

**Constructing Britain's response to the Arab uprisings:
A comparison of Bahrain and Libya**

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Sam Maguire and Rhiannon Vickers

Department of Politics, University of Sheffield

s.maguire1@sheffield.ac.uk, r.m.vickers@sheffield.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an account of how Britain's foreign policy response towards the uprisings in Libya and Bahrain was constructed. This is done through a critical discourse analysis of speeches made by senior politicians between February and December 2011. It demonstrates that the language used to describe actors and events in Libya and Bahrain, and Britain's response to each uprising, varied quite dramatically between the two cases. For example, Libyan civilians were depicted in a far more sympathetic light than their Bahraini counterparts. Finally this paper will argue that this had a significant impact on constituting the social identities of each group taking part in the events, and in turn facilitating and legitimising particular policy responses in favour of others. Through the use of particular linguistic practices, some actors in the uprisings were legitimised, while others were de-legitimised, and this in turn facilitated certain British policy decisions, making them appear almost inevitable.

INTRODUCTION¹

The 2011 uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa presented a new challenge to Western governments in how they would respond to rebellion against long-standing undemocratic governments. The uprisings, and the speed with which they spread from state to state, surprised politicians, advisors, intelligence analysts and academics alike. A narrative emerged that framed the uprisings as popular revolts, as broad based popular opposition to undemocratic regimes that had the goal of creating a more democratic society (Friedman 2012). Despite this general narrative, however, there were very different policy responses to the uprisings according to which country they were occurring within. A particularly striking divergence was in the British response to the uprisings in Libya and in Bahrain. In the case of Libya, the British government response was to push for and take a leading role in military intervention, but in the case of Bahrain, British action consisted of expressing concern at events and pressing for dialogue between the government and opposition groups. This paper will demonstrate how the British government portrayed events in Libya and Bahrain very differently, through an analysis of speeches and texts by senior British politicians, thus facilitating this policy divergence. This is an important issue, not least because journalists and commentators have condemned the British government for double standards in its response to Libya and Bahrain (e.g. Amirahmadi and Afrasiabi 2011; Cockburn 2011). This paper demonstrates how these double standards were constructed, and the different policy response to the two cases made to appear almost inevitable.

While much has been written on the Arab uprisings, the literature has not to date offered a deconstruction of the way that events were described to give them certain meanings. The literature on the ‘Arab Spring’ has tended to focus on the causes and consequences of the uprisings (for instance, Ajami 2012; Dabashi 2012; Foreign Affairs 2011; Ramadan 2012), and one of the most interesting features of the uprisings, the use of social media to mobilise and gain support (Ghannam 2011). There is a great deal of literature coming out written by journalists, observers and bloggers (for instance, Ghonim 2012; Manhire, ed. 2012; West 2011). However, to date there has been little systematic analysis of government responses to particular uprisings. This paper seeks to begin to fill this gap through its study of the British response to Bahrain and Libya. It also adds to the growing foreign policy literature on how states identify themselves and others through the use of

language (for instance, Campbell 1998; Hopf 2002; Kubáľková 2001). There has been extensive research on the way that the Bush Administration ‘wrote’ the response to 9/11 as the ‘war on terror’, which then became a dominant media frame (Collins and Glover, eds. 2002; Jackson 2005, Norris et al, eds. 2003), and how the West constructed a particular understanding of the conflict in Bosnia (Fierke 1996; Hansen 2000, 2006). However, little research has been conducted into the way in which the *British* government ‘writes’ or creates a public narrative for its response to critical events, a public narrative that shapes people’s understanding of events and that can be used to justify and facilitate particular policy responses. This is an under-researched area in foreign policy analysis, despite the proliferation of innovative interpretivist approaches to studying British foreign policy (see, for example, the special issue of the *BJPIR*, 2013).

The paper begins by outlining the methodology and the reasons for choosing these two particular cases, before moving on to the analysis of the speeches and texts. Preliminary quantitative analysis of key words is used to inform subsequent qualitative critical discourse analysis. Identity is considered as the main factor in the construction of the portrayal of the uprisings and the British response to them, with the constructed identities of the Libyan ‘civilians’ being contrasted with the Bahraini ‘protesters’. The construction of Gaddafi as an evil and irrational dictator will be contrasted with the more gentle portrayal of the Bahraini government, and the repeated assertion that Britain is a ‘friend of Bahrain’ (for example, Hague 2011b, cols. 1135, 1137, 1140; Hague 2011e, col. 495).² In the speeches and statements that are analysed in this research, the British government uses a particular discourse to construct a particular reality that then makes its response seem inevitable – in the case of Libya, humanitarian intervention, in the case of Bahrain, earnest requests for dialogue - as the only option available. It finishes by offering some explanations for why the situation in Bahrain was framed so differently, arguing that ideational influences, in particular the way that Bahrain is viewed through the lens of friendship by the British government, affected the way that events were understood by the British political leadership and subsequently communicated to the public.³

METHODOLOGY

The use of particular words and the patterns of selection and presentation of information frame our interpretation of events and gives meaning and order to complex issues. Language is not neutral. Thus, for instance, the term the ‘Arab Spring’ was quickly adopted by many Western media outlets, but it is a term that provides a very particular frame to the events it is signifying, one that has positive connotations. ‘Spring’ denotes renewal, rebirth, growth and hope, the overthrowing of the darkness of winter. ‘Spring’ in a political context is usually used to denote a period of political liberalisation, such as the Prague Spring of 1968. This paper uses a constructivist approach to demonstrate how language was used by the British government to shape a particular political reality so that actors and events in Bahrain and Libya were interpreted very differently. We propose that this facilitated the different foreign policy response to the two cases. Constructivism allows us to bring ideational factors as well as material ones, into foreign policy analysis. Constructivism pays considerable attention to analysing identity, arguing that ‘a state understands others according to the identity it attributes to them, while simultaneously reproducing its own identity through daily social practice’. Constructed identities are often seen as precipitating state interests, as ‘in telling you who you are, identities strongly imply a particular set of interests or preference’ (Hopf 1998, 175). However, interests can also affect the way that identities are understood and presented. Our aim here is not to demonstrate a one-way directional causal link between British interests and the identities that the government gave to particular actors in Bahrain and Libya through language, but rather to argue that there was a discursive interactive process going on. Thus, the use of a particular discourse was synchronically producing a particular political perspective that made action in the case of Libya, and inaction in the case of Bahrain, appear almost inevitable. This in turn meant that the government was able to minimise criticism of the divergence of its policy response in these two cases.

