Crusaders in Reverse? The Emergence of Political Islam in the Middle East and the Reactions of British Foreign Policy, 1978–1990

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Abstract: British foreign policy in the Middle East has been well researched. However, there are still aspects of Britain's approach towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) that have yet to be researched. One such aspect is Britain's encounter with the rise of political Islam in MENA and the way(s) in which this phenomenon was deciphered. Even though political Islam dates back to the late 19th and early 20th century, our study focuses on the period between the turbulent years of the outburst of the Iranian Revolution in 1978–1979 and its widely-felt influence until 1990. Our methodological tools include Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) archival material that addresses the phenomenon of political Islam and its implications for British interests and international relations in general. We choose the concept of political Islam and its adherents that are widely acknowledged as political, comparatively to those of da'wa and Jihadi Islamism. We argue that British officials were widely influenced by the intellectual debates of the period under consideration and that they mainly adopted four analytical schemas which focused firstly on the rise of sectarian politics in MENA, secondly on the gradual accommodation of non-state actors and organizations in political analysis, thirdly on the worrisome prospect of an alliance between Islamist and communist forces, and lastly on the prevalence of the idea of Islamic solidarity and Islamic exceptionalism in exerting international politics. Our findings suggest that, at times, the FCO approaches the issue of political Islam with a reassuring mindset, focusing on its divisions and weaknesses, while at other times it analyzes it with a grave concern over stability and Britain's critical interests.

Keywords: political Islam; Islamism; Middle East; Britain; Foreign and Commonwealth Office; Iran; Shi'a; Lebanon; transnationalism

1. Introduction: Religion in International Relations

For most of the 20th century, religion was kept at the margins of international relations (IR) analysis. For many scholars, be they historians, sociologists, or political scientists, religion was no longer a driving force in history. Nevertheless, the 'death of god' in the secular age, as Charles Taylor described it, was not so overwhelming, since people all over the world have come to seek for plenitude of their identity (Taylor 2007, pp. 1–24). Since the 1970's, religious feeling has been strengthening in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, yet it has also surfaced in the West, with the powerful emergence of religious discourses, such as the paradigms of Christian or Jewish millennialism.

By the same token, IR were undoubtedly influenced. For example, the consolidation of religious discourse in the practice of IR was facilitated by a number of variables. First, religion offered the mechanisms of legitimization by making use of symbolism that allowed the solidification of ethical and value systems. Second, the need for satisfying domestic constituencies regarding external relations often led to the adoption of a religion-based discourse. Third, religion provided ground for making

the use of violence against domestic or international enemies applicable and justifiable (Fox 2009, pp. 277–79). This was the case with Iran during the war with Iraq in the 1980's, when the Iranian state discourse focused on the need for defending the 'sacred' Iranian Revolution that would eventually bring the 'hidden Imam' back.

In Britain, especially during the 1970's and 1980's, a vivid debate occurred within IR theory known as the 'English School', which recognized an escalation of the influence of the civilizational/religious nexus in the theory and practice of IR (Dunne 1999, pp. 418–19), challenging the absolutism of the Westphalian secular system. As we observed during the aforementioned period, the religious variable intersects and provides an essential framework of analysis (Omer n.d., p. 129). Therefore, what is at stake in this article is to keep track and explicate the itineraries of FCO interpretations relating to the rise of political Islam during the period of historical transformations in the Middle East. By doing so, our study tries to fill a missing part in the scholarship of British foreign policy, especially in a period of high Cold War tensions. After considering Britain's, the USSR's, and the US's early responses to political Islam, this paper's structure delves into the FCO's reactions to the emergence of Islamism. The points addressed reveal the growing tensions between approaches related to Britain's interests, the Cold War political polarization, and the evident growing influence of cultural history in foreign policy.

2. Discussion

This paper outlines an historical approach to British foreign policy on the rise of political Islam. While most literature gives an account of international relations from the perspective of this period's power struggles and particularly under the 'Cold War lenses', our approach focuses on the FCO's attempt to stress the importance of social structures, social relations, and social knowledge not as background material but as fundamental historical driving forces (Wood 1978, p. 348). Despite the dominant articulation of the nation, based on identity, our goals here are twofold. First, to stress the importance of translocality in MENA, which is dependent on socio-political dynamics. This translocality is able to reframe the context of identity formation towards a more culture-based that transcends state boundaries (Mandaville 2001, p. 2). Second, our goals are to unravel the facets of British foreign policy analysis concerning the thorny issue of political Islam and its implications for MENA countries and for other major powers in the region, such as the US.

IR scholarship has not paid much attention to the influence of religion in IR (Hasler n.d., p. 138). Given the paradigm shift of social sciences and political history during the 1970's—from grand narrative to a focus on cultural history and identity politics—we note the influence of these transformations to the FCO and, by extension, its approach to MENA regional politics with the use of the nexus of culture and religion. To a certain extent, the English School of IR challenged the position of the non-existent or the marginalized role of religion in the field, acknowledging religion as an aspect of culture and its functionality in social and political relations. Scholars from the English School realized, during the 1970's, that interactions with non-western cultures, particularly in relation to Islam, formed a certain view within IR theory (Thomas 2001, p. 922).

Our main argument is that in the 1970's political history embedded in its analysis on the rise of political Islam a variety of elements from the emerging fields of social and cultural history. As British scholar Martin Wright maintained in the historical sociology of state systems, religion should be taken seriously, since the main historical religions cast doubts on the progressive character of modernity (Thomas 2001, p. 924). Martin Wight's academic activism in the 1960's influenced distinguished members of the FCO through their interaction in the British Committee meetings (Hall 2014, p. 966).

