

THE PERSONAL TOUCH: HOW BRITAIN'S VALUES- BASED DIPLOMACY CAN CHAMPION DISSIDENTS AROUND THE WORLD

BY LORD BETHELL



**CENTRE ON
SOCIAL &
POLITICAL RISK**

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Registered charity no. 1140489
Tel: +44 (0)20 7340 4520

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About the Author

Lord Bethell is a member of the House of Lords and a former minister in the Department of Health and Social Care. He is a member of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China and the China Research Group.

About the Research Team

Dr Helena Ivanov (Lead Researcher) is an Associate Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society. She recently completed a PhD in International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research focuses on the relationship between propaganda and violence against civilians.

Francesca Iellamo is a research intern at the Henry Jackson Society. She holds a Master's degree in international conflict and security from King's College London. Her research focuses on USA and UK national security strategies and foreign policy.

Carmen Elena Mitrea is a research intern at the Henry Jackson Society. She is currently enrolled in an MA Middle Eastern Studies programme at SOAS University of London. She is interested in post-conflict societies, human rights, state building and development.

Ahmed Zamzami is a graduate student of MSc Public Policy at Queen Mary University. He also works as a research intern at the Henry Jackson Society. His research interests include international affairs, Middle Eastern studies and the domestic politics of the UK, the USA and the EU.

Alex Alfirraz Scheers is a Dutch-Malaysian War Studies student at King's College London. He is also a research intern at the Henry Jackson Society. His research interests include nuclear strategy, Islamist terrorism and far-right extremism.

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About Us



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About The Henry Jackson Society

The Henry Jackson Society is a think-tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free, working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.

CENTRE ON SOCIAL & POLITICAL RISK

About The Centre on Social & Political Risk

The Centre on Social & Political Risk (CSPR) is a citizen-focused, international research centre, which seeks to identify, diagnose and propose solutions to threats to governance in liberal Western democracies. Its fundamental purpose is to underscore the potential harm that various forms of social, cultural and political insecurity, conflict and disengagement can pose to the long-term sustainability of our democracies.

Executive Summary

This report seeks to analyse the UK Government's performance when it comes to protecting and championing human rights across the globe. For the purposes of the report, we have built an extensive data set, which examines human rights violations in 31 countries that the **UK Government and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)** identified as "countries of concern" when it comes to human rights, although the report analyses a more limited number of cases for reasons of scope. We have analysed whether and to what extent the UK Government has engaged with regime dissidents and human rights fighters in these countries, and whether such engagement has produced a tangible impact.

Ultimately, the report applauds the UK Government's efforts - there are various instances in which it is obvious that the UK Government was willing to set its own political interests aside to protect human rights across the globe. Despite these efforts by the Government, the report also identified important areas in which we could see an improvement. To assist the UK Government in its aspiration to be the global human rights champion, the report suggests the following policies to the UK Government and Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office:

- **"Tea-hugs-selfie outreach"** - which would involve substantially increasing the number of meetings with individuals who are fighting for human rights in their respective countries.
- **Closing the rhetoric gap** - in some instances, we have noticed that there is a gap between the UK Government's verbal commitment to human rights and what the Government does in practice, and we think this gap must be closed.
- We believe that more **resources** must be reserved for protecting human rights and democracy across the globe.
- We propose the **university of dissent** - more specifically, the UK Government should offer courses to those who are fighting for human rights in their respective countries which would provide information about the best methods to achieve such aims.
- **Envoys** - we argue that the UK Government should consider appointing more envoys following a review of their work.

1. Thatcher diplomacy – the power of engaging with the dissident democracy movements

From the ashes of the Second World War, political freedom has advanced for sixty years across the globe, with the number of democracies rising significantly from 12 in 1945 to 92 in 2002.

Russia's Natan Sharansky, South Africa's Nelson Mandela, Nigeria's Claude Ake, India's Amartya Sen and Peru's Mario Vargas Llosa characterised a generation of freedom fighters who fought for democracy, liberalism and freedom, some of them from their prison cells. Many went on to leadership positions in their countries.

Popular non-violent protests played a decisive role in successfully overthrowing autocracies in countries like Chile under Augusto Pinochet, East Germany under Erich Honecker, Egypt under Hosni Mubarak and communist Poland.

But these dissidents did not act in a vacuum. We should never underestimate the importance of the support that they received from a democratic alliance of countries that saw democracy-building as a key foreign policy priority. There are many examples that could be cited here, but former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stands out for her determination to meet publicly with dissidents from the former Soviet bloc, despite the controversial nature of these meetings and sometimes contravening advice from advisors. In meeting these dissidents, Prime Minister Thatcher played a hugely important role (as is recognised by the dissidents themselves), acting as a diplomatic icebreaker for our American allies and challenging the orthodoxy of *détente* that was prevalent amongst our European neighbours.

On 22 September 1986, Prime Minister Thatcher held the first of several meetings with Natan Sharansky, the dissident who became the leading champion of the Refuseniks. This meeting placed the cause of the Refuseniks on the global radar.¹ Natan Sharansky described the impact of Prime Minister Thatcher's intervention in very clear terms when delivering the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom Lecture in 2006:

It was by far the strongest reaction of any foreign country at that time to the situation of one specific prisoner. And that says a lot about Margaret Thatcher – about her determination, about her commitment, about her global view, about her always seeing the big picture.²

In 1986, Thatcher also made time to meet publicly with Professor Yuri Orlov. Pool photographers captured their conversation in Downing Street, which was subsequently distributed to the world's media.³

On 30 March 1987, during her landmark visit to the Soviet Union to meet the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, Thatcher held a lunch for Professor Andrei Sakharov and his wife, Yelena Bonner, at the British Embassy in Moscow, and met Josef Begun.⁴

In 1988, she visited Poland. Despite resistance from the Polish Government of President Wojciech Jaruzelski, she insisted on meeting Father Henryk Jankowski, provost of St Bridget's

¹ "Prime Minister's meeting with Natan Sharansky 22 September 1986", <https://331215bb933457d2988b-6db7349bced3b64202e14ff100a12173.ssl.cf1.rackcdn.com/PREM19/PREM19-2427.pdf>.

² <https://www.heritage.org/civil-society/report/freedom-everyone>.

³ "Yuri Orlov obituary", *The Times*, 5 October 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/yuri-orlov-obituary-hpd55nzrr>.

⁴ Tyler Marshall, "Crowds Warm Up on Her Last Day: Thatcher Welcomed on Soviet Georgia Visit", *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-04-02-mn-1991-story.html>. Dr Sakharov later wrote: "I appreciated how firmly she believed that people are born to be free, and the regimes that are preventing that freedom are doomed." And <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/05/weekinreview/thatcher-leaves-moscow-hopeful-for-arms-accord.html>.

