



Transcript

British Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Dr Rosemary Hollis, author, *Britain and the Middle East in the 9/11 Era* (Chatham House Paper, published by Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)

Discussants: Dr Maha Azzam, Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House; Sir Harold 'Hooky' Walker, HM Ambassador to Iraq (1990-91); President, British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

Chair: Ian Black, Middle East Editor, *The Guardian*

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Dr Rosemary Hollis:

Good evening. Thank you very much for coming. I'm very relieved that this day has come, because after today I can begin the rest of my life. The book has been incubating for a little too long and I think if you do read it, you'll see in the preface the story of how the genesis of the book.

One important thing to flag up from the word go is that this book is not so much about the Middle East, although the Middle East features a great deal in the book, it is about the British and principally about the British in, as the title says, the 9/11 era. Which, for the purposes of the book, means the New Labour decade, when Tony Blair was in charge at Number 10, and a little bit thereafter in terms of implications.

But also, in order to address the three main questions of the book, which I'll tell you in a minute, it was necessary to offer some background in at least one chapter, what was true before this era in order to distinguish this era from what went before.

The three questions that I focus on in the book are:

1. What was new about New Labour, and how did that affect British policy in the Middle East?
2. What changed in British thinking after 9/11?
3. How did the British government's handling of the Iraq crisis and invasion alter British policies and role in the Middle East?

Now, the message of the book, if I had to boil it down, is that the implications of the changes made by New Labour in the policy-making process before 9/11 had consequences for the handling of the Iraq crisis thereafter and consequently the answers to my three questions are all interlinked.

Now, the best I can do now in the 10 minutes I've got left is to give you a short list of the topics touched on in the book, and then extract what I think are perhaps the most interesting findings; the topics possibly most enjoyable to discuss at this meeting.

Having attempted to make the point about the relevance of history, which I do at the beginning of the book, and is exemplified in this map, it matters, even at the turn of the 20th to the 21st century, that Britain was there at the beginning of the state system, drawing the lines on the map. Which set in place a system that had just about gelled in the region when the invasion of Iraq took place and threw all the pieces up in the air again. I would contend

that we don't know yet what the full implications are of that major disruption at the heart of the region.

I also deal with the New Labour policy approach and the changes to the policy-making process. I'll come back to this in a second.

There is a whole chapter about the road to war in Iraq and I'm gratified to discover that all presentations and appearances before the Iraq inquiry have computed with what I had deduced from my observations and my research over the same period when that decision was being made.

The fall out from the invasion. There's a couple of chapters on the Middle East peace process and the role of the British and Tony Blair in the Arab-Israeli conflict, both before and after 9/11. And then I do say something about Britain's relationship with the Arab Gulf states. Again, I'll mention that in a moment, to tell you what my main finding is.

I've said enough about history, so let's move on.

That's the second phase, now let me take you to the end of the 20th century. The following four points distinguish the New Labour approach to policy on anything, not just the Middle East.

1. The era of imperialism is so well and truly over that you don't need to even refer to it.
2. Globalisation, we're talking late 90s, is the new panacea. It's globalisation stupid. It appears in every speech and there's a sense before 9/11 that it's a good thing.
3. New Labour decided that Britain needed re-branding. Their term. And the new brand- Margaret Thatcher had said 'we're going to put the Great back in Great Britain'- the new brand produced by New Labour was to be that Britain would be a force for good in the world. This appears twice in the strategic defence review which defines New Labour even before 9/11. It's benign intervention, it's toppling dictators, it's rescuing populations from ethnic cleansing and oppression and promoting human rights. After 9/11 we shift from promoting the good to combating the evil. There is a palpable change.

Four points to mention about the policy-making process that are key to understanding Britain in the Middle East in the 9/11 era.

1. Tony Blair says this often: values and interests merge. You stand up for important values. You identify them- liberal markets, democracy,

liberty in general- and that is the same as defending your interests. It's a smooth transition from the national interest to the projection of British values overseas.