Our study found that a number of institutions inside the FCO, such as the Near East and North Africa Department (NENAD) or the Middle East Department (MED), moved their analysis towards a cultural/religious and sectarian approach in order to disentangle social relations and transformation inside MENA countries and their causal mechanisms that molded these dynamics into a coherent regional and international foreign policy. During the period under consideration, religious/ethnic identities emerged as an all-important component in local and global politics. Prominent religious

figures created a hybrid revolutionary religious/political discourse exerting considerable influence on local, regional, and international politics.

3. The Great Power's Foreign Policies and Reflections on Political Islam

Even before the Cold War, the Great Powers tried to counterbalance Islamist politics. For instance, British specialists on MENA saw Islam as an obstacle for the spread of communism in the Arab world (Vaughan 2005, p. 152). Hence, British authorities tried to manipulate early political Islam and its organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (M.B.) in Egypt during the WW II.[1] The manipulation included the incorporation of moderate Islam to the ideas of modernization and human rights, but most importantly the struggle against communist ideas (Callaghan 2007, p. 211).[2] Moreover, the rising American hegemony, the economic weakness that World War II brought, and the loss of Commonwealth territories provoked the need for altering the means of influence for Britain in the Middle East (Mayhew 1950, p. 477).

The USSR, in an attempt to manipulate the dynamics of its Muslim population, adopted a system of analysis concerning the origins, the nature, and the perspectives of Islam and its politicized forms since the beginning of the 1920's. After Stalin's persecutions, Brezhnev and eventually Andropov signaled a more consensual approach to Muslim populations, specifically by trying to manipulate ethnic/religious leaders in Central Asia (Fowkes and Gökay 2009, p. 2). At the same time, notwithstanding, the USSR's analysis of political Islam was used as a political tool for hampering capitalism's spheres of influence. More specifically, while after 1979 and for many years on, Islamist power in Iran was perceived as a liberating, egalitarian force, especially vis-à-vis American hegemony. Concomitantly, in Afghanistan, it was understood as a threat to the promising socialist project of the Soviets. Indeed, the USSR and its institutions, such as the Moscow Institute for Oriental Studies and the Communist University for the Toilers of the Orient, developed a number of schemas on the character of Islam throughout the 20th century. Some of them pointed out the compatibility of Islam with the founding principles of communism, such as those of Z. and N. Zavshirvanov and V. Ditiakin, and those that stressed Islam's enmity towards socialist aspirations, such as those of E. Beliaev and L. Klimovich (Kemper 2009, pp. 5–26).[3]

In tandem, US policy towards Islamic revival had also endured two bifurcations. In an attempt to engage with the Muslim world and secure its own interests, US policy experts attempted to maintain equilibrium between extremist and moderate forms of political Islam during the second half of the 20th century (Maghraoui 2006, p. 27). For instance, in certain contentious episodes, American foreign policy had a twofold approach: while supporting movements of political Islam in some countries like Afghanistan, it did oppose them in others such as Lebanon and Iran (Bill 1989, p. 135). Nevertheless, from time to time, Iran's Islamist movements were the object of support by western policy makers, especially when it came time to address dynamic leftist movements. Such was the case with Britain's support to the Iranian authorities in order to crash Tudeh party between 1983–1985 (Aslani 2020) or to manipulate moderate (or established) Islam as a tool for fighting extremism (Maghraoui 2006, p. 27). However, the British often disparagingly referred to the American 'tendency to treat all [Middle East] issues as military problems',[4] even if the issues at stake were essentially political.

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[1]　People's History Museum (PHM), CPGB Archive, CP/CENT/INT/56/03, Egypt, The Green Shirts, agents of International Fascism, 1942.

[2]　After WWII, Britain, indeed, put effort to promote an image of coexistence with the Arab world and Islam through cultural channels. In 1952, the magazine *al-Aalam* was launched in order to promote 'the theme of friendship and mutual respect between the Western and the Arab world'.

[3]　More specifically, the early works of Soviet scholars regarding (political) Islam include those of Z. and N. Zavshirvanov, *The Communist Trends in the History of Muslim Civilization* (1923), V. Ditiakin, *Marx and Engels on the Origins and Character of Islam* (1927), S. Asfendiarov, *Reasons for the Emergence of Islam* (1928), E. Beliaev, *The Origin of Islam and its Class Basis* (1930), and L. Klimovich, *The Socialist Construction in the East and Religion* (1929).

[4]　British National Archives (BNA), NF 226/1, W98C, D.H. Gillmore to J. Moberly, "Trilateral Meeting at the IISS", 10/11/1981.

The Suez Crisis of 1956 signaled the end of British hegemony in the MENA region. Nevertheless, since the withdrawal of the British troops from the Persian Gulf in 1971, Downing Street launched a different approach to its Middle East foreign policy. This 'new role' was characterized by two variables. The first one was the fact that British interests should be promoted through London's special relationship with Washington, with London remaining at the same time the leading power in European affairs (Çavuşoğlu 2018, p. 39). The second one was that Britain's main concern was to also keep close ties with its Arab–Muslim allies, acknowledging their demands and, at least rhetorically, attempting to identify with them, as seen for instance in the example of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thus, as Çavuşoğlu suggests, Britain opted to become 'freed of being the target of anti-imperialism criticisms', maintaining its ability to exert 'considerable influence' (Çavuşoğlu 2018, p. 42).