Church in Gdańsk and a key member of the Solidarity (Solidarność) movement, and the future President, Lech Wałęsa.⁵ That meeting between the British Prime Minister and the Polish dissident leader was pivotal, as President Wałęsa said afterwards:

There would not have been a victory if it were not for this meeting, because there would be a pause, greater difficulties, or our destruction.⁶

Prime Minister Thatcher was a figure of her times – she did not, for instance, champion reform in South Africa or challenge the Saudi Arabian royal family. Nonetheless, she made a huge impact through these deliberate, thoughtfully crafted and provocative interventions – which we have termed “Thatcher Diplomacy”. They gave Sakharov, Bonner, Begun and the entire dissident movement in the Soviet sphere huge credibility and visibility at a time when they were emerging from exile and raising their profile. It showed the world that the plight of political dissidents was intrinsic to Thatcher’s conversations with Gorbachev.⁷ According to Lord Charles Moore, her historian: “Leaders she criticised respected her anyway because she was utterly straightforward that her support for democracy and democrats was consistent and steadfast.”⁸

1.1. A time for hope

We hoped that the defeat of the Soviet system was enough to give democratic values – the rule of law and respect for the sovereignty of nations and human rights – the momentum necessary to become the undisputed global norm. I spent December 1989 in Bucharest listening to civic leaders outlining their hopes for their country as the last of the late President Ceausescu’s armed guards were rounded up. It felt like a moment of great optimism.

It is true that for more than a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall there was a self-generated surge in civil and political liberties. By 1994, some forty countries had transitioned to democracy in half a decade, a transition many called “The Third Wave”. Accompanying the rise of democracy was the wholesale release of political prisoners. Nelson Mandela’s walk out of the front gate of the Victor Verster Prison in suburban Cape Town on 11 February 1990 symbolised the dismantling of many of the gulags and special political regimes around the world.

For me personally, the highwater mark was the 2003 publication of *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil* by the late Ambassador Mark Palmer, the former White House speechwriter. He makes the case that wars, famines and poverty are created by tyrants and dares to imagine a dictator-free planet. He makes a very clear case that it is in the UK’s best interests to put value-based diplomacy on the same footing as our economic and security interests. He considers political oppression to be the cause of danger, so we are never safe until we tackle the root cause. His book offers a manual for ousting the world’s dictators by, wait for it, 2025. This paper follows that tradition.

1.2. The most sustained assault on liberal democratic values since the 1930s

We cannot rely on that momentum, and it is time for a rethink. Freedom House, which reports on political liberty around the world, has calculated that since 2005, the number of countries where freedom has diminished has been larger than those experiencing an increase in political and civil liberties, observing that “The long democratic recession is deepening”.⁹

⁵ “Thatcher in Poland”, *YouTube* video, posted by “goldndebriis”, 17 April 2007, <https://youtu.be/cADKFsQRI2s>.

⁶ https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/minitext/int_lechwalesa.html.

⁷ Howell Raines, “Sakharov Tells Thatcher Of Need For West To Back Soviet Changes”, *New York Times*, 1 April 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/01/world/sakharov-tells-thatcher-of-need-for-west-to-back-soviet-changes.html>.

⁸ Lord Charles Moore, “Margaret Thatcher: Herself Alone: The Authorized Biography”, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2019.

⁹ “Freedom in the World 2021”, Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf.

Many democracies are weak and shallow. Pakistan fell in a military coup in October 1999; Bangladesh and Turkey have also failed; others like Sri Lanka or Philippines are oscillating or have descended into regime ambiguity; many are struggling under populist, illiberal leaders and parties, such as Brazil, India, Mexico and Thailand. Gideon Rachman has charted the rise of “Strongman Leaders” who have contempt for state institutions and a fierce hostility to liberalism. “We are now in the midst of the most sustained global assault on liberal democratic values since the 1930s,” he writes.¹⁰ President Putin and President Xi are increasingly frenzied in their crackdown on democratic freedoms and human rights, setting examples to others. Leaders like President Modi, President Duterte, President Orbán and President Erdoğan are mimicking their playbook. In recent months, these trends have crystallised with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; China’s pre-Congress crackdown on Uyghurs in Xinjiang, its repression in Hong Kong, and over its “Zero Covid” policy; and India’s rejection of inclusive liberal politics and its commitments to Western partners. We should worry for the future of democracy.

The drivers of liberal change have faltered. The self-starting democratic movements seem to have stopped: since 2009, of twenty-two cases where mass public protests or an electoral earthquake opened possibilities for a transition to democracy, only two succeeded (Tunisia between 2010 and 2014, and Ukraine in 2014).¹¹ We can no longer expect domestic dissident movements and democracy advocates to spontaneously overturn dictatorships when the infrastructure of oppression, using all the tools of modern technology and psychology, is so effective.

Instead, the gulags are back, political prisoner populations are on the rise, and the special regimes are being enhanced. There is a new generation of dissidents, in the mould of Mandela and Sharansky, who embrace non-violent protest and support the key liberal values of the rule of law, the sovereignty of nations and human rights: people like Alexey Navalny, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Nathan Law and Sophia Sapega. Their style is sometimes different. Modern digital communications play an important role – Navalny’s “Putin’s Palace” investigation was named the most popular video on Russian YouTube in 2021.

In autocracies like Russia and China, the campaign of bigotry and harassment against the LGBT community and any deviance from traditional gender roles reflects the rising tide of chauvinistic rejection of “Western influence”, and this has generated a new generation of opponents to the regime. Whether we embrace the role or not, advocacy for political prisoners is increasingly an agenda-point for UK diplomats and ministers.

Many autocrats are so emboldened, and their oppression is so powerful, that the lives of these dissidents are in perpetual danger. The poisoning of Vladimir Kara-Murza, the arrest of tens of thousands of Russian anti-war protestors, the Xinjiang internment camps, the abduction of anyone participating in protests in China, and the image of Alexey Navalny in his prison cage are brutal images that characterise the remorseless modern dictator.

In March 2021, this challenging geopolitical scene was poignantly described in the UK Government’s policy statement *Global Britain in a Competitive Age*.¹² It recognised that whereas we were once optimistic, we now acknowledge that a growing number of people are living under unscrupulous and opportunistic governments that are increasing repression and flouting international law.

¹⁰ Gideon Rachman, *The Age of the Strong Man* (London: Bodley Head, 2022).

¹¹ Larry Diamond, “Democratic Regression in Comparative Perspective: Scope, Methods, and Causes”, *Democratization* 28 (January 2021): 31-32, Table 3. Quoted here: <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/democracys-arc-from-resurgent-to-imperiled-expanded-edition/#f14>.

¹² “Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy”, HM Government, March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

If we do not help those advocating for democracy in the autocracies of the world, the very future of democratic values is in serious jeopardy.