Bahrain and Libya were chosen as case studies because events in both countries were happening largely simultaneously, and yet we were struck by the disparity in the way in which the British government appeared to be responding to these events. While the situations in Bahrain and Libya were not identical, there were enough commonalities for the disparate policy response to raise interesting research questions about how and why this occurred. First, both countries were of particular geo-political interest to Britain. In

the case of Libya, this was due to a number of factors, including economic interests such as arms sales and favourable deals for oil and gas exploration and extraction, with BP signing a landmark agreement for what would be its 'single largest exploration commitment' in 2007. This involved an initial investment by BP of a minimum of \$900million, and the drilling of seventeen exploration wells (BP 2007). Political interests had also changed, with Gaddafi being rehabilitated as a potential ally rather than an enemy of the West. Tony Blair played a significant role in the diplomatic success of getting Libya to renounce its WMD programme in December 2003, renounce its support for terrorism, and settle damages for past acts of terrorism such as the Lockerbie bombing (see Jentleson and Whytock 2005/6). In the case of Bahrain, Britain's major interest is its naval base there, which is the command and control centre for both British and US naval operations in the area. Bahrain has been the primary base for the naval activities of Operation Enduring Freedom (the war in Afghanistan) and Operation Iraqi Freedom, as well as the maritime security activities in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman and Gulf of Aden. Both Britain and the US sell arms to Bahrain, and have continued to do so since the events of 2011. Furthermore, Bahrain is seen as one of several bulwarks against the influence of Iran, and is closely tied, politically, economically and militarily with Saudi Arabia, which is also considered to be an ally of Britain and the US. Thus, it could be argued that Britain had an interest in the keeping the status quo in both countries, and yet chose to support regime change in Libya.

Second, both countries were meant to be experiencing political reform. Bahrain has undergone a decade of reform, but, this has been very limited. It has resulted in disappointed expectations, especially from the younger generation and from the Shi'a majority, who took to the streets to demand the greater equality, justice and political representation, that they had been anticipating but which the government had failed to deliver on. As Ted Gurr argued in his seminal text, *Why Men Rebel*, it is relative deprivation, the frustration caused by the gap between what people have and what they believe they are entitled to, that lies at the heart of political protest and rebellion (Gurr 1970). Libya, some in Britain thought, had entered a period of reform spear-headed by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, and several British universities, especially the London School of Economics who awarded Saif his PhD, had been encouraged to establish links with Libya by Tony Blair. Blair himself had visited Libya in March 2004 and May 2007. Libya was elected by the UN General Assembly to the UN Security Council in 2007, becoming a

non-permanent member on 3 January 2008, and was elected to the UN Human Rights Council in 2010. Thus, Libya had undergone something of a rapprochement with the West and with Britain by 2011, from a pariah state to one that could, it was suggested by Anthony Giddens, become in a couple of decades the 'Norway of North Africa' (Giddens 2007). Third, the protests, and subsequent violence began almost simultaneously in Bahrain and Libya. While Libya's did escalate at a faster pace, protesters were killed by security forces in both countries using tear-gas, rubber bullets and live rounds. The figure killed in Bahrain is much smaller than in Libya, Amnesty reported that during 2011, at least 47 people had died in the protests, including five police officers, and five people who died in custody as a result of torture (Amnesty International 2012), though some reports place this figure higher. In the case of Libya, thousands have been killed as the situation deteriorated more quickly, with protesters quickly gaining access to weapons from neighbouring states, unprotected stockpiles, and from Western sources. Nevertheless, there was a period of time when the situation on the ground was sufficiently similar for comparisons to be made, for it was Western support and intervention that enabled the protests to evolve into a revolution in Libya.

Fourth, human rights abuses were the default response of the governments in both countries, for example, in Bahrain, doctors and hospital workers who helped those injured by government forces were subsequently arrested and put on trial (initially military tribunals), for assisting them; the King declared martial law on 15 March; approximately 1,300 people were arrested in connection with the protests, and several thousand Shi'ites were sacked from their jobs and expelled from their universities (this in a country with a population of 1.3 million) (Amnesty International 2012). Reports of torture were common in both countries. The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, set up by King of Bahrain on 29 June 2011 in order to assuage domestic and international opinion, found that systematic torture was used, including forms of physical, sexual and psychological abuse of detainees, and in some cases their family members (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry 2011, 287-303). Fifth, in both countries, the protestors were predominantly young, consisting of many different groups and individuals who lacked a clear programme or a hierarchical organisation with leaders and followers, and the protests occurred at multiple sites and involved large numbers of civilians. Lastly, both countries were ruled by a specific leader and his family, who had benefited enormously from control of state financial and natural resources.

The major difference in the two cases, was that in Bahrain, the leadership turned to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states for support. On 14 March 2011, around 1,200 Saudi troops and 800 troops from the United Arab Emirates crossed the causeway from Saudi Arabia into Bahrain in armoured vehicles to ‘assist’ the Bahraini security forces in protecting strategic sites and suppressing the revolt (Bronner and Slackman 2011). In contrast, Gaddafi found that he lacked support. Libya’s neighbours, Tunisia and Egypt were too caught up in their own internal unrest to want or be able to get involved. The Arab League voted in favour of a no-fly zone over Libya. Lebanon co-sponsored Resolution 1973. The GCC states were strongly anti-Gaddafi: Saudi Arabia had never forgiven him for funding a bungled assassination attempt on King Abdullah, while Qatar and the United Arab Emirates provided military, logistical and financial support to the National Transition Council in Libya (Noueihed and Warren 2012, 182). Even the Western businesses that had flooded Libya with investment for oil and gas exploration and extraction had lost faith with Libya by this point. Bahrain, on the other hand, had plenty of allies. For the ruling elites of Bahrain, Britain and America are considered important allies, but most important is the relationship with Saudi Arabia. During these events, the Saudis had ‘made it clear that they regard what happens in Bahrain as vital to their security’ (Doran and Shaikh 2011, 193).