2. I think this was evident in spades when Alistair Campbell appeared before the Iraq Inquiry, is that presentation is as important as content. And there's one mantra that I extract from the policy content: Failure is not an option.
3. There is a domestic foreign policy continuum. You can no longer find the boundary between the domestic and the foreign. That is until after 9/11, when you have British citizens questioning the policy on terrorism as pursued in the Middle East.
4. Lastly the Presidential Number 10- it's both presidential and informal. The sofa government business.

About the road to war in Iraq, and we can come back to this and I'm delighted that Hooky Walker, who is one of the people that read an early draft of the book and gave me some feedback, is going to have a say because Iraq was a posting that he had in the Middle East even before 2003.

What I say in the book, in the chapter about the road to war, is that this was not a decision made after much agonising about whether to or not. It was a decision into which Britain slid. The cabinet, more to the point, Tony Blair and his immediate entourage in Number 10, reasoned their way out of containment of Iraq once the United States was no longer on board for it. And there is a logic to this, because containment was no longer an option for Britain without the United States.

They then started hypothesising consequences of going in and arrived at a position where of course we will be going, as and when the US does it. Just one personal note at this point. I was participating in two or three brainstorming exercises in the United States in 2002. It was patently obvious to me that the invasion was coming and there was a dire necessity to discuss the day after. In this country, that was not encouraged. It was positively discouraged on the grounds that thereby you would somehow let the cat out of the bag that an invasion was on the cards. Saddam, I was told, must not get the idea that he can't get out of this if he does the right thing.

Enough on Iraq and the fallout, I'm not going to go into that. I also have things to say about developments in British relations with a number of states in the region; with Iran, Syria, Libya, Jordan, Egypt. And I would say that if I had to encapsulate the message, it is that the intelligence co-operation with certain

states, Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular, has had to intensify since 9/11 and this has become the core of the relationship which has implications for freedom of action issues subsequently.

On the peace process before and after 9/11, I'm just going to give you one item. It was patently obvious that when Tony Blair, who did make considerable efforts in his repeated forés into the region to get a Middle East peace process off the ground, to get the parties talking, to get the Americans back engaged... it was patently obvious that whenever he said anything to the Israelis that was generated by his own thinking on the problem, there was no interest. If Washington didn't say it, then there was absolutely no reason to pay attention to it. It was a lesson on the side of the Iraq experience in the relative lack of power of a junior power to the United States, at the turn of the 21st century.

My points about Britain and the Arab Gulf states. Firstly, it became patently obvious to me, as I proceeded in the research for this book, that almost by design, in fact by default, the way the British left the Middle East, including the withdrawal from the Arab Gulf states in 1971 was a smooth transition to the insertion of US power in the region.

As an American friend of mine has said, 'now that we're in retreat in the Persian Gulf, there is no Britain to take over for us'. There is only China and India. I would say that under the US umbrella that emerged after 1971, began to slot in before that with the Shah and so on, under that umbrella the British found a niche and the Americans were happy to have them find that niche. Part of that niche involved defence sales to Saudi Arabia.

The Al-Yamamah contract is the centrepiece to British defence co-operation, sales, training, maintenance, and now intelligence sharing with the Arab Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia in particular. And therefore I see that as another factor limiting the freedom of action of the British in the future.

The Serious Fraud Office investigation in this country into the Al-Yamamah defence deal was called off for reasons of national interest. There really were reasons of national interest at stake in severing that relationship or damaging. It turns out, notwithstanding a rocky period around 9/11, by 2007, business was booming again.

There is a wonderful quote that I have in the book by the UAE ambassador to the UK who has written his own memoir about his upbringing, his work for the British bank, his involvement with Britain over the years. He says, 'we thought in 1971 that we'd said goodbye to the British. They left by the front door and they came back in through the window'. He also points out that there is more

Western engagement and involvement in the Middle East today than there was in imperial times.

I have a few final thoughts but I don't have time to give them to you, so I will stop.

Sir Harold 'Hooky' Walker:

Well, as I'm lucky enough to be the first discussant, can I congratulate the author. I think it's a very solid work of a mere 184 pages. I don't think there's a word wasted. It is very tautly drafted in my opinion, but it reflects an enormous amount of research and interviews so it's very well researched.