1.3. Our role in supporting democratic movements

A key determinant in the success of popular movements in the past was the diplomatic support of the alliance of democratic nations because the international context of prevailing norms, ideas, models and trends, and the policies and actions of powerful democracies – and their power relative to autocracies – have a huge impact on the global fate of freedom. This point is argued by Samuel P. Huntington in his influential 1991 book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. He argues that during the post-Soviet expansion of democracy, it was the influence, diplomatic engagement and support of the US and European countries that often tipped the balance toward a successful transition (or away from democratic demise) in precarious circumstances.¹³ This insight was also endorsed by Kathryn Stoner who found that Western technical assistance, training, intellectual engagement, diplomatic pressure and financial support for independent media and non-government organisations (NGOs) all figured prominently in successful democratic transitions but were notably weaker or absent in failed transitions.¹⁴

These people need our support again. The time is right for the democratic alliance to think of new ways to support democracy and make common cause with domestic dissident movements that support liberal values. Vladimir Putin's war on Ukraine has given the world's democrats a renewed sense of unity and purpose. Galvanised by a sense of common threat and existential peril, Western democracies have imposed biting sanctions on Russia, boosted weapons and aid shipments to Ukraine, and increased military spending dramatically, as argued by Lucan Ahmad Way, professor of political science at the University of Toronto.¹⁵

Britain has a critically important leadership role in reinvigorating the Democratic Alliance.

1.4. “Tea-hugs-and-selfie” – British Government's evolving attitude to championing human rights and democracy abroad

This opportunity is something that is well recognised by the UK Government, as four successive foreign secretaries have made clear over the last five years, with steadily increasing vigour and commitment.

The Rt Hon Liz Truss, the current Foreign Secretary, made a strong case in December 2021 that our economic and security interests should be supported by values-based diplomacy. She argued that people have agency over their own lives when they have freedom and opportunity, and they can then achieve incredible things. She has argued that British values have inspired the world, such as the advancement of rights under the Magna Carta, the establishment of the rule of law, and the pioneering of free market economics. She announced her determination to build a “Network of Liberty”.

We have so much to be proud of. So I am putting this at the heart of the Foreign Office's mission – to go out there, influencing and inspiring others to join our cause.¹⁶

¹³ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave of Democracy in the Late Twentieth Century*, 1991, University of Oklahoma Press.

¹⁴ Kathryn Stoner, et al., “Transitional Successes and Failures: The Domestic-International Nexus”, in Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, eds, *Transitions to Democracy: A Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Lucan Ahmad Way, “The Rebirth of the Liberal World Order?”, *Journal of Democracy* 33, no.2 (April 2022), <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-rebirth-of-the-liberal-world-order/>.

¹⁶ Liz Truss, “Building the Network of Liberty: Foreign Secretary's speech”, FCDO, 8 December 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-liz-truss-building-the-network-of-liberty>.

This is needed now more than ever, at a time when China leads four of the fifteen specialised UN agencies and, in cooperation with Russia and other authoritarian regimes, is working energetically to degrade human rights norms and craft new global rules to make the world safe for autocracy, kleptocracy and digital repression.

Many others in the British Government have continuously supported the foreign secretaries in this venture. For instance, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict and Minister of State (Minister for South and Central Asia, North Africa, United Nations and the Commonwealth), has been a continual champion for human rights, tirelessly handling a lot of the ministerial heavy-lifting that is a necessary part of an effective government programme.

This report recognises that the UK's championing of human rights also extends to other kinds of programmes. For instance, the UK Government has a substantial and trusted infrastructure of soft power around the championing of human rights and democracy, a valuable legacy from another age that helps us punch above our weight. These include the Chevening Scholarship, the international scholarship funded by the FCDO; The Westminster Foundation for Democracy;¹⁷ and multi-lateral organisations that integrate our support for human rights into multilateral efforts, including the Community of Democracies¹⁸ and the Human Rights Defenders.¹⁹ There are important envoys including Fiona Bruce MP, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, and Rita French, Global Ambassador for Human Rights and Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations and other International Organisations in Geneva.

While powerful and important, these soft power schemes are not a substitute for the hard-edged impact of official diplomacy, especially the face-to-face meetings between Britain's ministers and those who represent the oppressed. Indeed, academic research shows that these face-to-face meetings have a tangible impact. Ostrander and Rider have examined the international travel of US presidents, in part because "a president's most precious commodity is time".²⁰ Face-to-face meetings allow individuals to transmit information and empathize with each other, thereby reducing uncertainty, even when they have strong incentives to distrust the other.²¹ Soft power tactics are important cards in the gin-rummy game of diplomacy, but the example of Prime Minister Thatcher demonstrated that face-to-face diplomacy is the trump card. British ministers and diplomats should launch a sustained and unstinting campaign of "tea-hugs-and-selfie outreach" to demonstrate in public terms their support and provide aircover for the democratic dissidents of the world, regardless of other considerations.

The recent performance of the UK Government is a mixed picture. On the positive side of things, ministers are stepping up to opportunities to engage, especially in this polarised world with those who have sought confrontation. In May 2022, the Foreign Office minister James Cleverly met with Evgenia Kara-Murza, the wife of the persecuted Russian politician Vladimir Kara-Murza. Mrs Kara-Murza claimed that it is as important as ever for Western politicians to continue to support dissidents from authoritarian regimes and never to give in to Putin's demands.²² In June 2022, Foreign Secretary Liz Truss met with Garry Kasparov, the eminent

¹⁷ "Westminster Foundation for Democracy", <https://www.wfd.org/>.

¹⁸ "Community of Democracies", <https://community-democracies.org/>.

¹⁹ "Who are human rights defenders?", International Service for Human Rights, <https://ishr.ch/about-human-rights/who-are-human-rights-defenders/>.

²⁰ Ian Ostrander and Toby J. Rider, "Presidents Abroad: The Politics of Personal Diplomacy", *Political Research Quarterly* 72, No.4 (December 2019), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45223006>.

²¹ Marcus Holmes, "The Force of Face-to-Face Diplomacy: Mirror Neurons and the Problem of Intentions", *International Organization* 67, No.4 (2013), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/abs/force-of-facetoface-diplomacy-mirror-neurons-and-the-problem-of-intentions/041311A8E4F21E80423AA9A3565A093D>.

²² Patrick Wintour, "Ukraine war is Putin's death warrant, says wife of jailed politician", *The Guardian*, 29 May 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/29/putin-vladimir-kara-murza-wife-russian-politician?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other.

Russian dissident and Chairman of the Human Rights Foundation, calling him “a great champion of freedom and democracy”.²³

This report celebrates these moments for the value they bring to the cause. But it recognises that more needs to be done.

1.5. The rhetoric gap

Despite the Government's best efforts, sometimes there is a gap between the rhetoric and what is done in practice.

The uneven support given to dissidents was described with characteristic clarity by former Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt in the Government's Human Rights programme audit:

In an imperfect world, we will not always be able to respond identically to the same abuses in different settings. But protecting human rights and safeguarding Britain's national values are not optional extras for the FCO. They are part of who we are.²⁴

This report recognises that support for democratic groups is not straightforward in such a complex world. Some of our diplomatic and security partners have moved away from liberalisation and towards political oppression – Saudi Arabia under Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud is the most vivid example.

As diplomatic globalisation gives way to a multi-polar world, there is now an international land grab for partnerships, which makes championing a values-based diplomacy more challenging – it is not so easy to romance a wavering partner whilst criticising their human rights record.

