Ashcroft owns most of the Conservative Party, right-wing Jewish millionaires own the rest of the Conservative Party and they will not alienate those Jewish donors by saying one critical word of Israel," he said. That this assestrion should come from a prominent Jewish politician is itself indicative of a change taking place within British Jewry, one that has a distinct resonance in the US. There, although support for Israel in Ameirca is near record high, according to a recent [Gallup poll](#) (63%), fewer and fewer Democrats are backing Israel (48%) as opposed to an increasing number of Republicans (85%).

To what extent the changes taking place in the US were influenced by developments in Britain is still unclear. There are however visible parallels. In the aftermath of the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon in 2006 more than 100 high profile British Jews signed up to the charter of a new organization called Independent Jewish Voices (IJV) in March 2007. Its founders included the late Nobel Prize-winning playwright Harold Pinter and historian Eric Hobsbawm. The group was established as a counter-balance to the uncritical support for Israeli policies offered by established bodies. Martin Hodgson in his article [British Jews break away from 'pro-Israeli' Board of Deputies](#) cited the the IJV's founding declaration: "Those who claim to speak on behalf of Jews in Britain and other countries consistently put support for the policies of an occupying power above the human rights of the occupied people."

Almost one year later, March 2008, a new generation of Jewish Democrats launched J Street in the US. They are widely regarded as credible rivals to the hard-line American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), who pretend to want a two-state solution but are not really committed to it.

Gaza

On a policy level, a future Conservative government would be similarly tested to demonstrate its commitment to a two-state solution. An estimated 80% of Conservative MPs are members of the Conservative Friends of



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Israel. At its annual dinner last year, the key address was delivered by David Cameron himself with William Hague and almost all members of the Conservative shadow cabinet in attendance along with many important Tory donors who advocate for Israel.

One of the key international events dominating the news at the time was Israel's brutal assault on the beleaguered Gaza Strip that resulted in catastrophic levels of destruction and the death of more than 1,400 individuals, including 300 children. Following a UN inquiry into the assault, it was concluded that Israel had committed war crimes and possible crimes against humanity. Nevertheless, Cameron neglected to even mention the atrocity; to the contrary, he praised Israel's efforts to "protect innocent life". This conspicuous omission highlighted a fundamental disregard of humanity and truth in favour of political and financial advantage.

During Hague's speech at RUSI, he mentioned wanting to see an end to the neglect of traditional British allies such as the Gulf States as well as an end to the Gaza blockade and a freeze on settlement activity. It will be interesting to see how he plans to address these. According to investigations, the CFI played a significant role in ensuring Conservative opposition to the UN report into the attack on Gaza and the statement issued by Hague rejecting the resolution was produced in consultation with one of its influential members. In addition, some of the strongest backing for efforts to change British Universal Jurisdiction laws to suit the requirements of Israeli officials accused of war crimes under international law has come from within the Conservative Party. Speaking at a *Jewish News* event last month, Hague reminded his audience that he is a longstanding friend of Israel, having joined the Conservative Friends of Israel at the age of 15. Accordingly, his party would 'have acted more speedily' on the Universal Jurisdiction question.

In so far as the UN Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict is concerned, Hague is unequivocal and unapologetic, "we also differed how to vote on the Goldstone Report when it turned out they couldn't even abstain competently...The motion that went forward was unbalanced as it made no mention of the responsibility of Hamas. We would have voted against it.'

Lobbying

A strong link exists between the CFI and another major pro-Israel Lobby outfit, BICOM - the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre. BICOM functions as a public relations (PR) machine for Israel working to further its interests in Britain; to create a positive image for it and promote an Israeli narrative within the

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media by supplying journalists, editors and parliamentarians with targeted information as well as seeking to build relationships with key influential figures by various means such as taking them on free trips to Israel. One of its main focuses of attention is on decision makers in their capacity to influence public opinion. Since Israel's inhumane assault on Gaza, BICOM has had to go into overdrive in its efforts to deflect British anger and temper the rising public tide against Israel.

BICOM's chairman and financial sponsor, the Finnish billionaire and former arms dealer Poju Zabłudowicz is also a donor to the CFI. He donated £70,000 to the Conservative Party including £15,000 to David Cameron over the course of his election campaign. Other prominent members of BICOM, including Michael Lewis and Trevor Pears are also members of the CFI; the three together form the backbone of the pro-Israel Lobby in Britain. Zabłudowicz, one of the twenty richest men in Britain, is also one of the most well connected people in both British and Israeli politics and describes himself as a 'political animal'. On 12th February, he gave an interview to Sami Peretz of the [The Marker](#), his first to an Israeli newspaper prior to which he telephoned Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to keep him in the loop. After the interview, he was scheduled to meet with David Cameron.