The time period chosen is from February to December 2011. It encapsulates the start of the British government’s discussion of events in these two countries. Events in Bahrain were first referred to in the House of Commons on 14 February 2011, the day that was referred to by protesters in Bahrain as a ‘day of rage’. This marked the beginning of the uprising with a series of marches, protests and rallies being held in twenty-five different locations in Bahrain. The uprising in Libya was first reported in the UK on 16 February 2011, and first mentioned in the House of Commons on 28 February 2011. The analysis runs through to the death of Muammar Gaddafi on 20 October 2011 and the immediate aftermath and reaction to his death, and the visit of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa of Bahrain to Britain in December 2011, when he met with David Cameron.

Speeches, statements and press releases by key government ministers were collected and analysed. These included speeches by Prime Minister David Cameron, Foreign Secretary William Hague, and the Minister for North Africa and the Middle East, Alistair Burt. The

initial intention had been to include speeches by Liam Fox, the Defence Secretary, and statements released by the Ministry of Defence, but the authors were unable to find statements or press releases by the MoD on Bahrain during 2011.⁴ This is itself of possible analytical significance as it means that all of the government comments on Bahrain were coming from the Prime Minister or from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, making Bahrain a foreign and diplomatic policy issue, rather than a security one requiring a military response. Burt is included as there is significant coverage of events in both Libya and Bahrain from Burt, and he is the Minister most closely involved in that region. On several occasions, it was Alastair Burt who briefed Member of Parliament on the government's response to the uprisings in Bahrain and Libya.

The corpus of texts to be analysed was gathered by systematically going through the websites for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and for 10 Downing Street, where reference was made to Libya or Bahrain, the Arab Spring or uprisings, the Middle East, and North Africa. This involved viewing every speech from within the time period, working chronologically through these, and looking for these key words. The same technique was used to collect press notices, press briefings, new stories, and statements and articles from the Prime Minister's website, and the 'latest news' section on the FCO website. House of Commons debates were also searched in this way. All the articles, speeches and press releases etc. were then downloaded, stored and read. Some texts were deemed to be irrelevant, for example an article on the London Festival of Contemporary Arab Culture, which mentions both Libya and Bahrain, and were thus discarded.

This produced a corpus of texts of 321 different speeches and articles, comprising 82,502 words, of which only 7,409 (8.7%) related to Bahrain. The proportion of words for Bahrain to Libya was 1:10.5. While the relative scarcity of texts on Bahrain it itself challenging methodologically, it is in itself significant. It suggests that either events in Bahrain were being viewed by the British government as being of far less importance than events in Libya, and, or, that the British government was seeking to minimise attention to events in Bahrain, thus keeping the need to take some form of action off the policy agenda. These texts were then analysed in several stages. The analysis begin with a careful reading of the whole corpus of texts in order to pick out key words which seem to suggest that a particular identity was being ascribed to the particular actors involved. This was done for the leaders of the two states, and for those taking part in the uprisings. Then a

quantitative analysis of all of the texts was conducted, counting the frequency with which these key words occurred. Counting frequencies is of course quite a crude method. It does not address the context within which words are used, the tone of voice, or thematic usage. Because of this, the final step in the research was to read the texts in more detail again and conduct a more in-depth qualitative discourse analysis, where focus was given to narratives of meaning. This enabled us to go beyond the somewhat surface level quantitative content analysis to see *how* the language was used to construct a particular narrative, and to situate what was being said within broader meanings.

Discourse analysis aims to ‘reveal the ontological and epistemological premises which are embedded in language’ (Pedersen 2009, 4). This paper employs a ‘critical’ discourse analysis, which differs from an ordinary discourse analysis because of the ‘*constitutive, problem-oriented, interdisciplinary approach*’, and how because of this it is ‘*not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se, but in studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multi-disciplinary and multi-methodological approach*’ (Wodak and Meyer 2009, 2, emphasis in original). This is important to consider, as rather than just looking at isolated words and phrases, it is necessary to analyse them within a wider social context. The importance of this is highlighted when it is remembered that ‘it is not simply manipulation that is at issue in the case of political language; it is the goal of such manipulation which is seen as problematic’ (Wilson 2003, 400). Thus, the central question to ask is not merely in what way were the uprisings in Libyan and Bahraini presented, but *how* was language used in order to achieve this? While critical discourse analysis is more commonly associated with poststructuralist approaches, there are commonalities with constructivism, and our position is that constructivism can be viewed quite broadly. How states use language to identify others is important, as the general public will tend to have very little direct knowledge of events and actors, and so this allows politicians to shape perceptions through the use of a particular narrative. To date, very little has been written on how Britain has done this as part of its foreign policy (but see Kitchen and Vickers 2012). Discourse analysis as a method is heavily dependent on the interpretation, insight and intuition of the researcher. This can raise issues of credibility and plausibility (Rapley 2007, 128-9). It was hoped that through the triangulation of the quantitative content analysis with the qualitative discourse analysis, the methodological problems of both could be somewhat mitigated.

The aim of the discourse analysis was to explain the representation of the uprisings and responses to them through the use of language, in particular looking at the use of language by the British government to forge identities for the different actors involved. The way that people think is contingent on language and the language which people use is contingent on how and what they think about particular issues. There are some themes that we expected to appear when undertaking this discourse analysis, similar to that which Hilsum noted of the media's constitutive role in constructing the portrayal of the uprisings: that the conflict has been presented as a 'temptingly reductive narrative: evil old dictator versus seemingly modern, often English speaking, democracy-seeking rebels' (Hilsum 2011, 5). However, while the government chose this narrative in the case of Libya, it did not do so in the case of Bahrain. Our argument is that the government chose these narratives because they fitted with both ideas and interests that existed before the uprisings began, but then also played a constitutive role in terms of producing, reinforcing, or shifting, the social identities of the actors involved.

THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT'S NARRATIVE OF THE UPRISINGS

In analysing the corpus of texts, we focused on the identities that were ascribed to the Bahraini and Libyan authorities, that is, the leaders of those countries, and those taking part in the uprisings. We turn first to the identities given to the leaders.

Leaders

A very significant difference was found in the way that the leaders of the two countries were portrayed. Apart from the actual names of the leaders, Colonel Gaddafi and his associates in the case of Libya, and Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and the rest of the Al Khalifa royal family in Bahrain, the terms 'government', 'regime' and 'dictator/dictatorship' tended to be used to describe the leaders. The frequency of these terms is given in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1 HERE

The term 'regime' occurred 344 times, and in all cases was used to describe the Libyan leadership. It was never used to describe the Bahraini leadership.⁵ The word 'regime' in a strict sense merely means a system of government or administration. However, its modern usage tends to be pejorative, and the term is usually used in reference to an authoritarian government or dictatorship. This use of 'regime' is further supplemented with use of the words 'dictator' or 'dictatorship' which occurred twenty-seven times throughout the text, all in relation to Libya, but never in relation to Bahrain. Neither leadership was democratically elected, yet the UK government only saw fit to denounce one as a dictatorship. The more neutral term 'government' tended to be used to describe the leadership in Bahrain, occurring sixty-eight times, and was used for the Gaddafi leadership in Libya only thirty times. Given that the proportion of words for Bahrain to Libya was 1:10.5, it means that if the term 'government' was used for Bahrain sixty-eight times, then equivalent number of occurrences for Libya - if the term 'government' was being used in the same way - would have been 714, not thirty. Furthermore, the British government did not choose to use the more neutral language used in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 to refer to the existing leaders of Libya, namely the 'Libyan authorities' (UNSC 2011). The significance of this is that Britain rejected the use of diplomatic language to identify the existing Libyan leadership, instead choosing to use emotive and strongly negatively value-laden language such as regime or dictatorship, but did not do this in the case of Bahrain.

When it came to describing the response of the leaders of the two countries to the uprisings, again the language was strongly loaded. It was found that the term 'reform' was used thirty-five times in the case of Bahrain, but only seven times in the case of Libya. The word 'brutal' or 'brutality' was used to describe the actions of the Libyan leadership forty-one times. Thus, a narrative was produced that portrayed Al Khalifa as being in the process of offering reform, that he was initiating a dialogue with the opposition (or at least that he should have been and that the British government was encouraging him to do so). If reform is on the agenda, then it means that intervention is not required, because the situation is being improved internally. Unlike Gaddafi, Al Khalifa is not portrayed as 'brutal', a particularly emotive adjective which was used to describe Gaddafi's actions, as it portrays not only the actions as wrong, but the intention and manner in which they are carried out are deliberate and malevolent.

Perhaps the most interesting finding was the repeated use of the word ‘attack’, and its forms. The word is never used to describe the violence in Bahrain, but is consistently used to describe the violence in Libya, and occurred 127 times. The words ‘attack’ ‘attacks’ or ‘attacking’ are extremely powerful in portraying Gaddafi as brutal because they instinctively make him the agent in a sentence. Gaddafi is always *attacking* or carrying out *attacks* on the demonstrators, rather than the demonstrators being *attacked* by Gaddafi (the word ‘attacked’ only appeared seven times). It portrays Gaddafi as active, putting the emphasis on his forces carrying out the attacks, as opposed to focusing on those being attacked. In relation to Bahrain, there seemed to be a lack of set words or phrases to describe what was happening. A mixture of ‘death(s)’, ‘violence’ and ‘events’ are the most common words associated with the hostilities there. With using ‘deaths’ the opposite of the portrayal of Libya is true. It is not that Al Khalifa’s police forces are *killing* protesters: it is merely that, in the words of Alistair Burt at the FCO, there have been ‘*events* which have led to the *deaths* of several protestors’ (Burt 2011b, emphasis added). This makes it sound like the deaths were almost accidental, unpremeditated, that they have happened by chance. Thus, the Bahraini government is portrayed as more passive and thus less accountable and morally abhorrent than Gaddafi. In addition, the portrayal of an active Gaddafi is continued with the use of the phrase ‘own people’, again never used in relation to Bahrain. The phrase positions Gaddafi again as the agent, brutalising his *own people*, and it has the additional effect of attaching intuitive connections of responsibility.

Those Taking Part in the Uprisings

The next step in the research was to identify particular words that were used to identify those taking part in the uprisings. Again we found a difference in the language used to describe the actors in Libya and Bahrain, and the motivations for their actions, as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2 HERE

The term most commonly used to identify those taking part in the uprising in Libya was ‘civilians’, while in Bahrain they were ‘protestors’. As already noted, only in Libya was the term ‘own people’ used. One surprise was the low use of the term ‘rebel’ to identify

those in Libya. Rebel was the term most commonly used by the media, after an initial period of uncertainty over what to call those taking part in the uprising in Libya, and was the term that became the dominant media frame. It seems that the UK government resisted that particular narrative. Instead, the term used to identify those in the Libyan uprisings was ‘civilians’, which occurred 227 times when discussing Libya, but only nine times in the case of Bahrain. In contrast, rebel was used only twenty times in the case of Libya, and not at all in the case of Bahrain. The term ‘protestors’ was used in the case of Libya, but seventeen of the twenty-nine occurrences (58.6%) happened in the relatively short period of time before United National Security Council Resolution 1973 on 17 March, approximately a month after events began. Furthermore, given that there were over ten times as many words devoted to events in Libya, then if the term ‘protestors’ was being used in the same way to describe actors in both cases, then one would expect it to occur 357 times instead of twenty-nine times in Libya.

