



Multiculturalism and religion in foreign policy

Introduction

A passionate group of participants, diverse in ethnic, religious and other senses, debated this complex and tricky issue between April showers. We tiptoed through the dilemmas of national interest and national identity, and what loyalties could mean in the modern world. We were able to agree on a good deal in terms of analysis, but struggled to give practical expression to our convergence in terms of recommendations. The risk that our discussions would stray away from foreign policy, into questions about religion or multiculturalism themselves, was not entirely avoided. But on the whole, guided by our wise chairman, we managed to stay focussed on the less well-explored international angle.

Summary

We agreed that religion was a growing influence in the world, for better or for worse, and also about the legitimate right religious groups felt they had to try to influence foreign policy. Governments in general, and foreign ministries in particular, needed to factor religion into their approaches, either setting up special units to deal with religious groups or mainstreaming training in religious issues. Religion should not be seen as a problem to be solved. But aggressive fundamentalism, from whatever quarter, was a serious issue. There was no support for foreign policy being used to promote a particular religion, but it had a role to play in promoting religious freedom and tolerance. Religious leaders could also encourage mutual knowledge and tolerance, though they did not always do so. We were concerned about religious flashpoints in various parts of the world, not least parts of Africa and the Middle East, and the rise of the Shia-Sunni divide. Doubts were expressed about the effectiveness of much of current interfaith dialogue. We were also concerned about attempts to promote a UN declaration on anti-defamation/blasphemy, which could have a chilling effect on the freedom of speech.

Ethnic minorities also had every right to try to have a say in the foreign policy of their countries of residence/citizenship, without being accused of disloyalty. Their role in terms of knowledge, contacts and business interests was often positive. Remittances were also a huge, and generally helpful, factor. Loyalty was a tricky concept in this area. Groups thinking they owed a higher loyalty to an outside religion or ideology could be a problem, and care needed to be taken about how lobbying was conducted, but otherwise as long as the law was obeyed, people could readily have multiple loyalties and layers of loyalty. Loyalty was in any case a two-way street. The way minorities were treated by the governments where they lived not only influenced the way they integrated, but could itself also become a foreign policy issue. Members of minority groups should be encouraged to participate in the normal political life of their country, and not be treated as either monolithic in their views or identified only by the ethnic group they belonged to. Similarly community leaders should not be treated as automatically speaking for all the members of their communities.

Governments had to retain the responsibility to balance the different elements in foreign policy, without 'outsourcing' policy in any area to a particular group, or 'Balkanising' the national interest. But defining the national interest was far from straightforward. It was not just a question of commercial or security interests but also had to take into account history, values and public attitudes. The ethnic make-up of a country was one of the important parts of this mix, as it was of a country's national narrative of itself. The role of diaspora groups towards their countries of origin was usually supportive but could also be hostile to the government in place there. That could pose problems for bilateral relations, but as long as

the rule of law was respected there was little or nothing host governments could or should do to control these groups in democratic societies.

Whether or not multiculturalism was adopted as a policy, many countries now had a multicultural reality, which inevitably had international impact and repercussions. Promoting mutual knowledge, understanding and tolerance was a key role not only for governments but also for education and the media. Globalisation and instant communication by the new social media increased the risks of domestic consequences from an incident anywhere in the world. That was also a reality which had to be factored into government behaviour.

Religion in international affairs

We were able to agree without much difficulty that religion was a growing factor in international life, though there were differing views about the desirability of this phenomenon. Globalisation had so far strengthened religion, not marginalised it, as some had imagined. We could not be said to be living in an 'age of religion', or at least not yet. But the idea that religion could be kept out of political life ('We don't do God.') was fading. We were arguably moving from a post-enlightenment paradigm to a new paradigm and needed to explore afresh where the legitimate overlap between religion and politics lay.

