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# INTERLIB

Journal of the Liberal International British Group



**Lynne Featherstone, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for International Development, at the Diplomatic Reception.**

**Inside: Chemical Warfare: Kurdistan: Mali:  
Military Conscription: Conference &  
Beirut LI Exec Reports**

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**15th May** Conscientious Objection: from personal right to universal responsibility – panel discussion within COnscription installation, 4 Wilkes Street, London E1 6QF. 6.00-8.00pm *see page 14*

**20th May** LIBG Forum: Russia and the persecution of LGBT and other minorities. 7.30pm

**6th June** Tim Garden Lecture - Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach. Chatham House, 6.00pm

**8th July** LIBG AGM, followed by reception and 'The Elephant and the Dragon - India, China and our relationship with them'. NLC 6.30pm

**14th –18th September** Liberal Democrats Autumn Conference, Glasgow

**18th September** 175th anniversary of the establishment of the Anti-Corn Law League by Richard Cobden, 1838.

**17th-19th October** 191st Executive Committee of LI. Antigua, Guatemala.

**XXth October** 128th Liberal Party Assembly, Friends Meeting House, 8b Summerfield Road (off Bath Road), Chapel Ash, Wolverhampton

*For bookings & other information please contact the Chair below.*

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-NLC= National Liberal Club, Whitehall Place,  
London SW1A 2HE  
Underground: Embankment

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Members of the LIBG Exec (+ Qassim Afzal), John Innes, Adrian Trett, Merlene Emerson, Nick Hopkinson, Wendy Kyrle-Pope, Simon Hughes, Jerry Asquith, Robert Woodthorpe Browne & Mark Smulian at the Diplomatic Reception.

*Thanks to Gary Kent for photographs from Kurdistan. Conference & Diplomatic Reception photographs Stewart Rayment.*

# From the Chair...

In a world where so much is happening – the tragedy of Syria, the rays of hope in Somalia – some countries do not get the coverage in the media they deserve. LI (BG) and interLib try to rectify this, and this edition is no exception, with Laura Gordon's article on the reasons behind recent conflict in Mali, and Gary Kent's on Kurdistan, which is the companion piece to the excellent meeting arranged by Nick Hopkinson in March this year. The annual Diplomats' Reception, held in February, was a great success. Lynne Featherstone spoke on the rights of women worldwide. We are enormously grateful to Sandra Lawman, Mark Pursey and BTP Advisors for their generous sponsorship of this event.

Our events in the next few months continue to spotlight the less obvious. In partnership with Liberal Youth, we are holding a meeting on Human Rights (or the lack thereof) in Russia. After the AGM in July, we are having a fundraising meeting on the Elephant and the Dragon, India and China, and Britain's relationship with them. This is always a fascinating subject, but now more relevant as their economies

boom while ours (& those of our European partners) are stalled, at best. Markets make politics and vice versa. Will the UK continue to be punished by China for Cameron's meeting

with the Dali Lama? Will a panda pregnancy in Edinburgh help smooth Sino-British relations? How relevant is Britain today to these great nations? The Tim Garden lecture will be held at Chatham House on Thursday 6 June at 6.00. The lecturer this year will be Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, until recently Commander Joint Force Command, and taking up the position of Vice-Chief of the Defence Staff this month. Alas, these events are all in London. Are there no regions, student or constituency branches who would like to organise a meeting on an international subject of their choice? Funds and assistance in finding speakers are available.

Wendy Kyrle-Pope,  
Chair LI(BG)



## LGBT Rights in Russia and Eastern Europe

May 20th, 2013 7:30pm  
National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place,  
London SW1A 2HE

Joint meeting LIBG and Liberal Youth on LGBT rights in Russia and Eastern Europe, and treatment of other groups that fall foul of governments in the area.

Confirmed speakers: Peter Tatchell (human rights campaigner),

## AGM

followed by

## 'The Elephant & the Dragon' relationships with India and China

July 8th, 2013 6:30pm  
National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place,  
London SW1A 2HE

The Annual General Meeting of LIBG will take place from 6.30-7.30pm in the Lawrence Robson Room of the National Liberal Club.

This will be followed at 7.30pm in the club's David Lloyd George Room by a cocktail reception and *'The Elephant and the Dragon - India, China and our relationship with them'*.

This event is supported by the British United Indian Liberal Democrats (BUILD) and the Chinese Liberal Democrats

# Under a Chemical Cloud

## Jonathan Fryer

Halabja is one of those place names, like Srebrenica and Katyn, that are etched into the collective memory of the extremes of man's inhumanity. In the spring of 1988, the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein ordered the bombing of the small Kurdish town of Halabja with chemical weapons, as part of his so-called Anfal campaign of genocide against Iraqi Kurds. After the bombs had fallen, a white cloud smelling sweetly of apples rolled along and over the streets and through the open doorways and windows, enveloping every living being and slaughtering them on the spot. When the Iranian photo-journalist Kaveh Golestan arrived by helicopter on the scene shortly afterwards he found bodies of humans and animals everywhere. 'It was life frozen,' he later recalled. 'Life had stopped, like watching a film and suddenly it hangs on one frame. It was a new kind of death to me. You went into a room, a kitchen and you saw a body of a woman holding a knife where she had been cutting a carrot.'

Golestan's iconic images of the Halabja massacre were distributed by the Iranian news agency IRNA and spread around the world. I was working at BBC World Service in Bush House at the time and remember trying to make sense of it all, editorial confusion compounded by the fact that the Iraqi government was claiming that it was the Iranians who had dropped the bombs. Iran and Iraq had been at war for nearly eight years, millions of soldiers had died in the worst stalemate carnage since the First World War and chemical weapons had certainly been used on the Iran-Iraq front line. Besides, Saddam Hussein was then the West's friend, fighting an extremist Islamic revolutionary government

that had seized power after the downfall of the Shah. It was not conceivable that he would use chemical weapons against his own people, was it?

Alas, it was. Subsequent analysis showed that the Iraqi military had used a cocktail of chemical horrors from their extensive arsenal, including mustard gas, and nerve agents such as sarin, tabun and VX. Some of the victims were covered in blisters, others coughed up green vomit. After the Iran-Iraq war ended later the same year stories about the true nature of Saddam's regime began to filter out. He completely burned his boats with the West, of course, when he invaded Kuwait in 1990. Though the Iraqis were evicted from there by an international Coalition force the following year – the Iraqis setting fire to over 700 oil wells as they left – it was not until 2003 that George W Bush decided to topple Saddam. The official pretext was Saddam's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction – including chemical weapons – but in the event it transpired that he had used or destroyed them all. That was not enough to save his life, as he was sentenced to death by an Iraqi court for his crimes and hanged. So too was Saddam's cousin, Ali Hassan Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti, or 'Chemical Ali' as he was dubbed by the Kurds who knew that he was personally responsible for the worst excesses of the Anfal campaign against them. In that campaign a total of 182,000 Kurds died, according to official records.