Largely drafted by the UK, the UNSC Resolution 1973 used the term ‘civilians’ fourteen times, authorising member states to take ‘all necessary measures . . . to protect civilians and civilian populated areas’ (UNSC 2011). The term ‘civilian’ has particular connotations of innocence in relation to combat. States are meant to protect their civilians, not attack them. Within government texts, reference was often made to the resolution, and the language of the government mirrored the language of the UNSC resolution very closely with regards to those taking part in the uprising. It is likely that the term ‘civilians’ became fixed in UK discourse after the resolution as the protection of civilians was the explicit legal mandate for military action. The government needed to be ‘on message’ from that point onwards in order to make clear that its actions were legally mandated by the UN. Any other framing, for example the use of the term ‘rebel’, would have suggested a more partisan position which would then leave Britain vulnerable to accusations of taking sides. Protecting civilians from attack is rather different from supporting rebels against their own government. Furthermore, it might also be the case that by reflecting the language of Resolution 1973, Britain sought to neutralise political debate about its involvement by passing on responsibility for action to the UNSC, by giving the impression that Britain had to be part of a military response because it was demanded by the UNSC, thus shutting down the discursive possibilities for an alternative course of action.⁶ Given the acceptance of the United Nations of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’, it was thus

Britain's duty to intervene to protect innocent civilians from being attacked by Gaddafi. Libya was violating the most basic tenets of how a state should behave towards its people.

There was no uncertainty in the government's narrative about events in Bahrain: those taking part in the uprisings were consistently described as 'protestors'. The implication of referring to the Bahrainis as 'protestors' rather than 'civilians' or 'rebels' is that it downplays the seriousness of the situation and the importance of their actions. Calling the Bahrainis protesters suggests that they are similar to those who protest in the UK, for example against government cuts, or increased student fees, rather than for a change of government. Although this does portray them as being legitimate, non-violent and organised, it does not give an impetus for mass sympathy and comes without the connotations of innocence or empathy framing that comes with the word 'civilian', or the romanticism and danger that is implied by the word 'rebel'. People often protest, that is almost to be expected, and so does not imply that there is any great urgency in when, or how, or even whether, the outside world responds.

Furthermore, we found that while the term 'the Libyan people' occurred 192 times, the term 'the Bahraini people' only occurred seven times. Part of the explanation is that there was far more coverage given to the events in Libya than Bahrain, but even when this is taken into account, there is still a disproportionate difference in whether 'the people' is used. This is important, for this affects the extent to which the respective protesters or civilians were portrayed as being united and thus how popular each uprising was. By repeatedly using the phrase 'the Libyan people', the UK government was able to portray the uprising as universally popular. At times when questioned about Libyan people supporting Gaddafi, the government brushed this notion off with claims that Gaddafi 'ruled by fear and oppression', thus signifying that any residual public support for Gaddafi was contingent on people being frightened, and so was less genuine or valid than the aspirations of the rest of the 'Libyan people' (Hague 2011g).

Another way that opposition groups in Libya were given legitimacy was in the use of the term 'government' in relation to the National Transitional Council (NTC). This group was officially recognised by the UK as the sole governmental authority in Libya on 27th July 2011, when the Libyan chargé d'affaires was summoned to the FCO to be informed 'that he and other regime diplomats from the from the Qadhafi regime must leave the UK'. The

NTC was invited to appoint a new Libyan envoy, and Hague said that ‘This decision marks another step towards a better, democratic future for Libya’ (Hague 2011h). It is interesting to consider how the NTC was portrayed as the distinct opposite to Gaddafi, as free, democratic and legitimate. The word ‘government’ was mentioned in relation to some sort a self-determined, future Libyan rule, often in relation to the NTC sixty-five times, a similar number to that which was referred to the Bahraini government and over twice as many times as occurred in relation to Gaddafi and the existing Libyan authorities. In this way, the NTC was portrayed as representing the ‘Libyan people’, and providing an alternative, democratic government in waiting, even though it did not have democratic credentials as such. The narrative of an alternative, democratic government in waiting, gave the British public a sense that there was a credible, legitimate and organised opposition to support who would provide a solution to the problems in Libya.

Furthermore, the use of key terms to describe a transition to a more democratic future was significantly different between the two cases. In the case of Bahrain, the government simply needed to respect existing ‘freedoms’ or at most consider some limited reforms, whereas in the case of Libya, there needed to be a transition to a ‘democratic future’ under a new government. This is highlighted in Table 3.

TABLE 3 HERE

Whereas the Libyan people deserved a ‘free’ and ‘democratic future’, the Bahraini people required merely that their existing ‘freedoms’ - freedom of expression was frequently referred to - be respected by the existing government. Similar discrepancies occurred in the narrative of the British government’s response to the uprisings in Bahrain and Libya.

THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT’S NARRATIVE ON ITS RESPONSE TO THOSE TAKING PART IN THE UPRISINGS

The next part of the research was to analyse the way the British government constructed the narrative of its response to the uprisings. While the government frequently used the word ‘pressure’ to describe the required response to those governments not respecting the

rights of their populations, at no point did the British government feel the need to put ‘pressure’ on the government of Bahrain. The British government was ‘concerned’ about the situation in Bahrain, but felt the need to ‘condemn’ the actions of the Libyan authorities. While it urged the leaders of both countries to modify their behaviour, it was Libya where the authorities ‘must’ change their course of action.

TABLE 4 HERE

There is a notable difference between the use of concern and condemnation in relation to Bahrain. Bahrain is only condemned once, whereas the Libyan authorities are condemned 38 times. The word ‘condemn’ has very strong negative connotations, it is usually the most grave of crimes that are condemned. To be condemned involves the idea of punishment, it suggests some form of action is required. The word ‘concern’ is much softer and more passive. To be concerned about the actions of a government is a way of showing that one cares about what is happening in that country, and is worried by the actions of someone, but stops short of claiming that those actions are absolutely wrong and therefore action is required to stop them. Hague did once use the term ‘alarmed’, which is stronger, with ‘I am alarmed by reports on soldiers firing on protestors’ on 18 February 2011 (Hague 2011d). But, even so, this passive nature of language towards Bahrain facilitated a passive response from the UK. There were significant mentions of concern in relation to Libya, but this was usually in conjunction with the language of condemnation.