This growth of religion's influence was not all about Islam, though this was clearly a major part of the explanation. In the Middle East, Islam had filled a gap left by the failure of other ideologies such as Arab nationalism. But other religions were expanding too, particularly newer forms of old religions, such as the Pentecostals, whose spread in Africa and elsewhere was striking. Other religions also had their fundamentalists – the evangelical Christian right in the US, and strict religious parties in Israel.

Several participants stressed that religion should not be seen as a problem to be solved. It was a vital part of most people's lives around the world, and had a perfectly legitimate place in the public sphere. It could often be a force for good, through its espousal of basic moral principles, and promotion of dialogue. Much of the conflict which seemed to spring from religious divisions or differences often involved religions used as proxies for other divisions. We agreed, however, that aggressive fundamentalism, of whatever kind, was a problem. More widely, religion could easily be invoked to inflame passions and drive divisions.

There was more or less consensus that religious groups and leaders felt it legitimate to seek to influence the foreign policy of the countries where they were based. They were part of society and its richness and had as much right to be heard as other groups. It could be argued that countries which factored religion into their foreign policy, and listened to religious concerns, were more likely to follow approaches reflecting the realities of the modern world. However, we needed to be careful about groups using religion for their own policy purposes, and hiding behind it instead of engaging with the values of the communities around them. Faith could not trump everything else.

There was no support for the idea of a foreign policy based on promoting or defending a particular religion, even where a country had an 'official' or state religion. It was pointed out that, in practice, even countries which might be expected to follow religious preferences in foreign policy, such as Iran or Pakistan, tended to look at national interest in non-religious terms – for example, Pakistan's closest ally was China.

How should governments and foreign ministries react to attempts to influence them by religious groups? There was agreement that greater religious awareness – religious 'literacy' – was highly desirable. It was also often absent, as shown for example by the Danish foreign ministry's unsuccessful handling of the cartoon issue. Some foreign ministries already had specialised officers or units to deal with religious issues. Were such units the right way to go, or was it more important to mainstream the necessary awareness through training? Views were divided. Units could become silos, but spreading

the responsibility might dilute it too far. In any case governments, while taking account of religious influences and views, should be careful not to allow them to dominate other considerations – the tail should not wag the dog. Religious voices were only a few among many.

How far should governments go in pressing for religious freedom in other countries? It was clearly desirable, as long as such pressure was non-discriminating between religions. But should it also include freedom to change religion, which was so sensitive in many countries, and should it be a significant factor in relations with other countries? At present practice seemed rather uneven, with commercial considerations affecting the degree of such pressure, for example in the case of countries like Saudi Arabia. Moreover, where did the limits of promoting a country's own values lie in this area, for example pressing for gay and lesbian rights within religions? We struggled with questions like these. In any case careful, soft diplomacy and grounded understanding of local realities were essential.

Where were the international religious flashpoints for the next few years? In geographical terms, the Horn of Africa and Nigeria were seen as particularly sensitive, with Christian and Muslim groups rubbing up against each other. In the Arab world, Shia-Sunni tensions were rising dangerously, and there were also increasing concerns about victimisation of minority religious groups, eg Copts in Egypt. The negative influence of the media was a concern, with religious TV channels sometimes broadcasting dangerous propaganda, including between Shias and Sunnis. Aggressive proselytisation could also be inflammatory, for example from newer evangelical groups. Violence was most likely, historically, when populations felt their own religion and religious space were under threat.

How far could religious leaders play a helpful role in talking to governments and calming tensions? Their influence was clearly important. It could be used negatively as well as positively. But there were some good recent examples, for example appeals for calm after the death of an imam in a Brussels mosque a few weeks earlier. Religious leaders could be encouraged to sign up to codes of good conduct, and to share these with their followers. A particular problem was posed by religious groups with no easily identifiable hierarchy or leadership, such as the Pentecostals. How could they be engaged? It was also not clear that parts of the modern Islamic world had a concept of religious freedom which corresponded to the normal meaning of the word.