All these recollections were in my mind as I travelled recently to Halabja, along with Kaveh Golestan and other journalists who had covered the aftermath of the massacre, to

commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the chemical attack. ‘The aftermath was worse,’ Kaveh recalled at the time. ‘Victims were still being brought in. Some villagers came to our chopper. They had 15 or 16 beautiful children, begging us to take them to hospital. So all the Press sat there and we were handed a child to carry. As we took off, fluid came out of my little girl’s mouth and she died in my arms.’ Some of the children who did survive were there to welcome us at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration. In the genocide museum we were shown a mock-up of a Halabja street in 1988, clearly based on one of Kaveh’s photos. In a huge marquee the children sang ballads of bereavement, all the more poignant for their cloying sentimentality. the Vice-President of Iraq’s Kurdistan region – which has a substantial degree of autonomy from the central government in Baghdad – made a speech along the lines of ‘never again’, but he was interrupted by a silent demonstration of students and other young activists who held up placards demanding the creation of a Halabja governate and economic aid, more jobs for young people and other calls familiar from the Arab Awakening that has swept across North Africa and the Middle East since the itinerant fruit-seller Mohamed Buazizi set fire to himself outside the town hall in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia in December 2010. One of the students thrust a tract into my hands that they had had translated roughly into English. ‘In memory of the Halabja comical weapons attack,’ it was headed. At most times this linguistic error would have prompted laughter, but in the emotional circumstances of the occasion, at which many people were crying, it was hard not to weep myself.

‘Never again.’ That snappy statement that so clearly summed up the feeling after the First World War – and which was so cruelly undermined just a generation later – now resonates in conference halls when chemical weapons are discussed. Partly as a result of the Halabja massacre, new impetus was given to the international Conference on Disarmament

which presented to the UN General Assembly a draft text for a Chemicals Weapons Convention (CWC), or, to give it its full title, the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction. The CWC came into force in April 1997 and is managed by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. Only six states had at the time of writing failed to sign the Convention: the brand new country of South Sudan (which maybe has other priorities on its mind), Somalia, North Korea, Angola, Egypt and Syria.

The last-mentioned in particular should sound alarm bells. Israel, which has signed but not yet ratified the CWC, is understandably nervous about having two neighbours who have not yet officially renounced chemical weapons but Syria is the bigger danger of the two. The Arab Awakening reached Syria later than it did in most of the MENA region; by coincidence I was there when the demonstrations started in March 2011, before being politely but firmly escorted out of the country. The brutal way the Assad regime cracked down on the dissenters finally blew away any pretence that Bashar al-Assad was a reformist, a man the West could do business with. Over the intervening two years, things have got much worse. At least 70,000 people have been killed in what has turned into a very messy civil war, hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees have fled to Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq, and millions have been internally displaced. Syria has become a humanitarian crisis of catastrophic proportions and the international community is at a loss about how this could be brought to an end. Moreover, the Assad regime – not just Bashar, but his thuggish younger brother Maher, Commander of the Republican Guard, who reportedly lost a leg in an assassination attempt, plus various in-laws and hangers-on – seem determined to hang on at whatever cost. The fabric of the country is being destroyed,

the historic souk of Aleppo just one of the World Heritage sites that have been trashed. What was perhaps the most successful multicultural society in the Middle East has been poisoned by sectarianism. No-one's future is secure. If all that were not bad enough, chemical weapons are the joker in Assad's pack.

There is no doubt that the Damascus regime has them. CWC experts believe the stocks include mustard gas, sarin, tabun and VX – exactly the same agents used against the Kurds in Halabja in 1988—and that they were based at as many as five sites, two of which also have Scud missiles. It admitted this on 23 July last year, while claiming that these were being held purely as a last resort for use against a foreign enemy. According to an article in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* last September, chemical weapons were tested by the Syrian army near Aleppo over the summer. On the 28<sup>th</sup> September, US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta declared on the basis of intelligence that Syria has moved its chemical weapons in order to 'secure' them. Syria's close ally, Russia, moved quickly to get assurances for the Americans from the Syrians that their chemical weapons facilities were secure. But early in December President Barack Obama expressed his increased concern that Syria was preparing its chemical weapons stockpile for use. The then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton warned that such use would be a red line which, if crossed, would trigger international intervention.

In order to evaluate the scale of the danger that Assad might authorise the use of chemical weapons let us remember what his father, the late President Hafiz al-Assad, did in Hama in February 1982. His Ba'ath regime – from the same political family as Saddam Hussein's, though they were bitter rivals – was feeling under increased pressure from dissidents, in particular from the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic movement that originally started in Egypt (where it is effectively now in power).

The historic city of Hama, famous for its giant wooden water-wheels, was a hotbed of Muslim Brotherhood activity and in order to suppress this Assad sent in the army on a punitive mission. There was whole scale slaughter as tanks fired down narrow streets and people were dragged from their beds and killed. It was some time before clear details of the massacre became known, this being in an age before mobile phones and social media. Robert Fisk, the seasoned Middle East correspondent, estimated 20,000 dead. Some Syrians claim the figure was even higher. The Hama atrocity certainly put the lid on dissent for quite some time. And that is what Bashar al-Assad is trying to do now, though most international observers believe the civil war is now so complex and bloody that neither the regime nor the rebels can win militarily. His army and airforce have shown no restraint. But he wouldn't use chemical weapons against his own people, would he?

Alas, he may have already.

*Jonathan Fryer is a broadcaster, journalist and lecturer at SOAS, and a vice-president of LIBG.*

*This article originally appearing in Huffington Post*



***Remembering the Halabja Massacre, but going forward.***

# Kurdistan: past, present and future.

## Gary Kent

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which is roughly the same size and population as Scotland, is safe, stable, secular, pluralistic and keen to link with the UK and the wider world.

It has taken time for all this to sink in here. Many were initially clueless about Kurdistan and worried when Iraq was mentioned. However, political and public awareness has been advanced in recent years through the work of many including the all-party parliamentary group (APPG). Our many fact-finding delegations sought to understand Kurdistan's past, present and future and to help fashion new connections with the Kurds.



*The Citadel, Erbil – our oldest inhabited city.*

History hasn't been kind to the Kurds, a distinct people at the often violent vortex between larger Arabian, Ottoman and Persian civilisations. About a century ago, the Kurds were denied nationhood and remain dispersed in four countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria in descending order. Things are more promising in Turkey but brightest in Iraq.

The APPG includes those who supported and opposed the 2003 invasion but Iraqi Kurds clearly saw it as a liberation. This is hardly surprising. They endured a rolling and increasingly brutal genocide waged by Baghdad, particularly Saddam Hussein. We backed a

major campaign to recognise this genocide and recently persuaded the UK Parliament to formally endorse this.

Long story short. Kirkuk was forcibly Arabised in the early 1960s. During the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s, many Shia Kurds were killed and expelled to Iran. Eight thousand boys and men from the Barzani clan were then kidnapped and consigned to mass graves, as were so many others later. There is another Iraq under Iraq.

In 1987/1988 a systematic effort to eliminate the Kurds was launched. The countryside became a free fire zone, thousands of villages were razed completely, and rural peoples were taken to urban concentration camps.

Two hundred communities were bombed with mustard gas, sarin and nerve agents. The most hideous symbol of this was the chemical bombardment of Halabja in March 1988 when 5,000 people were killed in minutes. Many remain terribly maimed.

The genocide ended when Saddam's defeat in Kuwait in 1991 prompted uprisings in the Shia South and Kurdistan. They were defeated but a horrified public opinion forced the imposition of western no-fly zone which sheltered the dirt-poor Kurdistan Region, from most of which Saddam withdrew.

The Iraqi Kurds began to rebuild their society. They voluntarily established a democratic Parliament and new universities. It was tough as they were doubly affected by sanctions on Iraq, cruelly administered by Saddam, and also succumbed to a bloody civil war. The Kurdistan Region is now an officially recognised autonomous region within Iraq. It has had several internationally recognised elections and has an official Opposition, rather unusual in the Middle East. Education is a priority and it now has 30 universities while most of its government sponsored postgraduates choose to study in Britain, which provided refuge for many current leaders.