Recognising this complexity, our report recommends a more systematic approach to provide policy-making in this area with more structure and solidity. This report recommends that the use of tired precedents or on-the-spot policy-making be replaced by a consistent algorithm or playbook to deal with these situations. Only by putting “engagement with dissidents” onto a default setting can we avoid our advocacy being interpreted in personal terms as a criticism of a particular regime.

Nonetheless, our analysis (outlined in the empirical section of the paper) demonstrates that our support for dissidents and democracy movements is too erratic, subject to outside pressures and does not deliver the required impact. There are three immediate moves the UK Government needs to make to show it is determined to narrow the gap between its verbal commitment to human rights and the policies it institutes. For instance, when it comes to China, the UK government could:

1. Meet with Nathan Law, the Hong Kong freedom fighter who is now a resident in the UK. He has sought an audience with any FCDO minister for well over 18 months but has failed to get a hearing. This is disappointing and a meeting should be diarised.
2. Formally recognise the Taiwanese Representative Office. The current situation has serious ramifications for our diplomatic engagement with a key member of the Diplomatic Alliance and seems increasingly out of date. It is also surely time for an official visit by a Cabinet Minister to Taiwan.
3. Arrange a ministerial meeting with Rahima Mahmut, the Uyghur advocate. A credible advocate for an important cause with considerable Government and parliamentary

²³ Liz Truss (@trussliz), *Twitter*, 3 June 2022, 5:18pm, <https://twitter.com/trussliz/status/1532758635666882560>.

²⁴ “Human Rights and Democracy: the 2018 Foreign and Commonwealth Office report”, FCDO, 5 June 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2018/human-rights-and-democracy-the-2018-foreign-and-commonwealth-office-report>.

concern, she has been conspicuously overlooked by the FCDO. An incident over a US Embassy event was regretful. This gap should be closed.

Additionally, resources for human rights advocacy are under pressure. In 2021, the Foreign Office halved its funding for human rights work and the promotion of democracy. The statistics showed that in the financial year just ended, the FCDO cut its overall human rights budget from £52.4m to £27.9m.²⁵ This is regrettable and should be reversed.

Building on our audit, this paper aims to provide several policy recommendations which would assist the UK Government in becoming the global champion for human rights.

1.6. Thatcher diplomacy - a call to arms

This is the moment for British leadership amongst the Democratic Alliance in the engagement with the world's freedom fighters. The UK is in a unique position to assert its position as the global champion for human rights. Britain has a history of championing democracy, it is an icebreaker for American diplomacy and it is an Atlantic bridge-maker with Europe. The UK's departure from the EU has opened a new avenue for the UK to take as it tries to become the global champion for human rights, particularly when countries like France are adopting conciliatory approaches to dictators like Putin. Though occasionally uncomfortable, we must embark on a systematic and uncompromising campaign of support for the new generation of fledgling democracy groups and their political leaders, in the spirit of Lady Thatcher. This should be Britain's distinctive contribution to the worldwide democracy movement.

This report is a call to arms.

²⁵ Patrick Wintour, "Foreign Office cut human rights budget from £52m to £28m last year", *The Guardian*, 1 April 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/mar/31/foreign-office-cut-human-rights-budget-from-52m-to-28m-last-year>.

2. Methodology

This report built an extensive data set which focused on the 31 countries identified by the FCDO as “countries of concern”²⁶ when it comes to human rights performance.

The report analyses the relationship between the UK and the 31 countries of concern, categorising each country in line with four clear definitions: (1) *ally and partner*; (2) *opponent*; (3) *systemic rival*; and (4) *diplomatic target*.

Ally and partner is a country with which the UK has a generally good relationship and a vast interest in maintaining that partnership – the most obvious example of such a country would be Saudi Arabia.

Opponent is a country which has interests that stand in stark contrast to those of the UK, and the relationship between the UK and the country in question is substantially broken – for instance, Russia is a clear example of an opponent.

For the purposes of this report, **systemic rival** is any country which is competing with the UK for a dominance over the geopolitical scene but also has opposing political values and principles to the UK. The most obvious example is China. Unlike with the opponent, the relationship has not been irrevocably damaged, and the space for some cooperation and mutual recognition continues to exist.

Diplomatic target is a country in which multiple elites are competing for power, and the UK has an interest in supporting some but not others. Alternatively, this could be a country with which the UK has a rather complex relationship but it continues to have an interest in cooperating with the country in question. For instance, Somalia and Sri Lanka could be considered as diplomatic targets.

Following such categorisation, this report analyses the concerns about human rights in some of the countries identified, as for the reasons of scope we could not present the data for all 31 countries. Additionally, we examine the steps taken by UK Government officials to improve the human rights circumstances in those countries.²⁷ Notably, we've relied on the FCDO reports²⁸ when it comes to human rights performance and violations taking place in the country in question. From there, we examined three crucial aspects of the UK Government's involvement.

First, this report has analysed statements which condemned human rights circumstances in the country in question. This report specifically focused on statements made by high government officials from the 2019 election to date.

Second, this report has focused on all meetings that took place between UK Government representatives and regime dissidents in the same timeframe as above.

Finally, to evaluate the UK Government's performance, this report has provided for each country a list of other regime dissidents that the UK Government could and should have met with, but for various reasons failed to do so. In the following paragraphs, we survey our findings from some of the the countries from the data base.

²⁶ “Human rights priority countries: ministerial statement for January to June 2021”, FCDO, 23 November 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-priority-countries-autumn-2021-ministerial-statement/human-rights-priority-countries-ministerial-statement-for-january-to-june-2021>.

²⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-rights-and-democracy-report-2020>.

²⁸ For further details on the report see: “Human rights priority countries”.

3. Case Studies

3.1. Afghanistan

The UK does not recognise the Taliban Government and, since the evacuation in August 2021, no longer has an embassy in the country. In November 2021, the UK Foreign Affairs Committee launched an inquiry into the future of the UK Government's policy on Afghanistan, including the implications of the Taliban's seizure of power, and the human rights and humanitarian crises.

On 7 March 2022, Afghan human rights activists visited the Houses of Parliament to mark the International Women's Day, an indication of the sort of outreach that is possible.²⁹

This report recommends that UK Government ministers meet members of the Alliance for Human Rights in Afghanistan which includes Amnesty International, Front Line Defenders, Freedom House, Freedom Now, Human Rights Watch, MADRE, the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

3.2. Bahrain

The UK Government's relationship with Bahrain is one of its oldest and closest in the Gulf.³⁰ The Bahraini royal family cares greatly about the opinion of its oldest friend and wants very much to be held in good standing. However, the increasing use of the death penalty and torture in Bahrain is in contrast to its story of civic reform and progress on human rights over the past decade.³¹

Despite having several opportunities to express concerns about Bahrain's human rights record,³² both during official visits to the country and in high-level meetings, UK officials have failed to hold Bahrain publicly accountable for its crimes.^{33, 34, 35}

In 2021, the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) sent a letter to Prime Minister Johnson and Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab condemning the failure to raise the topic of human rights during the July 2021 meeting with the Crown Prince of Bahrain and urged them "to place human rights at the centre of all conversations with the crown prince hereafter and any future relationship between the UK and Bahrain."³⁶

The UK Government should engage with The Gulf Centre for Human Rights (GCHR), an NGO that provides support to human rights defenders in the Gulf and promotes freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

²⁹ "Inspirational Afghan women invited to Parliament for International Women's Day", Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 7 March 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/inspirational-afghan-women-invited-to-parliament-for-international-womens-day>.