I think we all know that Rosy is a public spirited person and of course her present job is very public spirited.

You point out in the notes of your book that the Chilcot Inquiry was just taking place. It's often been said that the Chilcot Inquiry is a waste of time because everybody knows the answers. I think it's a great deal more serious than that. I think, first of all, that it has a cunning plan, that they have this ocean of documents and they're asking a lot questions to people without reference to the documents. I think some people may be caught out.

Apart from that, I think that they're going to come up with some trenchant remarks about the misuse of British constitutional machinery to which I'll return in a moment, but it's relevant to this book.

I was going to ask Rosy in question time, has the Chilcot inquiry altered her views, but I think the answer is that it hasn't so far.

Rosy has covered another of the points that struck me about the book. She says that with the arrival of New Labour, there was really a purposive change in British foreign policy, with this emphasis on presentation, globalisation leading to thoughts about free trade, new branding. As a citizen reading my way through the newspapers at this time, I didn't realise this was so purposive. It just seemed that one thing happened after another but I think Rosy makes a very good case says that this was a very interesting purposive action by New Labour.

Perhaps in the same strain, I think that Prime Minister Blair comes out rather better than he has out of most commentaries. It's firmly stated that in regard to going into Iraq he was not a US poodle, he was acting on his own decisions; he's a conviction politician who thought that intervention was the right thing. He made efforts to modify American policy in two respects, as we

know, to try to get the US to go through the UN, and to try to invigorate the peace process.

He had success in going to the UN for discussion, should he really have done better on getting more out of the United States on the peace process. But anyway I think you give him the benefit of the doubt. You have two criticisms to make of him. One is the well known thing, government by sofa, that he pre-empted discussion in cabinet and other appropriate fora. And secondly, that he gave minimal credence to available knowledge. I want to go on about that a bit.

I don't think you mention in the book, to the credit of Number 10, some academics were called in October 2002 to talk about Iraq. They've been reasonably discreet about this. I don't know if there are any of them in the room, but they're all well known. They decided in advance that they would not tackle Prime Minister Blair head on and say 'you must not invade Iraq'. They decided that would be wrong and decided just to describe the complexities of Iraqi society. By their account, all these details caused the Prime Minister to roll his eyes heavenwards and say 'but, Saddam is a very evil man, isn't he?'

I think you're a bit kinder to him than that account would suggest. More seriously from my point of view, given that I'm an old FCO bureaucrat, you don't touch on the extent, if any, that the Foreign Office warned Number 10 about the dangers of going into Iraq. I don't know whether in question time you would care to say something about that. My evidence, of course, is scrappy.

It doesn't look as if the British Foreign Office establishment put that much of a squeak about the inadvisability of going into Iraq and I would like to know why. Was it because, as you did mention, under New Labour, that there's a heavy message about being on message? And it's not like the old Foreign Office where you argued the toss, nowadays you do what you're told or you don't get another job. I may be exaggerating a bit.

That goes along with the point you mentioned that the powers of Number 10 have increased and have effectively taken over the strategic governance of foreign policy while the Foreign Office has become more of an executive agency of Number 10. I'd be very interested to hear your comments on that later on if there is time.

In the same bracket, did the UK plan for after military victory or did we just think 'oh the Americans will handle that'? Or that we'd win a victory and the Iraqi state would carry on under new governance? It's not mentioned and it's

an important point about how the Foreign Office and other parts of UK government have worked during this period.

Dr Maha Azzam:

Thank you very much. Rosy, I felt that the book need bear the facts, that it was a very, from my brief, as a discussant I was asked to look at the Middle East, and the implications of British foreign policy... I felt it was a very poignant critique of that policy and it rang true in terms of the feedback that I had got throughout the region as to the policy during that particular period.

I'd like to touch on the background and history which is so crucial to an understanding of British policy in the region. As you very clearly point out, the historical background is key to our understanding of what went on with New Labour. Your description and analysis looks at the legacy of colonialism in the region, and my feeling is that in a sense, as I was reading, the very impact of colonialism was what the Middle East was suffering from so much later on, in terms of fragile and weak states that in a sense contributed to allowing this very military interference.