Another contrast appeared in the strength of the language used to stress the need for a change in the course of actions being taken by those in power. Both the Bahraini and Libyan governments were being encouraged and urged to modify their behaviour, it was only really in the case of Libya that the authorities were being told that they ‘must’ change their behaviour, or that Britain or the international community ‘must’ take action. The word ‘must’ occurred 137 times in relation to Libya, but only nine times in relation to Bahrain. The use of the word ‘must’ implies urgency and strength. William Hague said on 17 February 2011 that the British government ‘encourage[s] Bahrain and other countries to take further steps that meet legitimate aspirations for greater political and social freedoms’ (2011c). There is great deal of difference between this statement and one made by David Cameron the following week regarding Libya, that ‘we must not tolerate this regime using military force against its own people’ (Cameron 2011b). Similarly, the term

‘necessary’ appeared sixty-eight times in relation to Libya, but not at all in relation to Bahrain. The term ‘pressure’ occurred 109 times, but never once in relation to Bahrain. For instance, on the Andrew Marr show, Foreign Secretary William Hague said that ‘The plan is to continue to tighten the pressure of every form, including the military pressure, on the Qadhafi regime. . . . the Qadhafi regime . . . are clearly under military pressure and they will come under ever greater diplomatic and economic pressure which we will be continuing to work on’ (Hague 2011f). The theme of ‘work’ occurred frequently in relation to Libya, being used eighty-six times, while ‘progress’ was reported in relation to Libya thirty-three times. This gave a sense that things are being done and moving forward, that achievements were being made as a result of hard work and activity.

Another narrative that was used in the case of Libya but not Bahrain, especially once UNSC Resolution 1973 had been passed, was that the actions that the UK was taking were humanitarian in nature, and due to the necessity of protecting the Libyan people.

TABLE 5 HERE

The British government, probably mindful of the concern over the legality and legitimacy of the intervention in Iraq in 2003, was keen to stress that the actions being taken in Libya were not only necessary but also ‘legal’, a term which was used sixty-one times. Often, it was not simply stated that the intervention was legal, it was stressed that it was ‘clearly legal’, there was a ‘clear legal’ basis to the action. So clear in fact, that the word was used 197 times in total, with only twelve of these occurrences being in relation to Bahrain. Aside from the usage alongside the frame of legality, the word ‘clear’ was very useful in terms of portraying the government’s response as strong and decisive. This is important when contextualised, as early during the unrest, the government came under pressure as the evacuation of British citizens was criticised for being slow. It was suggested that this then encouraged David Cameron to show strength and initiative in order to ‘regain lost ground’ (Wintour and Watt 2011). This repeated use of ‘clear’ supports this idea, with the government wanting to portray itself as being in control and having a strong idea of what its position on Gaddafi was, eliminating any doubt that their position may be in any way confused and indecisive as was suggested in the criticised evacuation.

Furthermore, it was ‘necessary’ to intervene in Libya in order to protect civilians; it was a ‘humanitarian’ act. This narrative fitted closing with the theme of protecting civilians in UNSC Resolution 1973. It was not necessary to discuss intervention in Bahrain as there was no ‘humanitarian’ crisis there, the term humanitarian was not used once in the texts, and the language of protection was only used in relation to Bahrain once. In contrast, the term humanitarian was used to 120 times to describe the crisis in Libya and the response of the British government to it.

Thus far, this paper has offered an account of the British government’s discourse on the uprisings in Libya and Bahrain by showing how each uprising and the corresponding response has been portrayed. It has been highlighted that there has been a significant disparity in the two narratives. The paper now moves on to assessing the potential interaction that these narratives had in terms of constructing the British response to the uprisings.

THE CONSTITUTIVE ROLE OF THE DISCOURSE ON THE UPRISINGS AND BRITISH POLICY

The British government narratives of the uprisings in Bahrain and Libya played a constitutive role in terms of creating and reinforcing the social identities of the actors involved. In the case of Libya, the results of the key word searches and the analysis demonstrate that a narrative was created that portrayed Gaddafi as the leader of a *brutal regime*, who *attacks his own people*, facing an opposition consisting of *civilians* who needed *protecting* while they sought *democracy*, and who represented the legitimate *future* of Libya and who were a *government* in waiting. This is contrasted to the Bahraini *government*, which offered *reform* through *dialogue* with *protestors*. In response to Libya, the British policy was to condemn Gaddafi, who they believed *must go*, while *protecting civilians* through action which was *necessary* and *clearly legal* on *humanitarian* grounds. This was different to the identity of the UK in response to the Bahraini uprisings, which was much more passive, *encouraging reform* and *dialogue* because it was *concerned* about *protestors* and *events* that had led to some *deaths*.

It is the argument of this paper that this narrative played a constitutive role. Much of the discussion of events centred on how the British government should interpret and react to events happening in Bahrain and Libya. It is not that the identities of the actors from the perspective of the UK government were created purely by its use of language, but that the public use of language mirrored and reinforced the (changing) social identities with which the actors in Bahrain and Libya were being viewed. Identities, norms and interests are not fixed, especially during a crisis, they are significantly constituted through ‘communicative action’ which allows actors to ‘mutually challenge and explore the validity claims of those norms and identities’ (Risse 2000, 2). Particular viewpoints or arguments tend to be persuasive ‘because they are enabled and legitimised by a broader social discourse in which they are embedded’ (Checkel 2008, 77). The primary function of the public discourse then is to introduce these identities to the audience, where they can be made to seem natural, shutting down alternative interpretations or points of view, and a political consensus can be reached. Once an actor is seen in a particular light, e.g. victim or aggressor, it makes it much easier to develop a consensus on the appropriate response to these actors. This results in policy outcomes that seem inevitable and can be easily justified and legitimised. The main audience in question was the British public, but of course the government was also sending messages to - and seeking to influence - governments and publics overseas.