³⁰ "The UK's relations with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain", Foreign Affairs Committee, 2013, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmselect/cmffaff/88/8808.htm>.

³¹ Jeed Basyouni, "From uprising to executions: The death penalty in Bahrain, ten years on from the Arab Spring", *Reprivee*, 2021, https://reprivee.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/01/Reprivee_BahrainDeathPenalty_28.01.2022_Pages-1.pdf.

³² "Human rights priority countries", FCDO.

³³ "PM meeting with HRH the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Bahrain Salman Bin Hamad al-Khalifa: 17 June 2021", Prime Minister's Office, 17 June 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-meeting-with-hrh-the-crown-prince-and-prime-minister-of-bahrain-salman-bin-hamad-al-khalifa-17-june-2021>.

³⁴ "UK Government Challenged Over Human Rights in Bahrain in Bruising Lords Session", Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy, 15 July 2021, <https://birdbh.org/2021/07/uk-government-challenged-over-human-rights-in-bahrain-in-bruising-lords-session/>.

³⁵ Rob Merrick, "Priti Patel under fire over tour of Bahrain police station where human rights activists were tortured", *The Independent*, 12 December 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/priti-patel-bahrain-police-station-torture-activists-b1768747.html>.

³⁶ "'Sickening': Rights groups slam Boris Johnson's meeting with Bahrain crown prince", *Middle East Eye*, 17 June 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/bahrain-boris-johnson-meeting-slammed-human-rights-sickening>.

3.3. Belarus

The UK Government's human rights agenda in Belarus has delivered consistency between the Government's narrative against human rights violations in Belarus and its engagement with human rights activists and stakeholders in the country.³⁷

The UK's strategy has combined close engagement with human rights activists in Belarus with support for local civic groups and, more recently in response to Belarus engagement in Ukraine, economic sanctions packages targeting over a hundred individuals and organisations linked to human rights violations.³⁸

- In January 2021, the British Embassy in Belarus funded an Amnesty International exhibition that promoted the campaign against the death penalty and was shown in cities across Belarus.
- In March 2021, UK Foreign Office Minister Wendy Morton announced that the UK would contribute €500,000 to the International Accountability Platform to collect and store evidence of human rights violations and torture in Belarus. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said: "The UK stands in solidarity with the victims of systematic human rights violations in Belarus and is committed to ensuring those responsible are held to account."³⁹
- In September 2021, the UK doubled its financial support of £1.5 million to protect and develop civil society and independent media in Belarus, providing a total of £3 million.

In August 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson met with opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. He pledged the UK's full support to Tsikhanouskaya to bring down the Lukashenko regime. Specifically, Johnson stated:

We are very much on your side, very much in support of what you are doing. We are committed to supporting human rights and civil society in Belarus.⁴⁰

In February 2022, James Cleverly, UK Minister for Europe and North America, criticised the Constitutional Referendum in Belarus:

The Constitutional Referendum in Belarus failed to meet international standards or offer the Belarusian people a true set of options. The lack of international observers or proper public consultation demonstrates the regime's blatant attempts to prevent a democratic process. Furthermore, the arbitrary arrests and crackdown on protests seen during voting was unacceptable.⁴¹

This programme of measures and meetings should serve as an important template for UK engagement with dissidents and must be applied to other countries.

³⁷ Aubrey Allegretti, "UK is on your side, Boris Johnson tells Belarus opposition leader", *The Guardian*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/03/uk-on-your-side-boris-johnson-belarus-opposition-leader>.

³⁸ "UK imposes sanctions on Belarus for its role in the Russian invasion of Ukraine", FCDO, 1 March 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-imposes-sanctions-on-belarus-for-its-role-in-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>.

³⁹ "UK condemns crackdown against human rights defenders in Belarus", *Reuters*, 14 July 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/uk-condemns-crackdown-against-human-rights-defenders-belarus-2021-07-14/>.

⁴⁰ Aubrey Allegretti, "UK is on your side, Boris Johnson tells Belarus opposition leader", *The Guardian*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/03/uk-on-your-side-boris-johnson-belarus-opposition-leader>.

⁴¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/belarus-statement-following-conclusion-of-constitutional-referendum-in-belarus>.

3.4. China

The UK once defined itself as China's closest ally in the West and its policy towards China was committed to strengthening the so-called "golden era" for the relationship between the two countries.^{42, 43}

That's all changed. The UK Government has removed Huawei from its 5G network and facilitated a pathway to British citizenship for the people of Hong Kong. Today, the UK-China relationship is dominated by British ministers' critiques of China's interventions in the governance of Hong Kong and its aggression towards Taiwan, and the condemnation of its human rights abuses against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.⁴⁴

For instance, UK diplomats attended the trials of several human rights defenders and visited Xinjiang and other ethnic minority areas including Ningxia, Qinghai, Gansu and Inner Mongolia.⁴⁵ At the UN, the UK raised concerns over Xinjiang and Hong Kong, leading joint statements at the UN Human Rights Council.⁴⁶ Since July 2020, both Conservative and Labour leadership have condemned China's action in Xinjiang and showed support for imposing sanctions against the regime.⁴⁷

Despite clear positions against China's human rights record and the regime's tight control of citizens' freedoms, the UK lacks a clear strategy when it comes to helping to improve China's human rights record. This research found that Britain's strong narrative against China does not reflect an equally strong engagement with Chinese NGOs and human rights defenders. It observed that while some important actions were taken to condemn human rights violations and to pressure the regime, more could be done to offer tangible and practical support.

It was only in March 2021 that the government imposed sanctions on Chinese officials, citing "systematic violations against Uyghurs and other minorities", to which China responded with retaliatory sanctions against several UK MPs.⁴⁸ In December 2021, the UK announced that it would not send official representatives to the Beijing Winter Olympics because of China's record of human rights abuses.⁴⁹ The challenge with this initial line of engagement manifested in February 2022 when the PM officially resumed trade talks with China despite rising concerns about Beijing's human rights situation.⁵⁰

Comparing this with what Britain's allies have done to tackle human rights issues in China, it is evident that the UK leadership could have done significantly more to join the international

⁴² Thomas des Garets Geddes, "UK-China relations: From Gold to Dust", *The Diplomat*, 2 October 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/uk-china-relations-from-gold-to-dust/>.

⁴³ Lu Zhenhua, "'Pro-China' Boris Johnson 'enthusiastic' about belt and road plan", *South China Morning Post*, 24 July 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3019884/pro-china-boris-johnson-enthusiastic-about-belt-and-road-plan>.