This dual role (Rynhold and Spyer 2007, p. 137), as perceived by British diplomats, would help Britain remain strong and influential in the region. Given the rising tensions in internal British politics regarding a mounting political and ethical conservatism (Garnett and Lynch 2009, p. 406) and a rising Islamic activism (Hamid 2018, pp. 1–14), British polity faced a number of critical dilemmas. As it was assessed in 1978, commercial interests in MENA could not be affected by the rise of political Islam thanks to the fact that the revival of Islamic consciousness, which was not directly connected to Islamic extremism. Hence, British intendants encountered the formation of a nascent 'critical Islam', as P. Mandaville coined it, and not necessarily the hegemony of a retrogressive belligerent militant Islamism (Mandaville 2001, p. 4). For instance, in 1978, British officials strongly doubted 'that there is a genuine widespread religious revival in the Muslim world'.[5] Islamic revivalism mostly represents, according to FCO's early views, an attempt by a small number of extremists to impose their views upon the masses. This is what J.P. Bannerman from the FCO Research Department underlined to Mr. Lucas from MED in 1978, manifesting his reassurance about political Islam:

> I am reluctant to take on a global study of Islam and its political influence [. . .] because I do not believe there is sufficient political, or for that matter religious, cohesiveness in Islam to justify such a study by us.[6]

However, when the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979 took place, the British were alarmed with the prospects and dynamics of the Islamist movement. This was mainly related to the fact that Saudi Arabia was one of the main allies in the region, while Iran, already a rival by then, was trying to globalize Islamist ideas. A conversation between British diplomats in Washington and the American security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1979 discloses that the latter was highly concerned about the Mecca Incident and its ramifications in a transnational perspective.[7] Therefore, diplomatic orientation often retreats to give space to strategic orientation, which mainly considers the containment of radical anti-western forces as the most fundamental issue in MENA (Rynhold and Spyer 2007, p. 138).

4. Transnational Religious Ideology and Network Dynamics

One of the fundamental aspects that the FCO detected was the transnational character of political Islam. Thus, the first point that we outline here is the perspective of transnational religious ideology and its impacts on MENA regional relations and stability. This hermeneutical approach concerns religious/ethnic cross-border connections, the dynamics of these connections, and networks and their consequences on regional politics, with a specific concern for the Persian Gulf, which was regarded as an area privileged by Britain. What we draw from our archival material is the attention paid—or sometimes not paid—to the agency of these networks as a significant manifestation for the local

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[5]   BNA, FCO 93/4048, NF 031/1, "Islamic Revival", Bannerman to Lucas, 16/5/1978.
[6]   BNA, FCO 93/4048, NF 031/1, "Islamic Revival", Bannerman to Lucas, 16/5/1978.
[7]   BNA, FCO 8/3419, NB5 014/5, "Unrest in Saudi Arabia: A Talk with Brzezinski", November 1979.

communities' dynamics, as proposed by Mabon and Wastnidge, (Mabon and Wastnidge 2019, p. 597), but also their horizons of expectations.

However, political Islam was not the unique means of contentious politics in the MENA region; for many analysts, it was a language and a tool against the western heritage of 'aggressive secularism' and its undisputable rejection, as FCO officials labeled it, and it was used by both state apparatuses—like in the case of Algeria—and opposition groups.[8] The reflections of Islam in the political processes in the period before and after the Iranian revolution, illustrates the growing concerns about political ideology in the Arab-Muslim world and its mounting anti-western character. For example, the FCO repeatedly received reports from its embassies in MENA that underlined the revived interest on Islam. One such example is Iran, where the role of the clergy to the opposition of the Shah is underlined, or Algeria, where it 'remain[ed] a foundation of national unity'.[9]

In a conference at Chatham House in 1981, the FCO's research department found Professor's J. Piscatori's analysis for the strands of political Islam very revealing. Piscatori stressed that political Islam had four facets. The first was the 'conservative orthodox' who supported the rigorous application of Islam's commands. The second was the political strand (or the 'leftist' as he coined it) that adopted a more realistic and egalitarian discourse. The third was the most materialist strand, as it perceived Islam as a secondary factor in the driving forces in history and focused on social and economic aspects. The fourth bifurcation was the secularist camp. The 'secularists' believed that proper development of political and social structures is imperative but meanwhile sought to manipulate Islam for the sake of common good. British diplomats underlined that the West should pay more attention on the last strand.[10]

British officials were particularly worried about the effects of Shi'a political Islam in the Gulf during the first years after the Iranian revolution. Thus, British foreign policy moved towards a securitization approach on Gulf politics, especially after 1979. Even though British officials did not predict serious Shi'a mobilization in the Gulf, they kept a close eye on Shi'a population in the region and cooperated with local monarchies (Çavuşoğlu 2018, p. 50). The main reason for this transformation was the fear for influence of the Shi'a revolutionary mobilization in the Gulf countries. Despite the fact that the FCO acknowledged that the Sunnis in the Gulf did not likely share the same views on Islamic political organization, they still feared that the Sunnis could draw inspiration from the dynamics of the Iranian revolution. A case in point is Oman, one of the strongholds of London's influence, which was viewed as a potential fertile ground for an upsurge of Islamic radicalism. British specialists observed that for a large section of the Omanis, traditionalism was a vital component of social cohesion. The FCO assumed that an erosion of this cohesion as well as the social dynamics of the demographic boom—given that an increasing number of youths were taking religion more seriously within a social context—could cause social turmoil. At the same time, Ibadhism, even in its most radical form, was not perceived as a threat since it was viewed as a counterbalance to the dynamic and more fanatical sect of the khawarij.[11]

Throughout the 1980's, Shi'a sectarian politics in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was not treated as a genuine threat for British interests and political stability. The political and economic importance of the community of approximately 10,000 Shi'a was limited to the economic activities of some important families, such as the Nuwais. Their key positions in state businesses and the importance of trade vis-à-vis political mobilization downplayed their threat to Gulf stability. In addition, according to an FCO 1983 assessment, the Shi'a immigrant population in the UAE was not likely to pose a political