When I first visited Kurdistan in 2006, there was much talk about plentiful energy resources but it seemed academic. Remarkably, the Kurds have since built an

energy industry from scratch with 45 billion barrels of oil and a century's worth of gas. The main city, Erbil is the world capital of oil exploration with many oil majors on the ground, including British interests. There is a huge demand for infrastructure and improved public services. The skyline is in constant flux as a construction boom, fuelled by 10% + annual growth, throws up new hotels, housing, offices, malls and other facilities.

Public services are better than the rest of Iraq where, for instance, electricity is available for just a few hours a day compared to continuously in the Kurdistan Region. There is still much work to do in developing public services for everyone and in reducing inequality.

A group of NHS medical volunteers from the North East, led by Kurdish-born orthopaedic surgeon Deiry Kader, regularly visits the Region to carry out knee and hip operations to fill the gap and literally put Kurds back on their feet. Co-operation between British and Kurdish health interests is growing. As part of Iraq, Kurdistan was lumbered with an inefficient command economy. The bulk of employment is still in government and, without a welfare state and a tax base, this disguises unemployment and under-employment. The private sector is puny but entrepreneurship is seen as key to a vibrant economy, which needs diversification.

Economic and political change is work in progress but they have achieved much in a short time. More Brits are visiting too. I spent the tenth anniversary of the war on holiday there with my family. We landed at the new British-designed airport in Erbil which has the fifth longest runway in the world. The APPG is also urging direct flights from the UK in order to increase our footprint there. When visitors leave Erbil for the other cities of Slemani and Duhok they enjoy a huge sky and a panorama of arable and verdant plains encircled by mountains. We saw a ski resort atop its highest mountain, the deepest canyon in the Middle East, springs and waterfalls.

Its natural beauty and solitude as well as historic battlefields and the citadel in Erbil, which is 8,000 years old and one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, can lure tourists in time. The cooler Kurdistan Region is already a much sought after destination for Arabs and has won the prestigious accolade of Arab Tourism Capital in 2014. Its tourist infrastructure needs developing and this provides opportunities for British companies, which benefit from a generous foreign investment regime.

Great efforts are also being put into reviving agriculture. Before Saddam, the Region was the breadbasket of Iraq. The KRG is now seeking self-sufficiency in foodstuffs and British businesses could play a role in establishing supply chains.

One exciting project is to develop the region's famous pomegranates, not least in Halabja and supply western supermarkets. It would be a powerful symbol of change if Halabja became famous as a source of this much prized health product.

But oil and gas as well as minerals will remain the mainstay of the economy. Such natural assets are often a curse rather than a boon. The Kurds are well aware of this danger and seek to maintain Kurdish values of community by ensuring they wisely use their assets. Sadly, there have been major disputes over energy policy with Baghdad which ignores the federal constitution, agreed by a popular vote in 2005, and demands a Baghdad veto. The Kurds insist that, while all revenues accrue to Iraq as a whole and they take their share, they have the right to develop their oil and gas as they see fit. Baghdad opposes the KRG exporting oil and gas direct to Turkey. Talks on this and land disputes are ongoing.

Success would boost Iraq's income and the world energy market as well as improve wider relations. The Kurdistan Region's links with Turkey, for instance, have been transformed in recent years thanks to a burgeoning trade and an energy-hungry Turkey keen to buy from its neighbours.

Turkey once refused to even mention the name Kurdistan for fear that success for the Kurdistan Region would inspire separatism in Turkey where war with the PKK has cost about 40,000 lives and many billions of dollars in the past three decades. All that is changing. The new rapprochement between the Kurdistan Region and Turkey is based on hard-nosed commercial imperatives but can also underpin prosperity in the Kurdish south east of Turkey where the Kurds could become equal citizens in the developing peace process in Turkey. Turkey would then fuel its economy and be an energy hub for Europe.

I am often asked whether Iraqi Kurdistan could move from devo max to full independence. Iraqi Kurdish leaders say they exercised their self-determination by plumping to remain part of Iraq in 2003 but that reversion to dictatorship in Baghdad would change that.



Iraq as a whole would suffer most if the Kurds were to go given their stabilising contribution. It is noteworthy, for instance, that Kurdish soldiers guard the Baghdad parliament.

My sense is that there is no appetite for challenging established borders but, with Iraqi Kurdistan as a



Goats expressing their freedom...

dynamo in a federal Iraq, they could become irrelevant for most practical purposes.

Iraqi Kurdistan seeks British partners in myriad commercial and cultural links. We may still disagree here about the intervention but it would be a dereliction of duty to ignore a place that could be the model for Iraq and help transform the Middle East for the better.

The Kurds have an old saying that they have no friends but the mountains, where they often sought refuge in the past. We can disprove this through friendship for mutual benefit. You should go there one day.

*Gary Kent, who has visited Iraq 13 times since 2006, is Director of the APPG Kurdistan Region and recently addressed a Liberal International Forum on Kurdistan.*

*He writes in a personal capacity. Their website is [www.appgkurdistan.org.uk](http://www.appgkurdistan.org.uk)*



View from the Citadel, Erbil.



Iraqi Kurdish Flag



Pupils at a school in Slemani.

## International Abstracts

The New York Times editorial on Cameron's Referendum gaff. January 27, 2013

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/opinion/sunday/p/prime-minister-camersons-european-fantasy.html>

*Mainstream American opinion on Cameron's promise of an In/Out Referendum on membership of the EU. Not calling a referendum on Lisbon was Blair's greatest domestic mistake, proposing an In/Out is probably Cameron's.*

The Republican Obsession, by Patrick J. Buchanan February 06, 2013 "Information Clearing House"

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article33843.htm>

*Pat Buchanan weighs into the Republican's grasp of foreign policy, but let's face it, the Democrats are scarcely any better. Ignore the fixation with the Israel lobby and Iran; I've included this as a useful checklist of the main issues.*

The Dream of Azawad, by BlaiseP January 13, 2013

<http://ordinary-gentlemen.com/blog/2013/01/the-dream-of-azawad/>

*This is one of the more informed pieces I've found on the Mali/Azawad issue. The perspective is distinctly pro-Mali and there undoubtedly is a Tuareg case, as responses to the blog suggest. The issue long predates International, or even Al Qaida interest in the region, and I regret to say our involvement is probably another knee-jerk reaction rather than considered policy.*

Trying to parse lessons of Iraq War, by David E. Sanger

March 21, 2013 International Herald Tribune, page 4

<http://iht.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/viewer.aspx>

*Stephen Hadley's (a Bush advisor) views on the misjudgements & inaccuracies that led to the Iraq war, with the views of Obama's advisors on how this impacts on US decision making on Syria and Iran.*

# A Breathing Space For Mali

## Laura Gordon

Since the French military launched Operation Serval in January 2013, Mali has gone from being a country that few knew to being regularly in the newspapers. Unfortunately, the complex origins of the conflict defy easy understanding, and the country's previous backwater status means that genuine analysis has often been lacking.

Mali's most recent problems date to early January, when Tuaregs returning from Colonel Gaddafi's African Legion launched a rebellion in the north. The main group was the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA, Azawad indicating a Tuareg homeland), accompanied by Ansar Dine (Defenders of the Faith; an Islamic group led by the same Tuareg clan as the MNLA), and MUJWA (Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, another Islamist group). In the background was Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, rich from ransoms and smuggling.