⁴⁴ "The UK and China's security and trade relationship: A strategic void", House of Lords, International Relations and Defence Committee, 10 September 2021, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/7214/documents/75842/default/>.

⁴⁵ "Human Rights & Democracy: The 2020 Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office Report", FCDO, July 2021, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/999607/Human_Rights_and_Democracy_the_2020_Foreign_Commonwealth_Development_Office_report.pdf, p.39.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "Boris Johnson on UK concerns over China's Hong Kong policy", *BBC News*, 20 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-53471802> and "Starmer wants UK to impose China human rights sanctions", *BBC News*, 20 July 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-53471804>.

⁴⁸ "The UK and China's security and trade relationship", House of Lords.

⁴⁹ Sean Ingle, "Boris Johnson confirms no UK ministers or officials will attend Winter Olympics", *The Guardian*, 8 December 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/08/winter-olympics-boris-johnson-confirms-no-uk-ministers-or-officials-will-attend-beijing-2022>.

⁵⁰ Eleni Courea, "Boris Johnson's plan to restart China trade talks angers MPs", *Politico*, 10 February 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/boris-johnson-uk-china-trade-economy/>.

pressure against the Chinese regime's abuses of human rights and its oppression of citizens' basic freedoms. For instance, in 2020, the French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called for international independent observers, as well as Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, to be allowed to "freely enter" the Xinjiang region to investigate human rights violations against the Uyghurs population.⁵¹

Additionally, in July 2021, France opened a "crimes against humanity" probe against four Chinese fashion brands accused of imposing free labour on Uyghur Muslims in China.⁵² In the US, the Biden administration restricted 11 Chinese entities' access to the US for their involvement in human rights violations and abuses. These companies now have restricted access to US-origin items, including commodities and technology. Prior to this, the US Department of Commerce set up two tranches of Entity List designations between October 2019 and June 2020, which added thirty-seven parties engaged in China's repression in Xinjiang.⁵³

This report argues that the UK could and should have done more – especially when the UK's performance in China is compared with the US, the EU or France, but also when we compare it with the UK's performance in other states analysed in this paper.

UK officials could have demonstrated more proactive engagement with prominent human rights organisations and individuals in China, for example:

- Rahima Mahmut, Director of UK World Uyghur Congress, is someone the UK Government could have met to demonstrate active engagement with grave human rights abuses by Chinese authorities against Uyghur Muslims minority.
- Pu Zhiqiang is a prominent civil and human rights lawyer who was released from a nineteen-month-long detention after receiving a suspended jail sentence. In 2015, he was found guilty by a Beijing court of "inciting ethnic hatred" and "picking quarrels" on social media.⁵⁴
- Human Rights in China (HRIC) is one of the few Chinese NGOs that engages with human rights issues in China while operating from overseas. The UK Government could meet with its representatives to gain a better understanding of human rights issues in China and how to approach the Chinese Government when seeking to improve its human rights record.
- The European Uyghur Institute is another group the UK Government could have engaged with. It organises events across Europe to sponsor human rights campaigns advocating for Uyghurs in China.
- The Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders is a coalition of Chinese and international human rights NGOs. The network is dedicated to the promotion of human rights through peaceful efforts to push for democratic and rule of law reforms and to strengthen grassroots activism in China.

⁵¹ Yusuf Ozcan, "France concerned by human rights violations of Uighurs", *Anadolu Agency News*, 22 July 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/france-concerned-by-human-rights-violations-of-uighurs/1918164>.

⁵² Beth Timmins, "France investigates retailers over China forced labour claims", *BBC News*, 2 July 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-57677157>.

⁵³ "Commerce Department Adds Eleven Chinese Entities Implicated in Human Rights Abuses in Xinjiang to the Entity List", US Department of Commerce, 20 July 2020, <https://2017-2021.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2020/07/commerce-department-adds-eleven-chinese-entities-implicated-human.html>.

⁵⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-35157525>.

3.5. Egypt

Egypt is one of the UK's closest allies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.^{55, 56, 57} Since the 2019 election, UK-Egypt relations have flourished.⁵⁸ Using these improved relations as a platform, the Government has engaged Egypt on human rights issues. Notably, as of June 2021, the FCDO had raised the number and treatment of defenders and journalists in detention,⁵⁹ freedom of speech in the media and the increase in executions.⁶⁰

Our research found that the UK's efforts to improve Egypt's human rights record has yielded positive results. In the call between President Sisi and PM Johnson in March 2021, Sisi agreed on "the importance of upholding freedom of religion and belief".⁶¹ The UK has also continued to pressure Cairo to change its oppressive policy against journalists and human rights defenders during several Human Rights Council sessions at the United Nations.⁶²

Considering recent improvements and the UK's role as a close ally and partner with Egypt, these represent positive developments that show Britain's willingness to put political interests aside in order to defend human rights globally. Indeed, the UK's recent engagement with Egypt is a good example of how a government can balance maintaining relations with a country without completely forgoing its commitment to human rights.

But more could be done. UK Government officials could meet with human rights activist Alaa Abdel Fattah, a British national who has been on hunger strike since 3 April 2022. He is demanding a visit from UK consular officials at the Tora Maximum Security Two prison, where he is being held for "spreading false news" through social media posts about torture and deaths in custody in Egyptian prisons.

UK officials should engage further in the investigation into Giulio Regeni, a former PhD student from the University of Cambridge who was tortured and killed by security forces who suspected he was a British spy. The Italian Government has overseen the investigation, but the UK is doing too little to engage with Cairo or the trial in Rome's court.

UK Government officials should meet with Gamal Eid, founder of Egypt's leading human rights group, the Arab Network for Human Rights information (ANHRI). ANHRI has had to cease its activity after members of the group were arrested and threatened with fines of up to one million Egyptian pounds (GBP60,000).

3.6. Iran

This report found the gap between statements and actual commitments/engagement to be extremely wide in the case of Iran.

⁵⁵ "Training: Egypt & UK closer on military training ties", Times Aerospace, 27 May 2021, <https://www.timesaerospace.aero/news/training/training-egypt-uk-closer-on-military-training-ties>.

⁵⁶ "UK-Egypt Joint Statement on Economic Cooperation", Egypt Ministry of International Cooperation and UK Department for International Development, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/859337/UK-Egypt_Joint_Statement_on_Economic_Cooperation.pdf and "UK and Egypt sign Association Agreement", FCDO, 5 December 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-egypt-sign-association-agreement>.

⁵⁷ Hanan Mohamed, "UK contributes by \$5.4B to Egypt's FDI", *Egypt Today*, 12 November 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/3/94154/UK-contributes-by-5-4B-to-Egypt-s-FDI>.

⁵⁸ Michael Hough, "Egypt: Human rights and its relationship with the UK", Bright Blue, 10 March 2017, <https://humanrights.brightblue.org.uk/blog-1/2017/3/10/egypt-human-rights-and-its-relationship-with-the-uk>.

⁵⁹ "Human rights priority countries", FCDO.