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8   BNA, NF 226/1, W98C, R.O. Miles (N. East and N. Africa Dept.) to B.L. Strachan Esq. CMG (Algiers), "Islam and Politics", 27/08/1981.
9   BNA, FCO 93/4048, NF 226/1, Telegraph, Algiers to London, 19/9/1978.
10   BNA, NF 226/1, W98C, Middle East Section Research Department, "Chatham House Conference on Islam in the Political Process", 14/07/1981.
11   BNA, FCO 8/6504, NB 226/1, "Islamic Fundamentalism", 7/6/1987.

threat.[12] The assessment maintained a focus on the Iranian ties, which were meticulously examined through the 'Iranian revolution lenses' that remained predominant in the analysis. Nevertheless, the FCO assured 'the UAE authorities, especially in Dubai, that they maintain close and effective surveillance on those suspected of engaging in subversive activities'.[13] As far as Kuwait is concerned, the Iranian revolution surely awakened Shi'a self-consciousness; even the Shi'a demonstrations that mostly occurred on Ashura celebrations were not a subject of concern for British and Kuwaiti authorities, as Shi'a mobilization in 1983, as the documents reveal, remained at low level.[14]

Occasionally, religious sectarianism appeared as a Sword of Damocles above the Persian's Gulf security and stability. In particular, Iraq, with the politicization of the Shi'a community—i.e., with the creation of the Hizb al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya already since 1958—and its dynamic religious establishment (Chalcraft 2016, pp. 402–07), was the main concern of the FCO. In fact, FCO documents reveal that British officials were reassuring about the prospect of a Shi'a takeover in Baghdad. P.F.M. Wogan, from the FCO's MED, argues that even if Shi'a came to power, 'any Shi'a regime would be difficult to retain power for long'.[15] In the eyes of the British, there are underlying differences between the Iraqi Shi'a's and the Iranian Shi'a's, reflecting mostly two variables of the Shi'a in Iraq; namely, their history and social characteristics. In 1983, the British embassy in Baghdad informed the FCO that it is difficult to envisage an Iranian-style Shi'a uprising in Iraq due to the lack of a genuine support from the Shi'a Iraqi side to the ideas of the radical clergy in Iran, since these ideas do not necessarily reflected their social and political aspirations. Therefore, what British officials underlined is the lack of appeal to the ideas of khomeinism in Iraq, even though Khomeini spent several years of exile in Najaf.

The fear of destabilization in countries such as Iraq was related to their importance to the West. In the beginning of the 1980's, British officials claimed that the threats posed by the Islamic awakening on regional stability could be twofold: the destabilization of key states and the possible rekindling of sectarian feelings in multi-ethnic states. The former includes states such as revolutionary Iran and Egypt. The significance of these countries lies in their political reflection, their size, and their strategic importance for western countries. As far as the likelihood of a deep fragmentation of multi-ethnic states like Iraq is concerned, it was stressed that the rise of peripheral nationalisms could shake the regional political order. In this context, an interesting case study for Britain came from the multi-ethnic Soviet Union and its Muslim components, since during the 1980's, the FCO observed the politicization of Muslim populations with mounting concern.[16]

The assessments regarding Shi'a politicization in Iraq in the first half of the 1980's pointed out that the Iraqi Shi'a clergy could not initiate, let alone sustain, a popular Shi'a mobilization in line with Iran. Especially after the murder by Iraqi authorities of the influential Shi'a spiritual and political leader Baqir al-Sadr in 1980, the Shi'a community in Iraq was much weakened.[17] In this sense, the foundations for a Shi'a popular uprising are seen as mitigated. In addition, British diplomats in Baghdad were insisting on 'the habit of coexistence' among the Shi'a population. Even though social relations were different in various cities, such as Karbala—with the 1979 riots—or Basra, intercommunal and interfaith dialogue and coexistence predominated in Iraq, according to the FCO. As the British ambassador in Baghdad put it, in 1983, amidst the Iran-Iraq War, the inhabitants of the Shi'a neighborhood of al-Thawra 'are subjected to intensive and clumsy programs of Ba'athist indoctrination', which were not, as he implies, unsuccessful.[18] For this purpose, as the British embassy reports, the Ba'athist regime

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[12]   BNA, FCO 8/4901, NB 226/2, "Implication of Islamic Sectarianism", Abu Dhabi to London, 17/4/1983.
[13]   BNA, FCO 8/4901, NB 226/2, "Implication of Islamic Sectarianism", Abu Dhabi to London, 17/4/1983.
[14]   BNA, FCO 8/4901, NB 226/2, "Political Implications of Islamic Sectarianism", Kuwait to London, 11/5/1983.
[15]   BNA, FCO 8/6504, NB 226/2, "Islamic Fundamentalism in the Gulf", Wogan to Egerton, 31/8/1983.
[16]   BNA, FCO 8/6504, NB 226/2, "The Political Importance of Islam", Makepeace to Richmond, 9/8/1983.
[17]   BNA, FCO 8/6504, NB 226/2, "Islamic Sectarianism in the Gulf", Myers to Wogan, 27/6/1983 and JIC Telegram No 583, "Islamic Sectarianism", FM Baghdad 1809900Z, 23/5/1983.
[18]   BNA, FCO 8/4901, NB 226/2, "Political Implications of Islamic Sectarianism", Moberly to Egerton, 13/4/1983.

appointed Izzat Ibrahim—vice president of the Revolutionary Command Council—to strengthen the regime's ties with Shi'a communities.

British authorities acknowledge the suffering of the Shi'a under the Saddam Hussein regime, due to a number of factors such as the agrarian reform and the lack of political representation, to name a few. However, Baghdad's policy on prosecution in tandem with the selective and careful incorporation of elements of the Shi'a community in the state apparatus gave the Shi'a a flavor of consent to some extent. This acceptance is not to be underestimated, as the Iraqi people are described by FCO reports as 'Calvinistic' in their approaches of resolving conflicts. This is an attribute that reflects the overwhelming prevalence of material progress over matters of faith for the Iraqi population.[19]

5. Islamist Organizations and Non-State Actors in a Changing World

Islamic transnational politics brought to the fore organizations of political Islam, be they Sunni or Shi'a, with which the FCO was preoccupied. Religious sectarianism bred the ground for the creation or the empowerment of parties and non-state actors in order to defend or promote their ideas and interests. Nevertheless, the FCO outlined their divisions, their weaknesses, and their plasticity to adopt in a changing political environment.