Faced with the ill-trained and poorly armed Malian army, the rebels made significant gains, including capturing the garrison town of Anguelhoc where it massacred soldiers. In protest, a group of soldiers led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo marched on the presidential palace, their protest swiftly becoming a coup when the president, Amadou Toumani Traore fled. In the confusion, the rebels made further rapid gains, taking over Mali's northern regions before halting at Mopti, while in the north, the secular MNLA were rapidly displaced by MUJWA, Ansar Dine, and AQIM.

These groups imposed Sharia law in the areas under their control, including amputations, stonings, and, echoing the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the destruction of Timbuktu's famous mausoleums. Although the return of the 'Libyan' Tuaregs played a part in triggering the revolt, the causes go far deeper.

Tuareg dissatisfaction dates back to independence, with a string of rebellions. Each was accompanied by a peace deal promising greater Tuareg integration into the state and development for the north, much of which was not delivered. However, it is important not to overstate the importance of this; although the

Tuareg can destabilise the north, they are a minority even there, and there is limited support for independence even among the Tuareg. Alone, they lack the numbers and the resources to take, and hold, the whole of the north.

The key to the rebellion's success therefore lies in the alliance with Islamic groups. Of these, the most important is AQIM. The group's origins lie in the Algerian civil war of the late 1990s; when the government then cancelled elections won by Islamic groups, leading the Islamists to take up arms as the GIA. A brutal civil war in which both sides carried out atrocities ensued, with the Algerian army eventually gaining control of most of their territory and the key towns. The GIA became the GSPC, focusing mainly on attacks within Algeria before, in 2006, signalling an increasingly outward focus by rebranding as AQIM.

### KIDNAPPING FOR RANSOM

AQIM's strategies have included bombings, largely of Algerian military targets and other armed attacks, but the major source of their power has been kidnapping westerners for ransom, raising some \$50m in the past decade. This has enabled them to become a sophisticated fighting force.

The other rebel groups in northern Mali, MUJAO and Ansar Dine, are more home grown. Ansar Dine, which controlled Timbuktu during the occupation, is led by Iyad Ag Ghali, a long-time Tuareg rebel and intermediary in hostage negotiations. Closely related to the leaders of the MNLA, he founded this group, with AQIM providing financial and logistical support, when the MNLA would not accept his Islamist agenda. The origins of MUJAO are more obscure, but it is essentially an AQIM splinter group. As well as the rebel groups, the Malian state contributed to creating the conditions for rebellion. Although pre-coup Mali was frequently praised as a beacon of democracy, this concealed a system in which power changed hands inside a small elite that controlled the country's resources as well as its politics.

In this system, the remote northern provinces were largely ignored by the Bamako-based ruling class,

creating a vast ungoverned space that was used as a base by terrorists and a transit corridor by drug smugglers. These drug smuggling networks allegedly paid off the government to look the other way, and garnered huge sums for the groups that controlled them – which included AQIM and MUJAO.

This context of negligible state presence in a large, isolated area populated by rich, well-armed and determined jihadist groups meant that, when the MNLA rebellion was started by returnees from Libya, the situation quickly escalated, enabling the groups to gain control of the entire north of the country.

Following protracted negotiations, UN resolution 2085 was passed. This authorised the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA), following training for the participating armies, but also called for elections to be held in April 2013 or ‘as soon as technically possible’, and highlighted AQIM and MUJWA as terrorist organisations with which negotiation would not be authorised.

Almost as soon as it had been passed, Resolution 2085 was overtaken by events. In early January, a rebel advance began, with Ansar Dine massing troops ready to attack Mopti. Mopti falling would have been a disaster; it is seen as the first town in the south, so has huge symbolic impact, and it controls the only large airstrip in central Mali. It is also the crossroads where all the roads to the south meet before fanning out again to the north; capturing it would have opened up the south to rebel attacks.

The interim president appealed to France for assistance. Swiftly deploying, the French army met initial fierce resistance, admitting to surprise at how well and how fiercely the rebels had fought. After a week of bombarding the northern cities, however, rebels withdrew, enabling the French army to take control. Fighting is now concentrated in the northernmost region of Kidal, while other rebels have changed tactics to asymmetrical attacks on government and military targets in the north.

Inevitably, there has been a great deal of discussion about whether the French were right to intervene, and about their real interests in doing so. The answer to the first question is relatively uncontroversial, particularly if you happened to be living in Mali at the time of the rebel advance. Militarily, the intervention has been an almost unqualified success. It prevented a rebel assault on Mopti. Swift action was undoubtedly necessary. As a result, the north has been liberated, and although

instability remains, the long hard work of rebuilding the country can begin.

## ACCUSATIONS OF NEO-COLONIALISM

Although a military intervention by a former colonial power makes many liberals instinctively uncomfortable, opening France up to accusations of neo-colonialism, there are strong arguments for not seeing it through this lens. The action was undoubtedly legal under international law; France was asked for assistance by the president of Mali.

The intervention can also be seen to have had positive impacts on human rights grounds. The armed groups running the north were committing abuses, including amputations, floggings and executions, often after summary judicial processes. Although a number of abuses have been reported against the Malian army, notably executions of civilians, these do not have the same widespread and systematic nature as those carried out by armed groups. Similarly, investigation of army abuses is easier, as there is at least some democratic accountability in place, and legal redress is possible.

Finally, the intervention remains hugely popular in Mali. From a Malian perspective, the French army saved them from disaster. Bamako is draped in French flags, many taxis have pictures of President Hollande on the windscreen, and t-shirts and printed cloth with his face even outnumber those featuring President Obama. Undoubtedly the euphoria will wear off, but Malians know best what is right for their country, and they currently overwhelmingly feel that that was the intervention.

It is also hard to see what ulterior motives could have pushed France to intervene in Mali. Northern Mali has very little strategic importance. It is in the middle of the Sahara desert, several days drive from anywhere and negligible transport infrastructure. It has no natural resources to speak of. It is possible that there is oil, but no test drillings have been conducted, and there may be uranium, but given the large supply in neighbouring Niger, almost entirely controlled by French companies, this would be an unlikely motive for intervention.

France does have 6,000 citizens living in Mali, and there were undoubtedly domestic concerns, with the intervention effectively restoring Hollande’s image and rescuing his tanking opinion-poll ratings. However, the efforts they made to convene an African force to dislodge the jihadists, and the speed with which they are planning to hand over to AFISMA, suggests that the motives were largely humanitarian. If

comparisons are to be drawn, they should be to the British intervention in Sierra Leone in May 2000, rather than to the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Almost two months after the intervention, northern Mali remains insecure. Around Gao, formerly controlled by MUJWA, there have been a number of suicide attacks and in Kidal, fighting continues between AQIM and the French and Tchadian armies. Banditry is widespread, with occasional attacks. The French army professes confidence that by the end of March they will hand over to AFISMA, for which 6,000 of the needed 8,000 troops have been pledged.

Military success, however, is far from being the whole story to reintegrating the north. Many northerners from non-Tuareg ethnic groups blame Tuaregs and Arabs for the conflict, and many have fled in fear of reprisal attacks. As these groups make up much of the merchant class, this has had a devastating impact on the economy in the north.

On the political side, progress is even less clear. Elections are scheduled for 7 July, but given the work needed to register the electorate, continuing displacement and instability, delays seem inevitable. There are also questions over whether immediate elections are wise; much of the support for the coup derived from dissatisfaction with the ruling political class. Without a reasonable lead period to elections, with time for genuine national dialogue, this dynamic will only be reinforced.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in the north and centre is bad and worsening. The departure of merchants has made it impossible for pastoralists to sell their animals, meaning they cannot buy food, while insecurity has prevented them from migrating on their traditional routes to access water. The cash system and markets are not working effectively, while displacement meant many were unable to plant. The UN estimates that 1.2 million people in northern Mali are at risk of food insecurity.