The importance of the British government’s narrative of the two uprisings then, is that through the way in which they were portrayed and identities were created, certain policy options were enabled, while restricting the possibility that other policy options might occur. The portrayal of those involved in the Libyan uprisings facilitated military intervention because of the severity of the situation. The narrative of Gaddafi being a *dictator*, a leader of a *brutal regime*, attacking *democracy-seeking civilians* who needed *protecting*, who were facing a *humanitarian* crisis, was entrenched in broader discourses of democratisation and liberal interventionism. These discourses are partly ideological, partly strategic, and partly historical, and they all strengthened the arguments about the actors involved and paved the way for military protection of civilians. In terms of liberal interventionism, or humanitarian intervention, ‘images of young protesters challenging autocratic regimes have simply provided new fuel to the ideational engine of Western interventionism’ (Tardelli 2011: 6). This is an important point, as part of the legacy of Iraq is that the idea of intervening in other countries had fallen out of favour with much of the

British public. The way in which the response to the Libyan uprisings was portrayed however, made the government action appear much more moral and ethical than it had seemed to be in the case of Iraq, stressing the *humanitarian* nature of the intervention, and the *clear legal* basis of it. With ideas such as democracy, self-determination and protecting vulnerable people being valued in the UK, this portrayal of the uprisings gave a strong basis for the limited military action, and moreover meant that it would have been immoral, irresponsible and inhumane not to intervene. Some form of military protection then, was the common-sense position and people who opposed this position would be perceived as not supporting democracy, self-determination and human rights, but were instead prepared to be passive spectators watching on whilst innocent civilians were brutally murdered.

There are significant questions then, over how and why these same prevailing social discourses of democracy-promotion, humanitarian intervention, self-determination and human rights, were not used in the narrative of the uprisings in Bahrain, and how this then prevented such a similar policy response. The first point to make here is that due to the relative lack of coverage of the Bahraini uprisings (when separated, there were only 7,409 words relevant to Bahrain out of the 82,502 in total) meant that prior to any identities being constructed, the whole uprising appeared to be of a far less serious issue. A key function of political discourse is to attempt to hide negatives, with the negatives on this occasion being the closeness of the UK's relationship with Bahrain and the inconsistencies in the treatment of two similar uprisings. The lack of coverage kept certain policy options off the table, because if something is not being discussed then it does not appear important. The issue of Bahrain has continued to be successfully kept off the agenda in part because of the violence which started in Syria, which has taken the main focus of the UK government and public since the violence in Libya decreased.

Aside from this, the identities that were constituted as a result of the portrayal of the Bahraini uprising made it appear that any form of intervention would be unwarranted and therefore wrong. This was primarily done through the portrayal of Al Khalifa as an instigator of *reform* who was engaging in *dialogue*. This narrative meant that while the British government might have concerns about events, and called on all sides to engage in dialogue, it meant that any kind of military intervention or sanctions or UNSC resolutions condemning the actions of the government of Bahrain, were kept off the table. Such action would have been excessive. This then raises questions of *why* this occurred. The reasons

are too complex to go into in any depth here, but there are clear strategic and material reasons for why Britain wants to keep a good relationship with Bahrain. Britain and the US have very strong naval ties with Bahrain – the US Fifth Fleet is based there, along with Combined Maritime Forces and the UK Maritime Component Command. Bahrain is important regionally in that it has a Sunni monarchy, with a close relationship with Saudi Arabia, governing a Shia majority. As Ajami puts it, ‘The shadows of Iran and Saudi Arabia hover over Bahrain’ (Ajami 2012, 61). However, this paper argues that it was not only strategic reasons that led to Bahrain being portrayed so differently from Libya, but also that ideational ones were very important.

Bahrain had been part of the British empire, only gaining independence from Britain relatively recently, in 1971, when it signed a treaty of friendship with Britain. This meant that Britain had a special relationship with - and a special responsibility towards - Bahrain. The narrative since independence has been that Bahrain is a ‘friend of Britain’. When a friend behaves in a way that goes against our values, this creates cognitive dissonance, which is likely to result in a rather embarrassed silence, rather than a vocal condemnation. Libya, despite its rehabilitation since the end of 2003, had a recent history of being a rogue country, even an enemy of Britain. Hence, when the Libyan ‘regime’ behaved badly, this was simply evidence of its dispositional wickedness. The British government under David Cameron was working within an inherent bad faith model with regards to Libya.⁷ In the case of Bahrain, however, Britain was using an *inherent good faith model*. As Bahrain was viewed through the lens of friendship, evidence of ‘bad behaviour’ produced a cognitive problem for the British government, and so had to be made to fit with existing beliefs when information about the ‘protests’ was being processed. Thus, deaths in Bahrain were almost accidental, they were due to situational constraints, whereas deaths in Libya were the result of Gaddafi’s deliberate, brutal attacks on his own people. As one Conservative MP put it when defending Bahrain in the House of Commons at the start of the uprisings, ‘Unlike Libya, where demonstrations are also taking place today, Bahrain is a loyal friend of the west. It has started political reforms and is very tolerant of western lifestyles. May I urge my right hon. Friend, before the Government make any criticism of Bahrain, to proceed with extreme caution’ (Leigh 2011).

This narrative of ‘friendship’ to describe the relationship between Britain and Bahrain was used throughout the period under investigation. For example, it was used right at the

beginning of events, by Hague in a joint press conference given by himself and the Bahraini Foreign Secretary, in Bahrain, on 10 February 2011, when he talked of ‘the long friendship between our two countries – a relationship which we value enormously’ (Hague 2011a). When Hague made a statement to the House of Commons on the situation in Bahrain on 17 February, he referred to the long-standing friendship between Britain and Bahrain three times (Hague 2011b, cols 1135, 1137, 1140). The friendship was also referred to by Cameron on 20 February, by Hague on 17 March, and by Alistair Burt on October 25 (Cameron 2011a; Hague 2011e, col. 495; Burt, 2011c, col. 181w). It was not just the politicians who used this language of friendship. On 14 January it had been announced by the FCO that Iain Lindsay would become the new Ambassador to Bahrain. Lindsay stated on the FCO website that he was delighted to be going to Bahrain at such an exciting time, and that ‘The UK and Bahrain are close friends’ (Lindsay 2011).