In this context, British officials were highly concerned about the role of religious brotherhoods in the 1980's and their social basis. For example, the FCO's attention was directed towards the implications of the Sufi *tariqas* on Sudanese politics, even though their mentality rejected direct participation in political processes. This view lies on the premise that Sufi *tariqas* were predominantly rural and thus influenced the development of intellectual activity and lay culture.[20] In times, the approach of British officials was persistent on the implications of religious sectarianism on MENA. Thus, the analysis was more concerned with the impact that religious sectarian feeling had in social and political relations, rather than on the influence that religious actors had in the political process, per se, as the analysis of Shi'a politics in the early 1980's Iraq and Syria reveals.[21]

Another important reason for the proliferation of Islamic militancy and militant groups—such as Hamas—was the unresolved and protracted Israeli–Palestinian conflict. British officials stressed emphatically that a solution should undoubtedly include the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The West's denial in acknowledging PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians posed a great threat for British interests for two reasons, as a document reveals. First, it empowers Islamic solidarity feelings among the Palestinians, especially in Gaza and, second, it 'inhibits many Middle Eastern states from moving as close to the West as they would like'.[22] In regards with British involvement in the issue, most reports underlined the importance of a closer economic relation with MENA countries—given that Britain is less involved in the dispute—but, at the same time, they stressed that London should have 'complementary military role' in the region based on its special relationship with the US.[23]

The rise of religious orientated non-state actors in MENA in the first half of the 1980's saw the endeavor of the global community, including British officials, to engage more closely with the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). This occurred in the context of trying to impel 'a common search for solutions to global problems, such as questions related to international peace and security'.[24] These endeavors emerged in an environment of intensifying violence and security threats, for instance in Lebanon and Egypt. The steps taken for the consolidation of mutual regimes of respect and

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[19] BNA, FCO 8/4901, NB 226/2, "Political Implications of Islamic Sectarianism", Moberly to Egerton, 13/4/1983.
[20] BNA, NF 226/1, W98C, R.O. Miles (N. East and N. Africa Dept.) to R.A Fyjis-Walker Esq. CMG CVO, (Khartoum), "Islam and Politics", 27/07/1981.
[21] BNA, NF 226/1, W98C, Middle East Section Research Department, "Chatham.", Ibid.
[22] BNA, FCO 93/2311, NF226/1, "Summary of the Conclusions of the Report of the Islam Study Group", 31/7/1980.
[23] BNA, FCO 93/2311, NF226/1, "Summary of the Conclusions of the Report of the Islam Study Group", 31/7/1980.
[24] BNA, FCO 58/2759, UNPO22/33, "Cooperation between UN and the Organization of African Unity, Organization of Islamic Conference and League of Arab States", Nash to Roberts and Williams, 29/11/1982.

cooperation developed at the same time in MENA countries themselves, given that the latter were trying to delegitimize Islamic opposition groups and manipulate the official religious establishment (Esposito et al. 2016, p. 203).

In this process, the FCO's diplomatic circles made efforts on reporting on the issues of Islamic fundamentalism and forms of extremism in a number of countries. In 1978, C.D. Powell from NENAD reported on M.B. in Egypt that despite its semi-legal form, it had 'cultivated a respectable image', while' as he continued, it was 'recruiting successfully particularly at the universities (their magazine [al Da'wa with senior editor the M.B. spiritual *murshid* Omar al-Tilimsani] allegedly has eighty thousand readers)'.[25] The organization's success was also attributed to its energetic leadership, good political organization and its adequate sponsorship.

The FCO also kept a close eye on the Levant. Syria is an example of small yet fast rising Islamic extremism detected since 1978 among the younger educated Sunni middle class.[26] In 1986, four years after the bloody eradication of the Syrian branch of M.B. in Syria, the British embassy in Damascus reported that it is of an extremely high risk to get contacts with Islamist networks, since the Assad regime had enforced severe restrictions on Islamist mobilization. These constrains left little space for political maneuvering, according to British diplomats. Furthermore, regarding the small Shi'a community in Syria, the FCO cast doubts on its radicalization in the mid 1980's for mainly two reasons. The first one relates to its small number (perhaps 20,000 in 1986). The second one was the regional alliance between Iran and Syria. Tehran, as British ambassador in Damascus W. R. Tomkys stresses, did not want to destabilize her close ally Assad for the sake of an Iranian-style Shi'a activism.[27]

Tomkys dedicates a meticulous description of the Syrian M.B. and its founding principles, which are based on Islamic activism, solidarity, and opposition to the 'infidel' Alawi Ba'athist state. Tomkys underlines the importance of two basic Brotherhood targets that are important for the FCO's perception of political Islam. On the one hand, he stresses the importance for the Islamic movement regarding the abolition of the sectarian system and their aspirations of political liberalization. This could allow the Islamist movement to freely form legal political parties and bid for political power. The other variable is their aspiration for economic liberalization. Tomkys assesses that 'this is the voice of Sunni merchants',[28] since the Syrian Sunni merchants were looking for channels to invest their accumulated capital. Economic liberalization could be achieved through a combination of political openings that could create political opportunity structures and a wide banking reform that could facilitate their social and economic position. Thus, Tomkys affirms the position of a political Islam with social and political aspirations that seeks to reap the benefits of modernization:

> It is not strictly accurate to view the Sunni mujjahideen as solely dedicated to destroying the system. [...] In many respects their political program embodied a call for a return to traditional elements of the Syrian political system. [...] Land-owners, merchants, professionals, Allepines and Hamawis, certain grandes families—in short most of the elements of the traditional Sunni hierarchy—were offended by changes being wrought at the hands of the Alawi neo-Ba'athists.[29]

Nevertheless, given the divisions and the ideological conflicts between Brotherhood fractions—i.e., the Damascus–Hama dispute (Pargeter 2013, pp. 75–90)—the FCO's assessment is rather reassuring about the likelihood of an Islamist takeover. On top of it, the Syrian regime followed the respective policy of other Arab regimes, giving vocal support to established moderate Sunni leadership. As the

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25　BNA, FCO 93/4048, NF 031/1, "Islamic Fundamentalism", Powell to Bannerman, 22/9/1978.
26　BNA, FCO 93/4048, NF 031/1, "Islamic Fundamentalism", Powell to Bannerman, 22/9/1978.
27　BNA, FCO 93/4755, NFy 226/1, "Islamic fundamentalism in Syria", W.R. Tomkys to J.P. Bannerman, 10/1/1986. The same applies to British foreign policy as any attempts from the Embassy's side to cultivate links with Islamist circles is "out of question" since this would anger Damascus.
28　BNA, FCO 93/4755, NFy 226/1, "Islamic fundamentalism in Syria", W.R. Tomkys to J.P. Bannerman, 10/1/1986.
29　BNA, FCO 93/4755, NFy 226/1, "Islamic fundamentalism in Syria", W.R. Tomkys to J.P. Bannerman, 10/1/1986.

documents show, the same stance applies to the Jordanian paradigm. In 1986, the correspondence of the British embassy in Amman marks Zaid Rifa'i's—the Jordanian Prime Minister—position on the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. The correspondence states the prevalence of moderate ideas in the country, reporting that 'the country was too sophisticated and too cosmopolitan to be swayed by fundamentalist ideas'.[30]

The plasticity of the groups of political Islam is backed by the FCO with the distinction of its manifestations to the 'extremists', who ascribe to militant means, and to the 'activists', who comprise of peaceful groupings. The term fundamentalism, however, should not be used as it creates 'misconceptions' that are usually linked to Shi'a activism, as stated by British diplomats. International relations, as an FCO background brief in 1990 puts it, are highly influenced by the militant Islamic element in Iran's foreign policy. This tendency 'has led the country [Iran] to act outside accepted international norms, notably by promoting the export of the revolution through violence, and has given her policy a pronounced anti-western bias', the FCO states.[31]

Again, the rising tide of non- state actors and organizations, like Hizbollah, and the implications on stability are reflected in a number of FCO documents. For example, in an attempt to approach Shi'a mobilization and its position on the concept of violence, the FCO circulated a translated article written by Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, Hizbollah's spiritual leader in the 1980's, who tried to conceptualize the idea of Shi'a politics and transnational violence. In his article, Fadlallah promotes the rhetoric of peaceful conflict resolutions but makes clear that when peaceful means are exhausted then 'violence as surgical operation' should follow.[32] The Lebanese leader continues by aggregating that the root of the Middle East violence lies in the unresolved Palestinian question, something the FCO partly admits. 'Violence', Fadlallah asserts, 'erupted in the region with the birth of the state of Israel'.[33]

In 1990, the FCO emphasized the fact that the Iranian revolution was still trying to promote its messages, aspirations and support to other Islamic countries and organizations. Hizbollah was a bright example. The Lebanese group is described as the 'leading pro-Iranian fundamentalist organization' that managed to bloom because the Iranian revolution acted both as a model and a political and financial sponsor (Daher 2016, pp. 26–34). However, the FCO's analysis of 1990 failed to see the growing Shi'a political mobilization in Iraq. It predicted wide resentment among the Shi'a's due to their exclusion from power sharing:

> There is little effective opposition, secular or Shi'ite, to the regime. There is also little evidence of unrest among Iraq's Shi'ite troops, who have been fighting their co-religionists in the Iran/Iraq conflict.[34]

For NENAD, religious sectarianism and loyalties depending on religious denomination were the subject at stake for the period on which we focus. What the FCO underlines is that religious denomination plays the same important role as social, economic, and political factors. The transformation of diplomatic discourse towards religious sectarianism at the end of the 1970's is revealed by a number of documents that stress the emergence and the influence that religious parties or organizations have at a global level. For this reason, NENAD supports that a high priority should be given to religious politics and their representatives:

> Contacts with religious bodies and specialist organizations must be judged on their merits. [. . .] Where the political and social structure includes a strong religious element, we give

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[30] BNA, FCO 93/4558, NF 245/2, "Jordan: Islamic Fundamentalism", Coles to Bannerman, 5/2/1986.
[31] BNA, FO 973/624, "Islamic Resurgence", Background Brief, April 1990.
[32] BNA, FCO 8/6120, NB 226/3, "Islam and Violence in Political Reality" Lamb to Boyce, 8/5/1986.
[33] BNA, FCO 8/6120, NB 226/3, "Islam and Violence in Political Reality" Lamb to Boyce, 8/5/1986.
[34] BNA, FO 973/624, "Islamic . . . ", Ibid.

priority to it. [...] In the Middle East intelligent ecclesiastical visitors with the feel of the region are very welcome to embassies.[35]

6. The 'Watermelon' Fear: Political Islam and the Left Against Imperialism

The third analytic point is highly connected with the context of the Cold War and the struggle against communism. This approach embraces strategic concepts of orientation and reads the likelihood of an alliance between political Islam and the Left as a genuine menace. Even though the possible survival of such an edifice was not likely, according to the FCO, what overwhelmed the analysis is the fear that occurred from the vacuum that the weakening of the Arab nationalist camp created in the Cold War period.