Although he resides in Britain, Zabłudowicz has non-domiciled status for tax purposes and at the beginning of the recession, sold off all his investments in Britain in order to re-invest in Israel where his core loyalties apparently lie. Politically, he is closely aligned to the right wing coalition government of Benjamin Netanyahu, with whom he is a personal and long time friend and whose policies include continued illegal settlement expansion. Zabłudowicz has nothing but praise for Netanyahu, particularly his economic policies that have allowed Zabłudowicz's investments to flourish. His singular criticism of the current government is on account of its limited spending on PR which he believes should be second only to national security.

Zabłudowicz takes personal responsibility for advancing Israel's image in Britain and during Netanyahu's last visit; it was he who organized meetings for him with British editors. As well as Netanyahu, Zabłudowicz also has a close relationship with Shimon Peres which stem from connection formed through his family's dealings as arms traders to the Israeli government. Although Zabłudowicz is no longer an arms dealer, the company through which his father made his fortune continues to thrive and recently supplied the artillery used in the Gaza campaign. Not able to assist Israel in its 'conventional' warfare; Zabłudowicz now conducts an information war on their behalf.

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Illegal Interests Abroad

Zabludowicz's investments in Israel include property, hotels, aviation and commercial shopping malls among other things. He also has a stake in a shopping centre in the illegal settlement of Ma'ale Adumim in the Occupied West Bank.

Ma'ale Adumim is a strategically located illegal settlement on the outskirts of Jerusalem positioned so as to remain a part of Israel in any two-state solution. It is part of what is often called the creation of 'facts on the ground' that preclude the establishment of a viable Palestinian State.

Zabludowicz also has a stake in the airline El Al and personally appointed its CEO; the former commander in the Israeli air force during the war on Lebanon in 2006. As such, he cannot come to Britain for fear of arrest as a war criminal.

Upholding British Values

For some, that Israel is a 'success story' is enough of a plausible defense against its numerous transgressions. However, such feeble arguments assume that Israel should be the exception to the rule. Universal standards of human rights and international law should not, however, take into account the material achievements of a state or the history of its people when determining if it has committed war crimes and crimes against humanity; success in one arena does not exculpate culpability in another.

Some British politicians' cynical downplay of the political agenda of certain of their donors and the requirement to abstain from criticism of Israel is deeply flawed, particularly when these donors have financial investments in illegal colonial enterprises on Palestinian land. The complicity of British officials who are willing to allow Israel's horrific attack on Gaza, as well its numerous other illegal enterprises and brutalities to be spun into an Israeli fable which portrays itself as a small, embattled country menaced by its Arab neighbors, is in itself an atrocity. It is a fallacy that exploits and makes a mockery of historic atrocities and the honestly held sentiments of good people.

The images that flashed across our television screens during Israel's assault cannot be glossed over nor can the numbers of those killed without any regard for the sanctity of human life. For 60 years Palestinians have struggled against the military and economic might of Israel, its overzealous army and its policies of systematic subjugation. The Israeli tactics being used in the Occupied Territories to break the will of the Palestinians;



psychologically terrorizing their children and withholding the bare necessities of life such as toilet paper, toothpaste and the building materials to reconstruct their devastated houses are abhorrent. Such policies and the racist, discriminatory mindset that underlie them are alien to the British value system. British public opinion demands that the current system which stands idly by while this continues be thoroughly investigated and changed. Our politicians also need to be reminded that they are first and foremost elected to represent British interests.

Conclusion

What are the legal implications for British politicians of accepting donations from individuals who not only lobby in the interest of a foreign government, but have financial investments and property in illegal colonial enterprises in Occupied Palestinian territory? How does the like of William Hague propose to bring an end to the siege of Gaza and settlement expansion in the West Bank when his financial backers have a stake in and profit from their continuity? How far does the influence wielded by billionaire advocates for Israel like Poju Zabłudowics go?

It goes without saying that should the Conservatives win the upcoming elections, the demands of the pro-Israel lobby would increase in line with their influence. While the Shadow Foreign Secretary was successful in his bid to woo diplomats, they would do well to note that a future foreign policy would only succeed on the world stage if it eschews the loss of credibility that would naturally afflict a government driven by contradictory and divided allegiances.