Therefore, in a sense, the region, and particularly Iraq, was suffering from the repercussions of something that had happened much earlier on. Although we were talking about countries that had become independent, in a sense they were not capable of withstanding the overwhelming military force of the outsider, even into the 21st century.

Although in many ways the book illustrates that the decision to go to war was a product of the politics and ideology of the day, it was very much part of New Labour's agenda and it wasn't rooted in the past... throughout I felt that the past was very much with us and I think that came across strongly and it's very much the feeling of those in the region.

I think also that in Chapter 5, which you point to frequently as a key chapter, and where you say that Blair deemed the whole issue of going to war as the right thing to do, and that Britain was going to be a force for good in the world. Again, it's possibly pointing out the obvious, but in a sense, it was still the language of the past. Again, we're going to better the lives of the peoples of the region, even if it's going to be through New Labour. But again we're going to deliver through military might. In this context it was the agenda of democratisation.

Again, in terms of the region itself, it was clear for the majority that there was an inherent contradiction in the call for democratisation because Bush and

Blair continued to support regimes that weren't democratic. In a sense, there was a sort of brazen aspect to all this. They're talking about democracy but then there's support for the various countries in the region that were far from democratic.

One would hear again and again from people in the region that Saddam Hussein was not attacked because he wasn't a democrat, Iraq was attacked not because Britain felt that it had to do something in recompense, that it was because he had blatantly stood in the interest of Britain and America.

In a sense that sort of contradiction kept reinforcing itself again and again. In the eyes of the people of the region, it cemented the idea that the new imperial power, the United States and its ally Britain were reinforcing old stereotypes.

The other issue I'd like to raise is the real cost of war and you point to that in terms of numbers. I think often we need to remind ourselves of the impact of the war for the peoples of the region, for the Iraqis themselves, in terms of the loss of life. The fact that that loss of life came from direct US air attacks or because of gunfire, the very impact in terms of human lives is something that will be with us for a very long time to come. I think you document that well in terms of numbers and it's a key aspect.

The impact of war meant that thousands died and the infrastructure of a country was destroyed. We're told that it's going to be rebuilt, and thank you very much, but for the peoples of the region that's not good enough.

Arab government's complicity, I've got, but I won't go into that very much. Basically, despite statements by Egypt and Jordan warning that the United States and Britain were doing the wrong thing, the view in the region is that they were complicit in allowing the invasion.

Consequences on the ground, in terms of extremism, Palestine and Iran. In terms of extremism: certainly I think there was a linkage in terms of what we saw in terms of terrorist activities in Iraq. Would we have had extremism anyway? Yes, but Iraq added to the list and allowed for individuals to carry out terrorism. It also allowed many on the ground to condemn that terrorism because they felt victim to it in the Islamic world.

In terms of Palestine, Israel. It was difficult for many, and still is, to see how the United States and Britain can be honest brokers having engaged so recently in a war.

In terms of Iran, many analysts will agree that in a sense it strengthened Iran as a regional power. The idea that Iran is either a threat or a friend in the

region has much to do with the regimes in the region themselves and I think the impact of US and British policy in Iraq only increasing the role of Iran... yes, but that's something that's bound to happen given Iran's stature in the region. Iran, in a sense, is taking its real place in the region, with or without the war that is inevitably going to happen.

And, finally, the whole issue of engagement and the need to re-appraise policies. I think that the problem lies within the region itself and the book made me think about this more and more. You were talking about British policy in the region, but in a sense the whole issue of victimhood came to mind. I felt that the region has to take its destiny into its own hands. So long as there is a division between state and society, then countries like Britain and the US can do as they please in the region.

In a sense there is always going to be this mismatch between what people want and what their governments are going to allow. Until there is serious regime change in the region, that is internal and domestically initiated, it's going to become increasingly difficult if anything for Britain or others to engage in any real sense on the ground with the region.