British foreign policy makers were at times deeply concerned about the alliance of leftist and Islamist movements, given their enmity towards Arab-Muslim secular dictatorships. Especially with the outbreak of the Iranian revolution, western governments were alarmed by the prospect of a bridging between militant Marxist and Islamist movements in the country and elsewhere. Nevertheless, from an early stage, Britain itself promoted the idea of collaboration with Islamist movements in order to safeguard the country's interests. For instance, as early as 1952, the British embassy in Tehran envisioned an alliance with the Islamists of Fedayan-e Islam.[36] Fedayan, founded by N. Safavi in 1946, played an important role in forging an opposition to Mossadeq, whom the British despised for his nationalization policies.[37]

Given the dynamics unleashed from the Iranian revolution in 1979, the likelihood of a leftist-Islamic alliance posed a grave threat to British diplomatic cadres. Indeed, since 1979, Islamist and Marxist movements in Iran, such as the Tudeh or the Fedayeen e-Khalq, cooperated with Khomeini in order to establish a revolutionary government. As mentioned by the FCO Study Group of Islam (SGI) in 1980, 'until recently socialist and communists [...] in the Middle East have sought to further their causes through the forces of secular Arab nationalism'.[38] Notwithstanding, the convergence of the cause between socialists and communists could pave the ground for a menacing alliance against the secular political establishment in the region. But given that the latter had lost much of its appeal to the Arabs, the Left, as the FCO mentions, was trying to approach the Islamic movements. However, as the Study Group of Islam assesses:

> This can never be more than an uneasy and temporary alliance. Islam cannot coexist happily with Marxist materialism any more than communists can readily accept the teachings of the Koran.[39]

Western interests could also be affected by the prospect of a Marxist-Islamist alliance. As NENAD points out, implications on stability could occur 'when Muslim extremist organizations are infiltrated by or form tactical alliances with, communism in situations of serious unrest' as was the case with Iran.[40] Even though British diplomats predicted that such an alliance could not be forged, they paid attention to the fact that:

> When expediency demands they are prepared to emphasize the principles of egalitarianism and social welfare which Islam and communism share and to ignore the atheism of the communist creed.[41]

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[35]   BNA, FCO 8/4901, NB 226/2, "The Religious Factor in Contemporary Politics, Miles to John, 17/3/1983.
[36]   BNA, FO 248/1540, G 10141, "Fiday'ian-i-Islam", R.C. Zaehner, 1/3/1952.
[37]   Specifically, the ambassador R. C. Zaehner thought that the keyperson to bring them in contact with the Fedayan was Sayeed Zia, the leader of the Homeland Party who believed Britain was the least evil in comparison to Mossadeq and the Americans. Ibid.
[38]   BNA, FCO 93/2311, NF226/1, "Report of the Islam Study Group", 31/7/1980.
[39]   BNA, FCO 93/2311, NF226/1, "Report of the Islam Study Group", 31/7/1980.
[40]   BNA, FCO 93/4048, "The Islamic Revival, Development and Western Interests", November 1978.
[41]   BNA, FCO 93/4048, "The Islamic Revival, Development and Western Interests", November 1978.

In addition, the British embassy in Washington clearly manifested the American position in 1979 regarding the interrelation between Marxist and Islamist movements. The former's stimulus to 'use to their own political advantage the anti-western manifestations of Islamic revival movements'.[42] Nonetheless, communications between the two movements, as these were portrayed by the FCO, were poor, 'reflecting their mutual distrust'. However, what the FCO detects is the Left's growing interest in seeking a dialogue with the Islamic trend (Abdelrahman 2009, p. 38).[43]

7. Islam as a Culture and Islam as a Political Ideology

The last field of focus of the FCO concerned issues of cultural exceptionalism. This approach maintains the indiscernible relation of religion and politics in Islam and the absence of a respective Enlightenment. This point focuses on the issue of cultural exceptionalism in the Middle East, based on anti-western feelings due to colonial heritage. The FCO's analysis underlines the Muslim perception of the secular state and modernization as a western malign imposition, which cultivates strong feelings of Islamic solidarity.

Islamic solidarity, as British diplomats assert, though deep rooted in the Islamic world, was reintroduced by the shocking waves of the 1967 *Al-Naqsa* (the Arab defeat). The defeat and its impacts —as they have been described in a moving way by Syrian philosopher Sadiq al-Azm (al-Azm 2012) —marked the demise of the actual resonance of Nasserist pan-Arabism. The defeat was often portrayed as a divine punishment for abandoning Islam. Thus, the Islamic feeling mushroomed and curved the way for an all-out assault to its secular counterparts. The concept of Islamic solidarity further paved the way to focus on whether an idea of Islamic foreign policy exists. In general, the definition of 'Islamic foreign policy' is disorientating. Nevertheless, British officials defined it as a common set of values and strategies based on Islamic interests. The political and structural motives in the awakening of Islam were constantly underlined. As P.F.M. Wogan of the FCO Middle East Department put it in 1983:

> It was not piety that created revolutionary Iran, but political ruthlessness and an astute awareness of how to mobilize people. Even Ayatollah Khomeini was respected primarily for his political opposition to the Shah. [. . .] The appeal of fundamentalism [. . .] provides, through Islam, a legitimate means of articulation opposition to existing society and to the import of foreign values.[44]

Concerns about Islamic solidarity were also manifested in King's Hussein proposal in 1978 of establishing an Islamic Commonwealth. This Commonwealth was seen as a facet of Islamic revivalism, which had some implications on British and European interests. Nevertheless, given the political and doctrinal divisions among Islamic countries and the differentiations in regional interests, the FCO predicted that King's Hussein idea would likely have little success, as it eventually did.[45] However, the idea of the Islamic Commonwealth as a stabilizing factor and as a 'moderating influence on the fanatical elements' was also expressed.[46]

