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**Geraint Hughes.** "Britain, the Transatlantic Alliance, and the Arab-Israeli War of 1973". *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10,2 (Spring 2008): 3-40.

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The Middle East has thrown up more than its fair share of disagreements between Britain and United States over the years. From the collapse of the Palestine mandate through the Iranian oil crisis of 1951, the Suez crisis of 1956 to the Arab-Israeli war of 1973, London and Washington have found themselves more often at odds than in harmony over the best way to deal with the challenges posed by competing nationalisms in the Middle East. In this longer view, then, the more recent cooperation between the two powers involving their joint intervention in the region appears more like an historical aberration than the norm. In the context of understanding the reasons for their earlier differences of approach Geraint Hughes' analysis of the British role in the 1973 crisis is a useful and insightful contribution. In terms of the bigger picture of Western interests in the region, Hughes argues persuasively that there was in fact very little difference in outlook between the British Government headed by Prime Minister Edward Heath and the Nixon Administration. Both saw Soviet encroachment as a threat, and both wanted to protect the substantial Western economic interests in the Middle East. But when it came to framing a policy to achieve these goals differences quickly emerged. One might go so far as to sum up the root of these problems in one word: Israel.

The predominant view in the Nixon Administration, championed by National Security Adviser and later Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was that Israel was a Cold War strategic asset which could help block Soviet encroachment and thus indirectly protect Western interests in the region. This thesis was founded in part on a reading of the September 1970 crisis in Jordan in which, Kissinger argued, Israel had protected the US's ally King Hussein against a Soviet-backed Syrian attempt to overthrow him. The fact that the Israelis had fired not a single shot in defence of Jordan, and that the Soviets had manifested no interest in the overthrow of the Hashemite regime were but minor inconveniences to this thesis.

The British view of the role of Israel in the region was different. In private British views were probably similar to the candid sentiments earlier expressed by President Eisenhower in a meeting with his advisers on 23 July 1958 when he commented that 'except for Israel we could frame a viable policy in the area.' The British government saw the unresolved Arab-Israeli conflict as a dormant, but most certainly active, volcano which was likely to erupt at any time causing widespread damage to Western interests in the Middle East. As the original framers of UN Security Council resolution 242 of November 1967, moreover, the British were in no doubt that the onus was on Israel to show a willingness to make territorial concessions and to return to the pre-June 1967 lines for the sake of peace. This was made clear in an important speech delivered by British Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home at Harrogate in October 1970 in which he called on Israel to implement resolution 242 and abandon the territories occupied in June 1967.

Hughes is mildly critical of the British approach to this issue, seeing the Foreign Office in particular as inveterately pro-Arab and suggesting on p.12 of his article that the British had little sympathy for Israeli concerns about the existential threat which they believed their country faced. But in truth the British position was an astute reading both of the realities of power in the region and of the dangers of continuing Israeli intransigence. The fact that Israel was the region's military superpower, and faced no existential threat after the 1967 war, was mirrored in the complacency with which Israeli leaders viewed the danger of a subsequent Arab attack. The contentment of the Nixon Administration with the status quo in the Middle East, reflected in Kissinger's failure to launch any serious diplomatic initiative even as tensions rose measurably during 1973, was viewed as misguided and potentially dangerous in London. Here we can see how policy might diverge significantly even as both powers aimed at the same overall strategic goals.

But aside from these specific disagreements over Middle East policy, Hughes also points to broader problems in the Anglo-American relationship at this stage which helped influence their response to the 1973 crisis. Chief among these was the diplomatic modus operandi of Nixon and Kissinger. The Nixon "shocks" of 1971-2, involving the opening to China and the abandonment of the Bretton Woods system reverberated loudly in London. British officials were accustomed to having the chance both to track and influence the policy formation process through connections in the Washington bureaucracy as well as in the White House. The secrecy which characterised the Nixon-Kissinger approach effectively cut the British out of their familiar position as relatively privileged insiders.

