

The UAE Lobby: Subverting British democracy?



A Public Interest Investigation by Spinwatch

On the 17th of July 2018, Public Interest Investigations (PII) presented a report at the House of Commons, publicised on its website Spinwatch, that focused on the UAE's lobbying efforts within the UK. The report illustrated how through the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash and the lobbying firm Quiller Consultants, the UAE initiated a comprehensive campaign of targeting journalists, policymakers, academics, businessmen, civil servants and MPs between 2011 and 2013. This campaign was designed to, and culminated in, two main policy changes within the UK government between 2011 and 2013. Firstly, the UK's official position vis-à-vis the Morsi regime in Egypt changed from what was tacit support to a more ardently anti-Morsi campaign that served to undermine his

presidency and offer support to the Sisi-led coup against him. Secondly, the UK's position against the Muslim Brotherhood and Qatar was made more aggressive as a result of the UAE's lobbying. Both of these policy changes were enforced through the weaponisation of UAE-UK trade deals, such as the BAE's Eurofighter Typhoon jet deal with the UAE.

Aside from the ways in which UAE lobbying influenced UK governmental policy directly, it has also been made clear by the report that the UAE's efforts to affect the British milieu also extend to the dissemination of information via media. Here, there were continuous attempts to both silence supposed Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers in the BBC, BBC Arabic, and in Chatham House. Through multiple complaints, and delegations, sent by the UAE to Number 10 Downing Street, the UAE managed to obtain some tangible results in the obtainment of a reduction, or removal from position, of those critical of the UAE's human rights record and who displayed sympathetic views towards the Muslim Brotherhood. Additionally, aside from the BBC, there has been a general shift in the rhetoric of a number of journalists in the UK as a result of the lobbying. Through briefings between Anwar Gargash and a range of different journalists and academics, including but not limited to individuals such as Con Coughlin and Andrew Gilligan, the UAE managed to fashion an anti-Muslim Brotherhood, anti-Iran, and anti-Qatar echo chamber that spans across a range of different media organisations at the forefront of the provision of news in the UK.

Furthermore, the UAE campaign to penetrate UK political life has also, as noted in the report, extended to efforts to designate and label senior members of the Qatari royal family as 'terrorists'. As the report notes, the UAE sought to generate research exemplifying the links between the Qatari royal family and terrorism through ICSR and King's College London professor Shiraz Maher. The lobbying firm Quiller discussed a £20,000 a month payment for this research. In

turn, this research was intended to be operationalised in order for the government to officially list members of the Qatari royal family as 'terrorists'.

Collectively, therefore, Spinwatch's report provides damning evidence of the ways in which the UAE has penetrated democracy and stifled debate within UK political and social life. This penetration represents a clear breach of our parliamentary democracy and the human right to civil and political freedoms and transparency. The report also calls into question and number of issues so as to ensure a lack of continuity in the tactics used by the UAE. For example, it exemplifies the need for lobbying reform, a closer examination of press regulation, and a more in-depth investigation into the links between governmental pressure and the rhetoric espoused by the BBC. That said, the AOHR UK welcomes these calls for reform and commends Spinwatch and the PII on this ground-breaking report. The report has indeed served to saliently highlight the ways in which democracy in the UK is being eroded by outside entities with clear politicised agendas that contravene the principles of democracy and democratic freedom.