⁶⁰ Michael Hough, "Egypt: Human rights and its relationship with the UK", Bright Blue, 10 March 2017, <https://humanrights.brightblue.org.uk/blog-1/2017/3/10/egypt-human-rights-and-its-relationship-with-the-uk>.

⁶¹ "PM call with President Sisi: 18 March 2021", Prime Minister's Office, 18 March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-call-with-president-sisi-18-march-2021>.

⁶² "UN Human Rights Council 46: General Debate on Item 4", FCDO, 12 March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-46-general-debate-on-item-4>.

The UK's commitment to upholding human rights outside international fora was expressed via statements, joint declarations with partners and sanctions regimes. There are intense debates within the UK⁶³ and numerous challenges to Iran's behaviour in a variety of international fora.⁶⁴ The House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee expressed concern about the challenge of influencing Iran's internal human rights agenda in a positive way.⁶⁵ And on 15 March 2022, dozens of members from both Houses of Parliament joined members of the Anglo-Iranian community at a Persian New Year reception held on the eve of Nowruz in the Jubilee Room in Westminster.⁶⁶

But there is very little constructive engagement with democracy movements, dissidents or civic groups.⁶⁷

Organisations that we would encourage the British Government to engage with include: Human Rights Activists in Iran; All Human Rights for All in Iran; Center for Human Rights in Iran; CIVICUS – World Alliance for Citizen Participation; Freedom from Torture; Iran Human Rights Documentation Center; Justice for Iran; United for Iran and British Committee for Iran Freedom.

3.7. Russia

The UK holds a clear position against human rights violations in Russia, which is implemented mostly through economic sanctions and travel bans imposed on the perpetrators of such abuses. However, this research found that Britain's engagement with human rights in Russia is still limited in terms of scope and effectiveness.

When it comes to defending human rights in Russia, Britain lacks a consistent engagement with human rights defenders as well as a plan to establish a stronger position against human rights violations in the global scene. In the case of Russia, this would have entailed engaging with different civil society groups, whose work is regularly harassed and legally prosecuted by Russian authorities.

A more effective engagement would also have included creating a dialogue channel between British authorities and Russian human rights defenders. Some of the most prominent names include Karinna Moskalenko, Igor Kalyapin, Dinar Idrisov, Irina Biryukova and Igor Kochetkov.

3.8. Saudi Arabia

The gap between statements and action is still wide with regards to Saudi Arabia. This report recognises strong levels of engagement vis-à-vis international cooperation for Saudi Arabia's peace and stability but not enough is being done when it comes to human rights.

This report recognises that in July 2020, the then Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab took bold steps in announcing the imposition of sanctions on Saudi citizens involved in the murder of Khashoggi, despite warnings that such actions could strain bilateral relations with the oil-rich kingdom.

⁶³ "No prosperity without justice: the UK's relationship with Iran, Fifth Report of Session 2019–21", House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 8 December 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3987/documents/40221/default/> and "Oral evidence: The UK and Iran, HC 415", House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 7 July 2020, <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/644/default/>.

⁶⁴ "UN Human Rights Council 49: UK statement for the interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran", FCDO, 17 March 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/un-human-rights-council-49-uk-statement-for-the-interactive-dialogue-with-the-special-rapporteur-on-the-situation-of-human-rights-in-iran>.

⁶⁵ "No prosperity without justice", House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee.

⁶⁶ <https://iranfreedom.org/en/activities-outside-iran/2022/03/british-mps-celebrated-of-nowruz-in-parliament-with-iranian-community-in-the-uk/32642/>.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Since then, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has created an energy crisis that makes Britain more dependent on the strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia. Prime Minister Boris Johnson paid Riyadh a visit in March 2022 to discuss deepening the collaboration between the two countries in terms of energy security.⁶⁸ This illustrates the pressures on British diplomats to preserve these strategic partnerships.

Reports of enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, torture and mistreatment in detention, and lack of access to adequate legal representation remained.⁶⁹

The UK Government should meet Yahya Assir, founder of ALQST. His human rights organisation documents and promotes human rights in Saudi Arabia. A meeting with such a person would signal that the UK would no longer turn a blind eye to ongoing injustice within the nation.⁷⁰

3.9. South Sudan

The UK's engagement in South Sudan is also one of the best examples of championing human rights. The official UK Government policy on South Sudan is based on extensive cooperation with the country's Government and international partners (notably the "Troika" of the UK, US and Norway)⁷¹ on a wide range of topics that help international peace and stability initiatives. These topics include South Sudan's political, security, economic, humanitarian and human rights concerns, as well as Sudan-South Sudan negotiations.⁷²

Through regular engagement in London (primarily reflected in the number of discussions and petitions taking place in Parliament),⁷³ in the region and in Juba, the UK has continued to press for greater cooperation on human rights issues by the government of South Sudan, as well as the implementation of the Peace Agreement.⁷⁴

There are two further organisations in South Sudan that the UK Government could consider meeting with. First is the South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network (SSHRDN), a coalition of 60+ civil society organisations and individuals working to protect and promote human rights in South Sudan.⁷⁵ The second is the South Sudan Human Rights Commission.⁷⁶

3.10. Syria

From outside the country, the UK works for a political solution that will establish a lasting settlement to the conflict and protect the rights of all Syrians. The UK believes that the only forum capable of achieving this is the UN-led Geneva Process.⁷⁷ At the moment, the UK maintains that it will not reopen its embassy or provide reconstruction assistance without a credible, substantive and genuine political process being firmly underway to assess the human rights situation.

⁶⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/saudi-crown-prince-meets-british-pm-johnson-riyadh-spa-2022-03-16/>.

⁶⁹ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Disappearances/Allegations/121-SaudiArabia.pdf>.

⁷⁰ "Who we are", ALQST, <https://www.alqst.org/en/who-are-we>.

⁷¹ "South Sudan 10 years of independence: Troika Statement", FCDO, 8 July 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/south-sudan-10-years-of-independence-troika-statement>. There is a long series of statements, meetings and joint visits under this Troika format (UK + US + Norway) both within UN bodies and separately, in a trilateral format, working on South Sudan human rights and conflict resolution issues.

⁷² "South Sudan and the UK: Our mission", Gov.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/world/south-sudan/news>.

⁷³ For further details see, among others: <https://www.parallelparliament.co.uk/APPG/sudan-and-south-sudan>; <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2014-01-17/debates/14011787000014/SouthSudan#39WS>; <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7944/>; <https://websearch.parliament.uk/?q=South%20sudan>.

⁷⁴ "Delivering the stable and prosperous nation the people of South Sudan deserve", FCDO, 21 June 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/delivering-the-stable-and-prosperous-nation-the-people-of-south-sudan-deserve>.

⁷⁵ "About Us", South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network, <https://sshrdn.org/about-us/our-organization/>.

⁷⁶ "History", African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, <https://www.achpr.org/history> and "South Sudan Human Rights Commission", <https://www.achpr.org/nhris/viewnhri?id=36>.

⁷⁷ "Syria and the UK", Gov.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/world/syria/news>.