This personification, depicting the two countries as long-term, valued friends, inevitably evokes expectations in how they ought to act towards one another. As Wendt points out, ‘people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them. States act differently toward enemies than they do to toward friends because enemies are threatening and friends are not’ (Wendt 1992, 396-7). Friends in this context are ‘expected to be loyal, stand up for each other, and help each other in times of need’ (Vestermark 2007). There is only one reference to friendship in relation to Libya, but here it is British friendship with the opposition groups; Hague says that Britain is a ‘strong and true friend’ of Libya because it is ‘supporting the Libyan people’ (Hague 2011h). The policy responses available subsequently appear to be helping a friend, which for Bahrain means encouraging greater reform for a better settlement for the whole country. In the case of Libya however, the only right policy response is to help and protect our friends, the opposition, who are innocent *civilians* who being *attacked*. Once Bahrain is viewed through lens of friendship, it becomes extraordinarily difficult and awkward for the British government to condemn its actions, because that would mean jeopardising that friendship.

CONCLUSION

The uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa produced a dilemma for the British government. On the one hand, it needed to support the rights of people with undemocratic, unelected governments to challenge those governments and to push for the same freedoms enjoyed in Britain. On the other hand, Britain has tended to benefit from relationships with some of these undemocratic governments. Libya and Bahrain offer an interesting contrast, in that they happened almost simultaneously, and yet the British government reacted very differently to these two cases, and, perhaps even more significantly, was able to do so without it causing a great deal of concern to the British public. This paper has sought to demonstrate *why* this was done, in particular focusing on the idea that as Bahrain was classified as a ‘friend of Britain’, and viewed through this lens of friendship, it became extraordinarily difficult for the government to criticise it – obviously here the material, strategic aspects of this friendship matter, but we would argue that the very idea of friendship affected the way that senior British politicians reacted, it created a cognitive bias. We have also sought to demonstrate *how* this was done, through the analysis of the language used to describe actors and events in Libya and Bahrain. Through the use of particular key words and terms, very different identities were ascribed to the governments and to those taking part in the uprisings. Whereas in Libya, *civilians* were being *brutally attacked* by a *dictatorial regime*, in Bahrain, *events* had led to the *deaths* of some *protestors*. Through the use of particular language and discourse, some actors in the uprisings were legitimised, while others were de-legitimised, and this in turn facilitated certain British policy decisions, making them appear almost inevitable. Intervention in Libya was *necessary* to *protect civilians*, and there was a *clear legal basis* on *humanitarian grounds*, and the Libyan people deserved *democracy*, to be *free*, and a *transition* to a *new future*. In Bahrain, Britain was merely *concerned* at events, and the strongest reaction was to *urge* both sides to take part in *dialogue*, and to encourage the government to undertake *reform*. It is very difficult to criticise a friend.

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TABLES

Table 1. Leaders.

| Terms for actors | Bahrain | Libya |
|--------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Regime | 0 | 344 |
| Dictator/dictatorship | 0 | 27 |
| Government | 68 | 30 |
| Terms for actions | Bahrain | Libya |
| Reform | 35 | 5 |
| Dialogue | 39 | 8 |
| Brutal/brutality | 0 | 41 |
| Attack/attacks/attacking | 0 | 127 |
| Own people | 0 | 55 |

Table 2. Those taking part in the uprisings.

| Terms for actors | Bahrain | Libya |
|-------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Own people | 0 | 55 |
| Civilians | 9 | 227 |
| Rebel(s) | 0 | 20 |
| Protest/protestor(s) | 34 | 29 |
| Bahraini people/Libyan people | 7 | 192 |

Table 3. Aspirations of those taking part in the uprisings.

| Key word | Bahrain | Libya |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Free | 1 | 50 |
| Freedom(s) | 17 | 38 |
| Democracy/democratic | 1 | 118 |
| Transition | 0 | 44 |
| Future | 8 | 185 |

Table 4. British government response.

| Key word | Bahrain | Libya |
|--------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Concern/concerned | 50 | 54 |
| Condemn/condemned/condemnation | 1 | 38 |
| Encourage(s)(d) | 11 | 13 |
| Urge(s)(d) | 20 | 13 |
| Must | 9 | 137 |
| Necessary | 0 | 68 |
| Pressure | 0 | 109 |

Table 5. Description of British actions.

| Key word | Bahrain | Libya |
|-------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
| Humanitarian | 0 | 120 |
| Protect/protection/protecting | 1 | 138 |
| Legal | 4 | 61 |
| Clear/clearly | 12 | 185 |

NOTES

¹ We use the terms ‘Britain’ and ‘British’ here, rather than ‘the United Kingdom’. This reflects the way that British foreign policy tends to be referred to, even though it is the case that we are actually discussing the foreign policy of the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

² King Hamad al-Khalifa of Bahrain was also welcomed by Cameron on the steps of 10 Downing Street at the start of an unofficial visit to Britain on 13 December 2011.

³ We are looking here at the intentional use of language. We do not attempt to unpick the extent to which the linguistic practices used were the result of the background effects of

existing collective assumptions, rather than a conscious endeavour: to do this will require further research.

⁴ Fox visited Bahrain in December 2010, when he stressed the importance of the Britain's relationship with Gulf region states, especially with regards to the threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. MoD press releases regarding Bahrain otherwise consist of announcements about the UK Maritime Component Command (UKMCC), based in Bahrain, but did not mention the uprising there.

⁵ The only time it was used in relation to Bahrain, it was done so in a quite specific way, in response to concern over arms sales to Bahrain, to explain that Britain has 'one of the most rigorous licensing regimes in the world'. Alistair Burt, 17 February, 2011a. Foreign Office Minister Comments on Arms Exports to Bahrain.

<www.fco.gov.uk/resources/en/news/2011/february/bahrain-exports> (accessed 16 March 2012).

⁶ We are indebted to (anonymised) for his insight on this point.

⁷ As developed by Ole Holsti. See for instance Holsti (1967); Stuart and Starr (1981).