What role could interfaith dialogue play? There was a good deal of scepticism around the table about traditional forms of polite dialogue between clerics and between faith structures. This was not seen as engaging the people or tackling the hard realities. To make a difference it needed to engage on the substance of the problems, global or local. Involving interfaith groups in projects for the whole community could be helpful, for example over environmental issues or projects for the homeless. Dialogue should also go beyond the Abrahamic faiths. There was support for the role which could be played by groups like the Alliance of Civilisations.

There was some discussion on the proposal for a UN Declaration on Anti-Defamation ie deploring blasphemy. This could have a chilling impact on free speech if adopted in its present form. A better alternative would be a UN Declaration on Religious Education, involving a commitment that citizens would be taught about the religions of their fellow-citizens/neighbours. This would be hard to draft but there was work to draw on at national level in several countries, for example agreement between Shia and Sunni groups in the UK about how Islam should be taught. The Council of Europe and the EU had also produced principles about the teaching of religion in schools.

A final part of our religious discussion was about secularism. Several participants pointed out that militant secularism could be as divisive as any religion. Others stressed that a secular space created by governments could be helpfully neutral, and allow all religions to flourish. The important concept here was pluralism, not secularism as such. Did having a state religion make such pluralism more difficult? Views differed. The UK had its established Church but also great freedom for others to worship and express their religious views. Some from the Islamic world looked at examples like the UK and

wondered why the idea of Islam in their constitutions caused such consternation in the West. But the parallels were not necessarily exact, and the tradition of tolerance not the same.

Ethnic minorities and foreign policy

This debate overlapped with, but was arguably even more tricky than, the debate about religious influence in international affairs. It was not difficult to agree that it was in principle perfectly legitimate and normal for ethnic minority groups to seek to influence the governments of the countries where they lived over their specific foreign policy concerns and issues. This was a natural expression of the pluralism of a democratic society, though it was much less likely to be acceptable in authoritarian societies. The fact that an ethnic group was lobbying should not be seen as evidence of disloyalty to their country of residence, any more than would be the case for other lobby groups pressing for particular policies or criticising existing government policy. Rather it was a normal and useful part of the foreign policy process, and a reflection of the diversity of modern countries.

Participants also pointed out that we should not frame the debate in terms of the problems posed by ethnic minorities. They could have very positive influences through their contacts and their knowledge, including in the sphere of trade. Businessmen from ethnic communities could be valuable links with countries of origin. Remittances from diaspora communities back to host countries were also very important in stabilising and helping them economically.

We paused several times on the question of loyalty, which was an uncomfortable concept for many around the table. Did we mean loyalty to a country, to a government, to a particular national narrative, or to a particular set of values? In any case more could not be asked by way of loyalty from members of ethnic minorities than from any other citizens. There should be no discrimination. Obedience to the laws of the country was a universal requirement. Many recent immigrants were in any case very positive about the country in which they had chosen to live, and fiercely loyal to it. But there was also perhaps a need for all to be loyal to certain fundamental values of the society they were in, such as tolerance in democratic societies, and to the processes of reaching policy decisions, eg through peaceful debate and democratic processes. This did not mean automatic support for the policy decisions themselves. But it did mean that the idea of a higher loyalty owed by some groups to an ideology or religion outside the mores of the country where they lived could lead to problems.

Participation in the normal processes of deliberation and policy-making should be actively encouraged. Governments and political parties had valuable roles to play here. Trying to exercise influence outside the normal political process was not however acceptable. Attempts of this kind should be tackled through the normal legal process, eg if violence or terrorism was being supported, or other means of illegal influence such as corruption, rather than through any imposition of special rules for minority groups. Efforts to close down particular discussions or debates should also be resisted.