The UK has attempted nearly every diplomatic and economic move in its effort to bring about a democratic Syria. The UK has provided a haven for Syrian liberals and freedom fighters. The 2015 Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) offered safety to 20,000 refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis during the five years it operated. It was a targeted asylum plan that focused on genuine Syrian opposition figures.⁷⁸

However, this report notes that there have been no high-scale meetings between Syrian opposition and UK Government officials since 2018.

Going forward, the UK Government may want to consider meeting with representatives of The Syrian National Council (SNC), founded in March 2011. The SNC was the biggest and most significant Syrian opposition group in exile until November 2012 when it joined the broader National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.⁷⁹ Such a meeting would send a clear message that the UK remains committed to seeing a democratic change within Syria. Additionally, the UK Government may want to consider meeting with Riad Seif, the most significant Syrian human rights activist.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ "The UK's Syria Resettlement Programme: Looking Back, and Ahead", UNHCR, 23 March 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/latest/2021/3/6059f1fd4/the-uks-syria-resettlement-programme-looking-back-and-ahead.html>.

⁷⁹ "The Syrian National Council", Carnegie Middle East Center, 25 September 2013, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48334?lang=en>.

⁸⁰ Ferry Biedermann, "Syria arrests prominent dissident", *Financial Times*, 29 January 2008, <https://www.ft.com/content/a0837ada-ce61-11dc-877a-000077b07658>.

4. Policy recommendations

We are living in a new world in which democracy is on the back foot and domestic oppression is widespread.

Dissidents are critically important catalysts to restoring democracy. Support from major democratic powers provides the kudos, platform and protection they need to have an impact. The new generation of political prisoners incarcerated or exiled by oppressive governments live in fear for their lives and deserve our protection. During the years in which democracy was making global progress, it was not necessary for the UK Government to focus on its role as a global champion for human rights and it reasonably left much of the heavy lifting to multi-laterals like the European Union. With the weakening of many multi-laterals and our exit from the EU, the UK Government has both an opportunity and an obligation to take a higher-profile role in supporting dissidents and political prisoners.

If we are to see a “Fourth Wave” of countries embracing democratic values, we need to signal to authoritarian and totalitarian regimes that the UK is stepping up in its fight for democracy. Below, this report provides clear policy recommendations to the UK Government which, if adopted, will help it achieve this objective.

4.1. “Tea-hugs-and-selfie outreach” – unremitting and consistent programme of convening, naming and meeting key democratic players

As evidenced throughout this paper, meeting with regime dissidents has a tangible impact on human rights circumstances in their respective countries. This report argues that there needs to be a gear change in the amount of engagement with freedom fighters and regime dissidents.

British diplomacy should have a default setting that it will engage with those who are supporting democracy in their domestic setting. It should defend this precedent so that it becomes normalised. Britain should be seeking to protect political prisoners in all countries, even where there are other sensitive diplomatic considerations. This report recommends more structure and solidity in our policymaking in this area, which will require an algorithm or playbook to deal with complex situations.

First, British ministers must increase the number of face-to-face meetings with regime dissidents and their family members. This report argues that ministers should have such meetings as part of a standard visit to the country in question.

Second, British ambassadors and embassy staff abroad should follow the same pattern and meet with regime dissidents in the countries in which they are located. Regime dissidents should be among ambassadors’ key contacts.

4.1.1. Closing the rhetoric gap

Ministerial rhetoric should be matched by action to support democracy, dissidents and political prisoners. The Foreign Secretary should upgrade the existing FCDO report on human rights to include a formal annual audit to assess the correlation between rhetoric and action, using a suitable set of assessment tools of the kind used in this report. The report should be submitted to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee for inspection and debate. It is our hope that this paper will assist the Government in narrowing down or closing the gap between verbal commitment to human rights and what is actually done.

4.1.2. Resources for human rights and democracy

Having suffered from cuts, the FCDO budget for human rights should be restored or even enhanced. The financial support for organisations that fight for human rights should be significantly increased (possibly by reversing the budget cuts).

- I. **Soft power.** This report applauds the soft power programmes instituted by the UK Government across the globe and our policy recommendation does not aim to criticise the current efforts. Instead, this report suggests how to make them more efficient. First, this report recommends an audit of the soft power elements of the UK Government's human rights and democracy programme. Following such an audit, this report recommends that the elements that have fallen behind be brought up to speed.
- II. **Asylum.** Many dissidents are forced to seek sanctuary overseas – for instance, Hong Kong dissident Nathan Law, once jailed by the regime, is now a political refugee in the UK. This report recommends improvements to the UK Government's refugee regime so that more dissidents can escape the constant threats on their life. This report recommends that the UK Government should offer asylum status to all prominent regime dissidents who are in life-threatening situations. Indeed, this would not be something unknown to the UK Government – most notably, Nathan Law holds an asylum status in the UK. Thus, this report recommends that the UK Government should investigate more broadly the prominent regime dissidents who are in life-threatening situations, particularly in the 31 countries identified as “countries of concern”. Once the list of individuals has been made, this report recommends that the UK Government should extend its asylum to these individuals. This policy would help save lives and would also enable regime dissidents to continue their fight against authoritarianism from the safety of the UK.

4.2. University of dissent

UK universities can also play an important role in our fight for democracy and human rights protection. This report recommends that the UK Government offer courses and education to dissidents living in the UK on how they can encourage democracy in their countries. Dissidents seeking asylum or refuge in the UK can benefit from access to the culture of debate and intellectual freedoms of campus life, and use the opportunity to learn the skills of political dissent. An online course could give access to these skills to those living abroad. Through such education, the UK Government can assist those who wish to fight for human rights by providing them with the necessary theoretical and practical knowledge on how to achieve that aim most effectively, and lock in the culture of freedom that is an essential part of the democratic vision.

4.3. Envoys

The UK has a complex and haphazard system of envoys, many relating to trade and some relating to thematic, values-based priorities. Most notably for this report, Rita French is the UK's Global Ambassador for Human Rights based in Geneva and focused on engagement with multilateral organisations; Fiona Bruce is the PM's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief; and in 2021 the PM Boris Johnson also appointed Lord Herbert of South Downs as the UK's Special Envoy on LGBT+ Rights. This report applauds these individuals and their hard work championing British values around the globe.

This report recommends the UK Government to invest further in the values-based envoys; increase the resources available; create greater latitude for those envoys seeking to champion their field and build a more systematic roster of appointments.

In the first instance, the UK Government should review the roster of Prime Minister's envoys to ensure it includes the right focus on themes of human rights. For example, in a world in which there are various attempts to restrict free speech, and in which authoritarian regimes continuously imprison and threaten those who speak freely against the regime (for instance Sofia Sapega from Belarus), this report believes it is important for the UK Prime Minister to appoint a Special Envoy for Freedom of Expression who could assist those who fight for one of the crucial democratic values which is free speech.

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CAN CHAMPION DISSIDENTS AROUND
THE WORLD"

By Lord Bethell

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The Henry Jackson Society
Millbank Tower, 21-24 Millbank
London SW1P 4QP, UK

www.henryjacksonsociety.org



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