Mali's likely future remains hard to predict even in the short term; in any scenario, progress is likely to be erratic and slow. Now that the immediate crisis has passed, Mali remains poorly governed, divided, and one of the poorest countries on earth. Without substantial international support for development, governance and peace building, as well as military capacity building, it will remain unstable and continue to provide a 'safe haven' for armed groups and drug traffickers.

*Laura Gordon has been working for a British NGO in Mali since April 2012 and is writing in her personal capacity. She is a member of Tonbridge and Malling Liberal Democrats.*

# A Conference Pair Brighton

There was no specific LIBG presence at the Liberal Democrat Spring Conference in Brighton (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> March), but several members were there and *interLib* camped on the LDEG stall. None of the motions before Conference were of great international note, but there were three fringe meetings, organised by the Friends of Turkey, BUILD (India) and the LD International Office, on the Middle East. I managed to attend the first two and hopefully reports will appear elsewhere. There was a small diplomatic presence, and a young man from the Congo, a student active in his host UK constituency, was anxious to learn more.

Paddy Ashdown, heading the LD General Election team, gave one of his tub-thumpers – probably the most motivational asset the Lib Dems have and Steve Webb gave an account of Pensions policy (as only he, or the late Conrad Russell could – an aside, Lloyd George effectively introduces State Pension policy in the UK, Sir William Beveridge refines it; do Liberals have a monopoly of clear thinkers in this field?) – however these are not international issues.

Nor particularly was Nick Clegg's speech, though I extract the following: *'Did you notice the bizarre mixed messages from the Conservative party after Eastleigh? An article in one Sunday newspaper, promising: no lurch to the right. Others splashed with the promise to pull the UK out of the European Convention on Human Rights. Something only one other European country has done: Belarus. The Conservatives would actively take away rights enjoyed by British citizens just to appease their backbenchers. Yesterday Theresa May made a speech arguing the option of leaving the Convention should remain 'on the table'. Well, I tell you, it won't be on the Cabinet Table so long as I'm sitting round it. Conference, make no mistake, no matter what the issue..., the Liberal Democrats will keep the Coalition firmly anchored in the centre ground.'*

I really regard European issues as domestic policy, but congratulating the Lib Dems on opposition to the illegal Iraq War a decade ago and as early converts to climate change doesn't advance international arguments. Clegg's conference gaff this time was on Secret Courts; a wiser leader would at the very least have kept his head down, if not having a natural instinct for the civil libertarian issue.

The Friends of Turkey's Fringe focussed on gender issues in *Muslim cultures and post-Feminism*. The novelist Elif Shafak was a very powerful speaker on that subject, urging, amongst other things, less stereotyping in the up-bringing of children, and for men to take a more sensitive role in child rearing at an earlier stage than she found typical in Turkish & Kurdish society.



*Elif Shafak speaking at the Friends of Turkey's fringe*

BUILD, the British United Indian Liberal Democrats, asked *How should the UK engage with emergent Euro Zone and emerging BRICS economies?* Again, they had a powerful panel, Sarah Ludford, a banker, an economist and an entrepreneur. The entrepreneur told us how only a few years ago he had gone to his bank and asked for a £10,000 loan to assist in setting up his business; they turned him down. The next day he went again and asked for a loan to buy a car; they gave him £20,000. What does this tell us about British banks and their attitude to enterprise, and particularly small business? He has, of course, now expanded into France, Poland & I forget where else, and will be setting up in the Czech Republic shortly. Much of the meeting focussed on Europe and the sheer stupidity of David Cameron in promising an in-out referendum.

**Stewart Rayment**

## Dundee

The Scottish Liberal Democrats' conference in Dundee in mid-March heard Sir Graham Watson twice in one afternoon. •He first shared a platform with fellow MEP George Lyon to answer delegates' questions ahead of the European Parliament elections next year. •Then he spoke on Liberal values in Europe at a fringe meeting organised by the Scottish branch of LIBG.

Graham was of course back in his native land. •His enviable facility in European languages was developed through an interpreting and translating degree at Edinburgh's Heriot-Watt University. •It is a pity that the fringe clashed with a event organised by the Better Together campaign preparing for the Scottish referendum in October 2014. •Understandably, many delegates wanted an up-to-date briefing on the "No" campaign, but they missed an impressive defence by Graham of a liberal Europe, very different from the misrepresentations in the bulk of the hostile British press. •I can testify that his blog, often composed on an aircraft at the end of a tiring week, gives a rounder and better informed picture. •But it, too, needs a wider audience.

*Willis Pickard, chairman of the Scottish branch, LIBG*

## 190<sup>th</sup> Liberal International Executive Committee – Beirut

Given current events in the region and the recent history of the Lebanon, there was some concern about the prospect of holding the 190th Executive Committee meeting in Beirut. Our Arab colleagues lobbied hard and fortunately Liberalism proved that it has the bottle to support those of us who are more beleaguered. It turns out that Beirut was probably one of the best Execs for a long time. LIBG and the Lib Dems were represented by Lord John Alderdice, LI Treasurer Robert Woodthorpe Browne, and Jonathan Fryer, a journalist veteran of many Lebanese conflicts.

At the invitation of the Future Movement/ al-Mustaqbal (LI Member) and under the patronage of the President of Lebanon, the Secretary General of the Future Movement, Ahmed Hariri welcomed delegates of the 190th Executive Committee to Beirut. Hariri greeted delegates from around the world to what was referred to as the 'heart of democracy in the Middle East'.

At the same event, LI President Hans van Baalen used his opening address to explain to Liberals present that Lebanon served as an example to the region while asking delegates to think on what they could do over the course of the Executive to alleviate the humanitarian catastrophe unfolding in neighbouring Syria.

Speaking at the Opening ceremony, Ahmed Said, a leader of the Egyptian opposition NSF and President of the Free Egyptian Party, stressed that Egyptians were moving through a transition and that the time of tyranny has passed; Egyptians, he said, 'want a culture of democracy'. Additionally, Minister Ouzzine of

Morocco reiterated this point by remarking that security and stability are central to Liberalism.

### **Lebanon's President welcomes LI Bureau**

At a special audience in the Palace near Beirut, the President of Lebanon H.E. Michel Suleiman welcomed the LI Bureauled by President Hans van Baalen MEP. As patron of the 190th LI Executive Committee, President Suleiman expressed particular interest in the strength and growth of LI in the Arab world. During the meeting President Suleiman pointed out: 'if democracy was not achieved in Palestine, there will be no real application of democracy in the Arab region, where moderations should be replacing extremism and intolerance.' He emphasized the officials ought to reconsider the issue of democracy and involve local communities: 'They must work on improving social education and culture systems, as that would push peace between peoples and anchor justice, along with the principle of freedom among the nations and populations.' The discussions focused on latest developments in the Arab region, and Syria in particular, stressing the importance of stopping the cycle of violence and finding a political solution. Van Baalen emphasized 'that the Middle East strongly needs Liberalism.'

### **190th Executive**

At the Administrative Session of the 190th Executive Committee Meeting, delegates from across the world expressed concern about recent developments in Russia and Ukraine and unanimously passed two political resolutions: Condemning the burning of books at Yabloko headquarters and the importance of fighting corruption in Ukraine.