Beyond the unusual methods adopted by Nixon and Kissinger, Hughes also considers briefly whether the Heath government was responsible for the deterioration in Anglo-American relations between 1970 and 1973. Here, the principal question is whether the European orientation of the government and, more specifically Heath's personal Francophilia, were responsible for the downgrading of relations with Washington. This was certainly a view voiced on the other side of the Atlantic, and repeated by Kissinger in his memoirs, where the theme of unrequited affection on his and Nixon's part for Britain,

rebuffed by the inveterately Francophile Heath, is a recurring one. Hughes describes Heath as ‘ambivalent about the United States and the concept of a “special relationship”’ (p.9), which is probably about right. Certainly, Heath made securing British entry into the European Economic Community the centrepiece of his foreign policy and to the extent that French suspicions of the Anglo-American relationship were one impediment to securing this goal he did play down high level political ties with Washington. But this tendency was balanced by the commitment of his Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas-Home, to continuing Anglo-American cooperation.

In terms of the handling of the specific crisis which erupted in October 1973, Hughes argues that the main burden of responsibility for the tensions which afflicted Anglo-American and broader transatlantic relations lay with the Nixon Administration. The argument pursued by Nixon and Kissinger was that the Europeans should back Washington’s attempts to resolve the crisis because to do otherwise would be to present the Soviet Union with the opportunity to advance its influence in the Middle East and threaten broader Western interests. The British, by contrast, believed that Washington’s unflinching backing for Israel simply increased the likelihood that the Arab oil-producing states would feel obliged to back Egypt and Syria by using the oil weapon against the West. Both London and Washington wanted to halt the war, but the question was how best to do it. When Kissinger tried to persuade the British to sponsor a ceasefire-in-place resolution during the initial phase of the conflict, claiming that Egyptian President Sadat had indirectly signalled he would accept this, the British suspected a possible Kissinger trick. They used their own improved contacts in Cairo to check the bona fides of this claim. Sadat’s unequivocal dismissal of the idea only deepened their suspicion that the secretary of state’s goal was to get someone else to carry the can with the Arabs for unwelcome diplomatic moves at the UN.

But probably the greatest damage to Anglo-American and broader transatlantic relations was caused by the abrupt US decision to move its nuclear forces up to the DEFCON 3 state of readiness between 24 and 26 October. The British along with other European allies believed that they should have been consulted before this action was taken. Heath was particularly discomfited by questions from the Labour opposition in parliament as to whether the government was aware of the mobilisation of US nuclear forces stationed on its own soil. Hughes notes that Heath was not only dismayed at the lack of consultation, but believed that the nuclear alert was an unnecessary escalation in the crisis. To the extent that the Soviet Union seems to have had no serious intention of unilaterally deploying combat forces to Egypt, and that Moscow’s suggestion of a joint US-Soviet peace-keeping force had only been provoked by Kissinger’s encouragement to Israel to ignore the ceasefire, Heath’s doubts were well-founded.

The imposition of the Arab oil boycott which the British had expected and feared all along helped deepen the scars left by Anglo-American political disagreements during the crisis. But the damage was not as long-lasting as might have been feared. At the NATO foreign ministers’ meeting in Brussels in December Kissinger expressed regret for the lack

of consultation with allies over the nuclear alert while Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home also worked hard to improve relations with Washington. The greatest political fall out for the Heath government was domestic, with the Arab oil boycott provoking an economic crisis which precipitated the fall of the government in February 1974.

If Hughes' analysis of these events is for the most part shrewd and balanced there are inevitably some criticisms which can be levelled at his argument. Perhaps the largest concerns the sources on which it is based. While the title is carefully framed to place Britain in the lead role, it is arguable that the reliance on British archives alone presents a limited and potentially one-sided view of the crisis. Since the central thrust of the article concerns Anglo-American relations there is no doubt that it would have been strengthened further if US documents in the National Archives and Nixon presidential papers had been consulted. While my own research in these sources suggests that the picture which might emerge would still not be a pretty one from the point of view of the American role in the breakdown of alliance relations, it would at least be a fuller one in terms of the Nixon Administration's decision-making.

A further gap concerns what is admittedly a sub-plot in the crisis: Anglo-American attempts to keep Jordan out of the war. Here, as during the September 1970 crisis, the picture in terms of Anglo-American relations was a considerably more harmonious one. London and Washington worked together to help persuade King Hussein to resist Arab pressure to join the war in its later stages.

Overall, though, Hughes' article presents a convincing picture of the reasons for tension between Britain and the United States during what, for those of us who still have strong childhood memories of petrol rationing, queues and power cuts, was a defining social, economic, and political crisis.

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