Loyalty was also a two-way street. Inclusiveness from governments and the majority community/culture was likely to increase loyalty from all citizens, including those from ethnic minorities. Could divided loyalties be a problem, in other words situations where ethnic minority/diaspora groups took a very strong interest in the affairs of their country of origin, and seemed to be supporting this country? The general view was that this need not pose problems – the so-called ‘cricket test’ had no real validity – except in the case of an actual conflict between the countries concerned. Loyalty was not binary, and ‘layers of loyalty’, or multiple loyalties, were normal, in the same way as layers of identity or multiple identities.

Nevertheless there were perception risks for minority groups in mounting lobbying campaigns over foreign policy issues which could lead to majority community citizens seeing them as the ‘other’. This could become self-reinforcing if the minority concerned accepted this identification, and came both to be seen and to see themselves as uniquely characterized by one facet of their identity, eg ‘Irishness’ or

'Muslimness', and adopted attitudes and views accordingly. Identifying people by their communities was to deny their individual experiences, and their individual rights as citizens.

In normal circumstances ethnic minorities, like other groups, were not at all monolithic in their views, even over issues concerned with their country or region of origin, and should not be treated as if they were. There was a risk for governments and society as a whole in dealing too much with so-called community leaders, who often did not represent the spectrum of views within that minority. This was unhelpful in cementing identification of a community with one specific set of views or one issue. Engaging with communities and community leaders about issues which were nothing to do with their religious or ethnic identity, for example about local services, was a valuable way of normalising relations with them. One important element of integration into the host country was the convergence of the spectrum of views of the minority with the spectrum of views of the society as a whole.

If we accepted that ethnic minority views about foreign policy were natural and on the whole helpful in formulating good policy, there were still questions about how minority views related to the 'national interest' which was assumed to guide foreign policy as a whole. The general view was that in many cases, short of conflict, there was no such thing as an easily identifiable and clear national interest. A country had specific commercial and security interests, which could be measured up to a point, but there were also important elements of history, of attitudes to issues like human rights and justice, of values, and of public opinion which had to be fed into the mix. The diversity of a national population and the existence of ethnic minorities within it, with particular views and sensitivities, were also part of this mix. It was the role of governments to balance all these elements and come up with an approach, a formulation of national interest, which took them all into account, even if it could never satisfy everybody.

It was important to avoid 'Balkanisation' of the national interest, by fixing foreign policy towards particular countries solely or mainly on the basis of lobbying by diaspora groups. Policy should never be 'outsourced' in this way. It was the role of governments to maintain the right balance. A number of different examples were quoted: American policy towards Israel and the Middle East, and the influence of the Jewish community; American policy towards Cuba and the views of Cuban exiles in the US; the Armenian diaspora in France with its effect on French policy towards Turkey. Many participants felt that systems which codified lobbying activity, rather than allowing a free for all, and ensured full transparency of who was trying to influence what, were highly desirable.

Discussion of the national interest led us on to 'national narratives', in other words peoples' views of themselves, their country, their history and their place in the world. These were clearly crucial in terms of national identity, but it was hard to know who defined and fixed these narratives. It was more a multiplicity of actions and influences than governments. In any case national narratives changed and evolved over time, including the incorporation of multicultural diversity. The influence of the new social media democratised further any given national narrative. It might be impossible in this day and age for there to be a single national narrative in any country.

Finally we looked at whether there should be limits on the role of diaspora communities vis-à-vis countries of origin. While many of these communities were keen to help promote their countries of origin, some, including where political refugees and asylum seekers played an important role, wanted to see the governments in their countries of origin overthrown and were working actively to that end. This could pose problems for bilateral relations between countries of residence and countries of origin. Was there anything to be done by host governments? On the whole we thought not. Any attempt to promote violence or terrorism should be covered by national laws. Advocacy or other political activity simply had to be accepted as part of democratic cut and thrust, and robustly defended as such to governments of countries of origin complaining about such activities. At all events there were no other sanctions available in democratic countries, though trying quietly to persuade diaspora activists not to abuse the

host country's hospitality could be an approach worth trying, together with warnings about fund-raising activities which looked suspicious.