The Executive Committee endorsed the cooption of high-level politicians from un-represented regions on the LI Bureau: Kasit Piromya, of the Democratic Party of Thailand (Asia); Ahmed Hariri of the Future Movement/ al-Mustaqbal, Lebanon (MENA); Edgar Herrera, Guatemala (Latin America).

One endorsement to full member status and three endorsements to observer member status were also voted. The Republican Party of Georgia is set to become a full member, while four parties -- Alliance Nationale pour les Comores, Comoros, United Democrats, Cyprus, Rassemblement National des Independents, Morocco and Partido de la Libertad Individual, Spain, were validated by the Executive as LI observer members. The status of these parties will need to be verified by the next Congress meeting.

The 191st Executive Committee of Liberal International will take place on 17-19 October in Antigua, Guatemala.

### **The Crisis in Syria**

“How should Liberals Deal with the Situation in Syria?” was the main question at the centre of the first panel at LI's 190th Executive Committee Meeting in Beirut which was hosted by the Future Movement (LI observer member). The panel was chaired by LI President Hans Van Baalen MEP and included as speakers Hassan Mneimneh, Former Lebanese Minister of Education, Lord Alderdice, Immediate Past President of LI and Kasit Piromya MP, Former Foreign Minister of Thailand. Former Minister Mneimneh spoke of the importance of the democratic changes that have occurred as a result of the Arab Spring cautioning that “democracy is not a recipe or a universal model that can be applied in the same way everywhere.”

Lord Alderdice traced the origins of the present-day conflict in Syria stressing that the West has actually contributed to the further isolation of Syria. “We should condemn Assad for what he has done to his own people, [but] we need to take some responsibility for not addressing some of these major regional issues properly for a long time” said Alderdice. Former Lebanese PM Sinoura stated that Western powers have no right to intervene while the Israel Palestine problem, caused by the West, is unresolved, as it is at the heart of all regional conflicts.

### **Liberalism and Traditional Values**

ALDE Party Vice-President Ramona Manescu MEP chaired the high-level panel on Liberalism and Traditional Values. In his intervention, Free Egyptians Party (LI Member) Leader Dr Ahmed Said stated that “Egypt will not progress if religiously inspired people continue to believe that personal interest is ‘haram’.” Former Lebanese Finance Minister Raya Al Hassan of the Future Movement (LI Member) continued: “The success of the BRICS in combining market capitalism with targeted government interventions is leading many to question economic Liberalism.

Economies need to be people-centred. Fostering the private sector as the main motor of growth ensures that society is open and used to challenge, change and difference.” Foreign Secretary of Catalonia Roger Albinyana spoke about the Dutch model of combatting populism: “We need to let populists prove that their ideas are untenable and often plainly illegal. Liberals can then deliver on reform in our societies' interest.” Member of the Tunisian Constituent Assembly from Joumhouri (LI Partner) Rym Mahjoub added: “We need to emphasize a new, tolerant and accepting sense of Islam. Tunisia must be an open, Islamic society that is comfortable with its own diversity. I am very much a modern, Tunisian, Muslim, Liberal woman.”

## **A Lively Fringe Sparks Debate**

Number of engaging side-panels and fringe events enriched the main conference and Executive Committee agenda in Beirut. The IFLRY (LI Full Member) panel, supported by D66 (Netherlands LI Full Member) and VVD (Netherlands LI Full Member) discussed the importance of raising the voice of young people. The panel saw Wissam Shibli, President of Future Youth, Lebanon, argue: “young people need to establish their own role & break the image of incapacity”.

In addition, the Ralf Dahrendorf Roundtable organised by the European Liberal Forum and International Network of Liberal Women (LI Full Member) held discussions centring on how to improve the position of women in politics and enterprise. One of the most important contributions here came from ALDE Party Vice President, Lousewies van de Laan, who said: “Changing the sexist perception of women in the media is essential to changing public mindset concerning women”.

During the ALDE Party (LI Full Member) discussion on Israel/Palestine, LI Past President, Lord Alderdice insisted that to improve the peace process the international community must “identify those Israeli's who want to make progress”.

Robert and Lib Dem Head of International Office Iain Gill co-chaired an event bringing together all of the political foundations, including the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, to set up a system to ensure co-operation and no duplication in democracy building projects in the Arab World and Africa, north and south of the Sahara. This will be co-ordinated by LI Political Officer Robert Wintraeken.

## **Arab Alliance for Freedom and Democracy holds General Assembly**

The Arab Alliance for Freedom and Democracy (LI cooperating organisation) held its General Assembly meeting in conjunction with LI's 190th Executive Committee Meeting in Beirut. Addressing the meeting Hans Van Baalen said: “Trying to unite in the power building process through democratic measures is very important in the Arab world. I hope that unity comes to the liberal parties in the MENA region and that we can all work together.” The main message of the meeting was that the achievements of the Arab Spring are more important than the failures as the Arab population has finally began the search for an Arab political and economic identity. Dr. Ahmed Said from the Free Egyptian Party (LI member) explained that Egypt is a good example of this as the Salvation Front showed that Egypt can have an opposition. Participants in the meeting agreed that proper legal and constitutional definition of a civil state needs to be defined in the future in order for the Arab Spring revolution to be successful.

## **RDR Storms to Victory in Cote d'Ivoire Elections**

President Alassane Ouattara's party, the Rassemblement des Republicains (LI Full Member) has won the largest number of seats of any political party in Cote d'Ivoire's local and regional elections. RDR secured one-third of all seats in the first elections of their kind for a decade; the poll was seen as a trial-run ahead of the presidential elections in 2015. P

uttering to rest concerns about violence following declarations, this election past with only minor protests from supporters of independent candidates, with the head of the UN mission in the country calling the ballot “free, transparent, calm and credible”.

Analysts have questioned the opposition party of former dictator Gbagbo's decision to boycott the elections, describing the move as “a major risk” and suggesting that without officials in parliament and local offices, it will be difficult for them take part in national debates.

## **Georgia**

LIBG Vice President Robert Woodthorpe Browne led a multinational delegation of Liberals on a fact finding trip to Georgia in May 2012, since which the Government of the increasingly autocratic Michael Saakashvili has been defeated at the polls by the Georgian Dream coalition of The billionaire Ivanshavili, which includes LI member party the Republicans and ALDE member the Free Democrats. The leader of the Republicans, David Upashvili, is the President of Parliament and the most highly respected figure in Georgian politics, while the leader of the Free Democrats is cleaning up, the Ministry of Defence. the LibDems helped the Republicans with the drafting of their manifesto, which became the programme of the new Government Robert returned to Tbilisi in April together with Lib Dem Project Officer Peter Lesniak on behalf of the Westminster Foundation to assess future needs of both sister parties. They visited several NGOs to get independent views of the trends in Georgian politics, which are largely positive. The previous ruling party is a member of the EPP who are waging a propaganda war against the new Government, which has put some former ministers under judicial investigation. Transparency International's booklet "Who Owned Georgia" should be downloaded by anyone interested in the Country.

Sadly, the Georgian Dream Party has joined Socialist International Robert had a meeting with the Prime Minister who said that for him "the Liberals are the best Party"! Georgia can have a great future, and British Liberals will certainly help.

**RWB**

# CONscription

filmpro presents:

A multimedia installation by  
Çağlar Kimyoncu



*A thought-provoking multimedia installation by Çağlar Kimyoncu exploring the callup to military service for people who don't 'fit the mould'.*

With conflicts going on worldwide, and struggles between liberalist and nationalist values, human rights, freedom, dignity and individual choice become urgent issues probably more than ever. Though these are particularly contentious where people are required to do national service, engendering politics of compliance and resistance, the questions raised are global and current still.