Nevertheless, the persistence of engaging with Islam had two further sources: first, the reaction to rapid and disruptive modernization, and second, the quest for a spiritual haven escaping from western materialism. Modernization in the historical conjuncture of the 1970's and 1980's was perceived as a tool for integration in the developed-world system. However, it was not only viewed in economic terms. Modernization was also a measure for adapting in political and socially accepted patterns as the work of S. Huntington has shown (Huntington 1968; Bill and Leiden 1979, p. 69). Disruptive

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[42]　BNA, FCO 93/1837, NF 2261/1, "The New Islamic Fundamentalism", Muir to Tatham, 28/2/1979.
[43]　BNA, FCO 93/1837, NF 2261/1, "The New Islamic Fundamentalism", Muir to Tatham, 28/2/1979.
[44]　BNA, FCO 8/4901, NB 226/2, "The Religious Factor in Contemporary Politics, Wogan to John, 21/3/1983.
[45]　BNA, FCO 93/2311, "Islamic Revival", Tomkys to Weir, 30/11/1978.
[46]　BNA, FCO 93/4048, NF 031/1, "Islam", Tomkys to Crowe, 15/9/1978.

modernization ushered Muslims 'to turn to ancient symbols and rites', the FCO claims, and 'in this confusion the only safe mooring seemed to be in the attachment to Islamic values'.[47] Yet:

> The Islamic backlash, then, was not because modernization per se is unacceptable to Muslims but, rather, because the effects of the modernization program were unacceptable.[48]

Hence, what the FCO accentuates is rather a gingerly endeavor by Muslims to cope with modernization. However, despite the remaining presence of a strong bias against a progressive Islam during the 1980's, several intellectuals observed the mistaken oversimplification of the interaction of religion with economic development (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, pp. 23–24). The anomic consequences of development in MENA made political Islam attractive in the years following the Iranian revolution. Even though there was not a pragmatic consensus about how an Islamic model of political organization should look like, it seemed that a wide majority of Muslims believed that Islam should be part of the 'nativized' solution. This search for the native identity emphasized on the traditional networks of Islamic society, such as family and clan, solid networks that the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldun described as *assabiyya*.

In tandem, cultural exceptionalism is expressed in many different ways. Nevertheless, the main reflections of this position postulate the religious specificity of the Arab-Muslim world, since religiosity is seen as an integral part of various identities. Since Islam was perceived as a dynamic intellectual, social, and political phenomenon, the FCO specialists observed that the readings concerning Islam should not remain monolithic. This point is important because Islamic religion was often portrayed as anti-western and anti-Christian. 'In this situation where various Islamic ideologies mix with specific national interests, it is unlikely' an FCO assessment states, 'that we will find Muslim statesmen whose overriding ambition is to push back the frontiers of the Christian West'.[49] This position reflects the acknowledgement of the renegotiation by Muslims of key-concepts, such as modernity, postmodernity, and the West, leading to alternative contextualization of Muslim identities.

Islamic assertiveness, the FCO underlines—adopting M. Yapp's position—lies deep in the process of the encounter between European colonialism in the period of modernization and various forms of Islamic civilizations. The Islamic world adopted in general facets of modernization but, to a great extent, the process of modernization was confined to political and economic elites, as was also the European paradigm. One facet of disruptive modernization, as seen from London's view, is crystallized in hectic urbanization.[50] Family and denominational/community networks became gradually more important in the process of urbanization. While alternative identities where galvanized in order to take part in the political process, Muslim identity was consolidated. In fact, as modernization further proceeds, all the more people are dragged into the towns and its industrial suburbs, as in the case of Cairo and Tehran, triggering a wide gap between the elites and lower social strata, which, as many people assert, is equated with the betrayal of core Islamic values.

8. Conclusions

Overall, whether British officials regarded political Islam as a menacing phenomenon or not, it is evident that the FCO paid great attention to its emergence. Many of the studied documents repeatedly stress the need to focus on British interests and implications on foreign policy, but also on the need to adhere to the concepts of tolerance and understanding (Rynhold and Spyer 2007, p.138).[51] It is evident that although the FCO gradually adopted a securitization discourse—which was also consistent with state policies—it also preserved some autonomy upon its analytical approach (Rynhold and Spyer 2007,

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47　BNA, FCO 8/6504, NB 226/2, "The Political . . . ", Ibid.
48　BNA, FCO 8/6504, NB 226/2, "The Political . . . ", Ibid.
49　BNA, FCO 8/6504, NB 226/2, "The Political . . . ", Ibid.
50　BNA, FCO 93/2311, "Contemporary Islamic Revivalism: A Discussion Panel", 12/2/1980.
51　BNA, FCO 8/6120, NF 226/3, "Research on Islam", Long to Bannerman, 5/12/1986.

p. 141). We do not argue that the dominant effect of Britain's 'global role' was absent at the FCO. However, the debates and controversies between British officials regarding the character and the role of political Islam were always vibrant.

British officials sometimes fell short when it came to transcending the traditional discourse of power influence and its connection to sectarian kinship regarding MENA (Mabon and Wastnidge 2019, p. 596). However, even though the British diplomatic authorities feared the influence of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the spread of political Islam and Shi'a mobilization, they did not read Islamist feelings in a bandwagon manner. Instead, they articulated their predictions and their perspectives by using historical, social, political, and economic tools that that enabled them to weigh the balance of power, even though at times—for example in the Kurdish and Shi'a uprising in Iraq in 1991—they failed to acknowledge the dynamics. Nevertheless, as our archival material reveals, sometimes, the FCO could not escape from the use of stereotypical approaches that failed to see the historical driving forces.

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