Multiculturalism and foreign policy

Not all participants were happy with use of the term multiculturalism in this context, particularly when it could mean such different things in different countries. Clearly many countries had a multinational/multiethnic make-up. But while some had embraced multiculturalism as a key part of national policy and given it a particular expression, as in Canada, others had explicitly rejected it, believing that it militated against the creation of a national identity and favoured the development of parallel lives, which were a long-term recipe for trouble. One issue raised frequently was the absence of a common experience for citizens of all kinds which would then be a unifying factor. This led some to suggest reintroducing the idea of some kind of universal national service, which did not have to be military.

Whatever description was given to official policy towards minorities, the way they were treated by host governments could have a major impact on the image of a country, the attitude of some countries of origin to it, and therefore on bilateral relations and foreign policy options. These issues were therefore a reality which could not be ignored. Where a host country was seen as hostile either to the sending country or to the diaspora community itself, tragic consequences could follow. Attempts to crush identities were bound to lead to problems.

Discussion focussed on useful approaches to manage such problems. The following possibilities were identified, many of which are already in operation in some countries:

- full and open recognition of the presence of minority communities and their right to a voice in policy formulation, including foreign policy, and efforts to ease access for them to the corridors of power. Being able to speak reduced the need to shout, or worse;
- more outreach by the government to diaspora communities, eg diplomats proactively going to them to seek their views;
- encouragement of minorities to participate at every level in political processes, from voting upwards;
- policies to reduce the prevalence of enclaves. Enclaves might not always be bad: people could feel comfortable clustered around a church, mosque or synagogue, and integrate better that way. But if they were in enclaves through economic or social necessity, they could increase exclusivity and alienation;
- clever use of language policies: learning the host language was crucial for integration but policy discussion of other issues in minority languages could help widen interest and participation;
- education: getting the right curricula in place was crucial to mutual understanding. In this context were faith schools divisive? Views were divided.
- media influence: using the media to promote tolerance and reduce friction and divisions. But this was not easy, and the trends were not necessarily in the right direction.

Inevitably we discussed whether Muslim communities presented a particular problem, especially in Europe. The security issues, eg post 7/7 in the UK, certainly caused special complications. But those concerned were the tiniest of minorities and these issues should prove transitory in the great scheme of things. Other groups had seemed specially difficult at different times, eg Irish in the US or UK, Jews in parts of Europe, but had come to seem much less so. Moreover there were many different communities lumped under the Muslim label. One question was whether an expression of Islam could be identified which would make sense in a European space, where Islam would always be in a minority.

What was the balance to be struck between demands from some communities to be treated like everyone else, and simultaneous claims to exceptional treatment (for example establishment of Sharia courts, though these were said by some participants to be more mediation centres than courts as such)? We had no easy answers to such questions. However it was emphasised again that there was a need not to regard communities as monolithic in their views and attitudes. We should also understand that there could be great pressure to conform within certain communities. People could be helped in resisting such pressures by more subtle approaches. We also needed to recognise that situations and relationships were not static but constantly evolving and changing. These were dynamic issues, and we should constantly re-evaluate the role of the state.

Conclusion

As the above account illustrates, we found it difficult to identify many practical recommendations. In a complex world, states were not necessarily the key actors any more, and influence was very diffuse. The consensus that religion and ethnic minority groups had a natural right to be part of the foreign policy debate, as long as they conformed to the law like all other citizens, was reassuringly clear and positive. But it was also clear that both majority and minority groups needed to be careful about how they handled public debate and each other, to reduce the risks of simplistic labels and over-identification with one characteristic. Instant communication through the new social media increased these risks, and the chances of conflict, for example over isolated incidents which went instantly round the world. The vital roles of the media and of education in promoting knowledge of others and acceptance of diversity were constant themes in our debate. The price of tolerance was constant vigilance.

This Note reflects the Director's personal impressions of the conference. No participant is in any way committed to its content or expression.

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