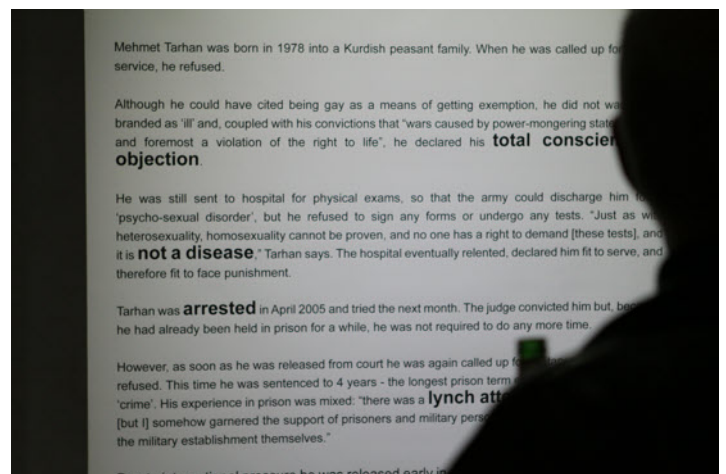
**CONscription** is in East London in May 2013 to encourage people from all sections of society to search for answers and ask questions: Three strangers meet in a military psychiatric ward. Each man has a story; each has his doubts about the others. All are being watched and judged. As they await their fate, they are called individually to see the doctor whose decision will influence the rest of their lives. The pressure builds, fear rises and secrets are revealed. Will they be exempted on medical grounds? Will they refuse outright? Or will they be forced to serve?

A military hospital room is reconstructed at the exhibition space, the Old Truman Brewery, where a four-channel film follows their story, placing the visitor in the position of an unseen protagonist, an intrigued spectator or simply a passer-by. Avoiding a judgmental or prescriptive approach, **CONscription** prompts the viewer to challenge assumptions, misconceptions around the position of the individual within the social system, and what it means for the two to be at odds.

Going even further, and in conjunction with the exhibition, a panel discussion on 15<sup>th</sup> May, the International Conscientious Objectors' Day, sets out to reveal some of the issues which don't currently have the same international profile as other human rights

questions. On this day special events are held in cities around the world to remember and draw attention to conscientious objectors worldwide, many of whom have been persecuted or imprisoned for their views.

The event brings together representatives from high profile anti-war organisations and individuals to share their expertise and experiences, exploring themes of our times, such as individual rights versus state coercion, art and politics and the relevance of non-violent strategies in a 'post 9-11' world. Thoughts and discussions will complement **CONscription** and feed into 'Conscientious Objectors, a series of collaborative research-based focusing on countries which use conscription and national service.



The exhibition takes place between 2 – 18 May 2013 at the Old Truman Brewery, E1 6QF.

**CONscription** is funded by the Arts Council England and produced by [filmpro ltd](http://filmpro.ltd)

Find out more: [caglark.com/conscription](http://caglark.com/conscription) and <https://conscientiousobjectors.wordpress.com>

© Photos credit: Zeynep Dagli





# Syrian conflict makes a mockery of the international community.

## Ajmal Masroor

I have been watching on the television screens the death and destruction of the Syrian people for nearly two years. I have been reading about the massacres committed by the Asad regime on the Syrian men, women and children all this time. I have feeling the pain at the core of my being and have been trying my level best to help these people. I decided to go into Syria to witness with my own eyes the misery of these people, to stand next to them in solidarity and most importantly to tell them that there are people out there who care.

The international community has been dithering over what to do, in the mean time over hundred thousand people have been killed, nearly five million have become refugees and towns and villages have razed to the ground. Only because Bashar Al-Asad would like to remain in power! I traveled with a very reputable charity called Syria Relief, who are working on the ground deep in the heart of Syria providing support and assistance to people. They do not promote making the refugees dependent on aid and handouts rather they should return to their homes as soon as possible to live a normal life.

I visited a few refugee camps located at the border region of Turkey and Syria. The condition in those camps were beyond description. There was no privacy for families as everyone lived in small tents and very close to each other. The tents were like a sauna during the summer and a freezer during the winter. There were piles of rubbish everywhere, human excrement, urine and bathroom water were running openly through the camps and children were playing around it, families placed their food very close to it - an open sewers infested with diseases that could easily spread and cause medical emergencies and epidemic.

There were many children ill in the camp with high temperature, stomach upset and rashes. One of the doctors in our group told us that these were signs of contagious diseases being spread due to the close proximity and unhygienic conditions. One mother who had there of her children unwell begged us to help her find cure for her children. She even said, "we do not need food any more, my children need medicine!" I later visited this ladies original village where her home was destroyed by Asad's brutal bombing raid of a civilian area. The locals told me five families perished in that bombing raid.

I have travelled through villages where rows upon rows of houses have been bombed and totally destroyed, its inhabitants buried underneath the rubbles. I was taken to a mosque, where the congregation along with the surrounding fifty houses were totally flattened. The outcome was barbaric, more families were killed. I was shown the graves of those who have died, they were laying buried in rows upon rows; one single row caught my attention, I counted more than thirty graves with the same the surnames. They all lay united in their graves, what binds them together is that they were killed all at the same time by the bombs of Asad.

Syria is a very beautiful country with rolling hills full of green vegetation, crops, flowers, fruits and plats. Its mountains are breathtaking decorated with rocks and stones and some completely filled by olive, fig, apricot, and pomegranate trees. It a county full of history, art and architecture of the ancient world and the modern world. Every square inch of the country reverberates with the stories of the Prophets from Old and New Testaments and the Quran. It is the historically one of the richest countries in the Middle East. Yet all that is being systematically destroyed and lost forever. This pained me greatly, for me, every bomb wipes away the history of the human civilisation.

No place in Syria is safe. While I was there, we rushed from our location when we heard low flying aircrafts whizzing past the skyline and then dropping bombs on a village while doing a summersault like a professional acrobat. The only difference is, this one killed and destroyed. We heard over the radio that a refugee camp had been bombed and many people have been dead and injured. We rushed over there to find twenty injured and eleven dead, all of them women and children. Why would anyone bomb a refugee camp? Why would anyone target women and children?

I came to the hospital that was treating some of the injured. I saw a four year old boy, the same age my son, lying on a stretcher, blood all over his body, head bandaged and looked scared and dazed. The doctor told me to not tell the boy that his older sister who was ten years old had been killed in the bombing. I stood there crying my eyes out. I imagined my son who is four and my daughter who is seven. This boy had a small pellet from a cluster bomb that had lodged itself in his liver, if the doctors operate on him, he may not survive and if do

not operate on him he may die. The doctors looked at us helpless and speechless! You have to be a real monster to perpetrate such heinous crimes against your own people!

I visited a school that was bombed. The caretaker of the school was killed and in the place where he body was torn to pieces I saw several pieces of his body parts scattered around. It was a gruesome sight that I would never forget! His blood was still on the ground, red and evidence of life not that long ago. I wanted to cry again but my eyes felt dry and my stomach felt churning. What could I do to help these people?

Our inaction and delayed response has a serious consequence. A large number of freelance fighters from various parts of the world are gathering in Syria. Currently they are doing their own thing and not causing too much trouble, but soon, with the rising number, they could cause instability and extremism within the Syrian youth. This would have a knock on effect on our countries. Free Syrian Army is still a good ally for us and for the Syria people. We should support them and I would call for arming them too. Asad will not survive even a month if the opposition had the resources.

I travelled to various villages and town, I saw people in all conditions including people residing in caves, for them mountains caves were safer than their houses. I felt angry that Russia and China could bully the world to inaction. I felt aggrieved that this problem in Syrian is so easily resolved that it did not need much effort on the part of the international community yet we have failed to do much. What the Syrians need is political solution. They do not need our handouts. They need long term rehabilitation programme so that they can get back to their towns and villages to start a normal life again. They need help and support to restart their life, rebuild their homes, schools and business.

I believe Syria will be free soon but the price they pay would be huge. We will pay a huge price too if we stay silent about it. You can donate for rehabilitation of Syrian people and you can lobby your MP for the government to help resource the opposition.

*Ajmal Masroor is a broadcaster and fought Bethnal Green & Bow for the Liberal Democrats at the last general election.*

# Reviews

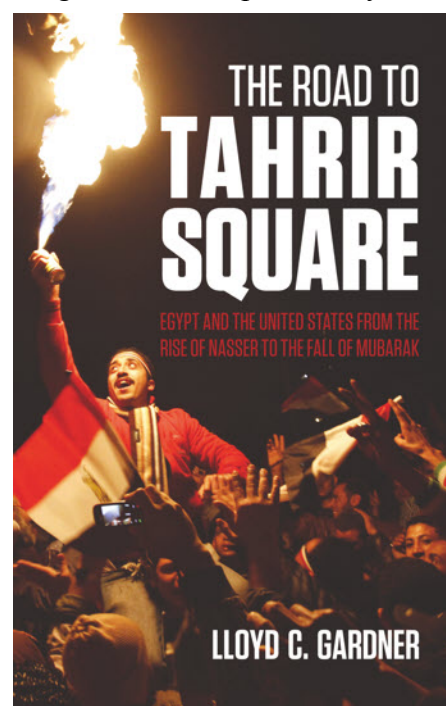
## **The Road to Tahrir Square by Lloyd C. Gardner Saqi 2011**

Unless you read the subtitle 'Egypt and the United States from the Rise of Nasser to the Fall of Mubarak' is suspect that this might not be the book many of its buyers were expecting it to be. They will however, be pleasantly informed, although I suspect it may have had a different working title before the events in Tahrir Square gave it a far sexier one.

Gardner, who is primarily a diplomatic historian at Rutgers University, cut his teeth on the Vietnam wars, and is amongst those who recognise that the USA is an imperialist power just like those its diplomacy sought to overcome (chiefly Britain and France). Many Americans remain in denial of this, or express surprise when you put it to them.

Basically America screwed up in Egypt and we have yet to see how the latest round plays out (and where their dead hand lies). They were probably drawn in deeper and sooner than they expected – stretched after the Second World War, they seemed to hope that the British might hold the line in Egypt. This proved infeasible, notwithstanding the bizarre incident of the Suez crisis. Gardner doesn't quite answer the question of whether American policy drove Nasser into Soviet arms; certainly support for Israel bedevils the USA to this day in the Middle East, and the tail can too easily wag the dog.

Having lost Nasser, US initiatives switch to Saudi Arabia; George McGovern presciently raised the



question 'Do we build strength against communism by contributing American tax dollars to perpetuate this kind of feudal despotism?' Fifty years later, an apply this almost any regime in the region, and the answer is plainly 'Yes' though we've yet to see how, as I've said, the dead hand plays out post Tahrir Square. However, the impact that leads to Tahrir Square is obvious; back in Egypt we find that the Military veto on contracts in the 1990s meant that under Mubarak 'instead of fostering a rising middle class, the industrialization that took place was of a semi-feudal nature.' Add to this the shortcomings of CIA practices post 9-11, which generate more anti-Americanism and the returns from the Egyptian investment become less attractive to the USA. Dennis Blair, Obama's first head of national intelligence asserted 'Not only did these intelligence relationships interfere with our ability to understand opposition forces, but in the eyes of citizens of those countries they often associated the US with the tools of oppression.' Hence Osama bin Ladin's argument that the only way to bring about change in the Middle East was to 'attack the head of the serpent', the USA.

However, come Tahrir Square and it seems to be the case that American purse strings do dictate the behaviour of Egypt's military. One to one contacts between senior US and Egyptian military personnel seem to have caused restraint on behalf of the latter. Does America get as much small change from its investment in Israel? Maybe the Democrats have greater pragmatism in dealing with these challenges than we might expect from the monster raving Republican party. Defense Secretary Robert Gates put it thus, 'many of the regimes affected have been longstanding, close allies of the US, ones we continue to work with as critical partners in the face of common security challenges like al Qaeda & Iran, even as we urge them to reform... our desire for democratic values to take hold... may be many years or decades off.'

Post Tahrir Square One, Admiral Mike Mullen rated US funding of Egypt's military as a 'relatively inexpensive investment'. As Mubarak had warned Bush, popular elections led to the Muslim Brotherhood in power, which it abuses. The military remains the best card in America's hand, but the steady flow of press releases out of the Egyptian government relating to the IMF etc., suggest some shuffling of the pack. Egypt conventionally leads Arab opinion, and Gardner tells us that the stakes for the US are greater than those of Iraq and Afghanistan, concluding on Kissenger's admission 'that the Egyptian revolution requires a new definition of American leadership and American national interest is indeed inescapable.'

**Stewart Rayment**

Grayson Perry has come a long way since his *Cycle of Violence* – a MEGA exhibition at the British Museum, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*, in 2011, uniting the many cultures found therein and reminding us that there is one race – the human race, followed by a compelling documentary on British culture in 2012. To top that @las republished his 1992 angst-ridden *Cycle of Violence*, written & drawn when the responsibilities of life were crowding in on an uncertain artistic future.

In his preface to the new edition Grayson Perry notes the 'unwitting prescience' of his tale. Green causes have moved up the political agenda and 'to top it all' a British cyclist named Bradley had been in fourth place in the 2009 Tour de France, and 'crashed out' in 2011. His 2012 triumphs were too late for the press. But what prescience for 2013? Did Perry capture the mood of the electorate towards the Lib Dems?



Like many graphic novels, not for the squeamish (sexual violence & murder throughout) but it has a happy ending - 2023 – a greener, psychologically adjusted planet... we're working on it.  
**Stewart Rayment**

# The Diplomatic Reception

Sandra Lawman (BTP Advisers) with our newest Diplomat, Akok Manyuat Madut, Counsellor from South Sudan.



Philip Goldenberg, Asta Skaisgirytė Liauškienė (Ambassador, Lithuania), and Miguel A Solano Lopez (Ambassador, Paraguay)



Corps Diplomatique



**Bernard H. Sande (High Commissioner, Malawi), Lynne Featherstone, Bernard Ntahiraja (Chargé d'affaires a.i. Burundi).**



Liliana Reasor, Peter Lesniak (International Programme Officer, Liberal Democrats), Alina Bowling (International Office, Liberal Democrats)



Khaled Al Duwaisan (Ambassador of Kuwait), Simon Hughes, Prof. Paul E.M. Reynolds (Global Economic Policy Institute), Abdul Aziz Alhimai (Ambassador, Oman), Asta Skaisgirytė Liauškienė (Ambassador, Lithuania)

*As Wendy says, the Diplomatic Reception on 26<sup>th</sup> February was a great success, the more so for Lynne Featherstone's recent promotion as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for International Development. Sandra Lawman and BTP Advisers are thanked for their support.*