



2018 no.3 £6.00 (free to members)

# INTERLIB

Journal of the Liberal International British Group



Phil Bennion & Tamara Dancheva at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy

**SYRIA YEMEN OXFAM**

# EVENTS

**20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> April** Scottish Liberal Democrats Conference. MacDonald Aviemore Resort

**23<sup>rd</sup>-27<sup>th</sup> April** Study Session “You(th) in the <3 of Human Rights Education”  
European Youth Centre Strasbourg, France

**21<sup>st</sup> May** LIBG Forum – Chinese Influence in Africa, Who Benefits? NLC 6.30pm for 7.00pm

**9<sup>th</sup> July** LIBG AGM

**15<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> September** Liberal Democrat’s Conference. Brighton

**13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> October** Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru/Welsh Liberal Democrat Autumn Conference, Marine Hotel, Aberystwyth

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*InterLib is published by the Liberal International (British Group). Views expressed therein are those of the authors and are not necessarily the views of LI(BG), LI or any of its constituent parties.*

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Photographs: Stewart Rayment, Helen Lackner, Phil Bennion, Mark Smulian.



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# **Syria: if WW3 does come about it will be comforting to know what led to it.**

## **Paul Reynolds.**

How significant is the 14th April US-French-British attack on Syria ? Is it merely a face-saving tactic for domestic audiences following premature threats from President Trump, or is it a precursor to war between the West and Russia, with Chinese and Iranian support - in effect the start of WW3 ?

In my attempt to summarise the recent events leading up to this attack, I intend to shed some light on this question, and provide some key context for UK policy.

Since, with Russian help, the Syrian Assad regime gained the upper hand in the conflict, their tactics have followed a pattern. Their urgent priority has clearly been to brutally regain jurisdiction of territory under the control of armed rebel groups.

The primary tactic has been broadly indiscriminate bombing and the use of (or threat of) chlorine-based weapons. The method established is to create panic among civilians and get them to flee, to the extent that all remaining people in rebel-held areas can be considered to be armed militants. This is then followed by managed evacuations.

The approach has been largely successful for Syria and the Russians. In the western part of Syria where most of the population resides there are only a few pockets of resistance remaining.

The exception is Rojava in the north east, which is largely Kurdish. The Rojava Kurds have played a canny game in the conflict, first gaining more autonomy from Assad on the basis that 'we are not your problem' and then later warming up relations with the USA, first by fighting against IS, as then as the Assad regime sought to re-establish their previous level of control, fighting regime supporting militias. The Rojava Kurds also faced increased threats from Turkey as President Erdogan moved politically closer to Russia.

The partial success of the Russians in Syria has created a quiet political earthquake in the Middle East. Even Saudi Arabia has established cordial relations with Russia, and antagonism over oil prices and supply has turned into cooperation. Despite the April 14th bombing, Russia matters in the Middle East now. More importantly for Western policy, Turkey has 'cut loose' politically. It is in the process of acquiring hi-tech Russian defence equipment and running down Western assets in Turkish bases. Turkey may even leave NATO. This is the 'Western' problem, causing political mayhem in Washington DC.

The West has had no politically comfortable options if seeking to reverse the 'earthquake'. Only three have been subject to serious contingency planning.

One has been to revive the abandoned plans to attack the Syrians and Russians in the manner of Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and Kosovo. Syria is different because of Russia. In a real conflict Western casualties would be in their tens or even hundreds of thousands, not just the few thousands from those other conflicts. Western powers have limited information about the efficacy of Russian defences, if fully deployed. Unlike those other conflicts victory would be uncertain. The public appetite for these prior wars of choice has clearly been based on an assumption of very limited casualties. Worse still, the Pentagon knows very well any early military success by Russia against the US would have far-reaching implications for US exceptionalism and its unipolar assumptions.

The second option has been very extensive strikes against Syrian and Russian airfields and other assets, but only to put a halt to the 'exodus from rebel enclaves' approach. The benefit of this option is that 'a signal will

be sent' and the Syrian government's capacity likely degraded. The 'exodus' approach might even be halted, but it doesn't solve the underlying problem that the brutal Assad regime will still be in power, and Russian influence in the Mid East still higher.

The third option has been to make limited strikes for domestic western consumption and as a smokescreen for a further step up in support for anti-regime groups in Syria, especially the Rojava Kurds and Islamist groups, so as to buy a seat at the negotiating table, when and if the time comes. This option carries an enhanced risk that Turkey would leave NATO; a devastating loss for Western 'reach' in the Middle East, which is exactly what a military escalation would be designed to prevent.

A curious hybrid of these three dire options resulted on April 14. The initial Trump rhetoric in the preceding week suggested option one. The Trump rhetoric around the attack suggested option two. However the actual attack was militarily closer to option three, showing how much the US hawks such as Mike Pompeo and John Bolton were pulled back from a potential war with Russia by relative pragmatists like Defence Secretary Mattis.

What lies behind this political process and how stable is US policy now ?

By March 2018 Washington DC was implacably divided around the third option. This was as much about the importance of Turkey as it was about Syria and Russia. Those in support of gaining a territorial foothold by further arming and training the Kurds (for a new 'border force') prevailed, and keeping Turkey in NATO was downgraded as a core aim. Predictably this was followed by a Turkish quasi-annexation of the Afrin Kurdish enclave, and much of the Turkish-speaking parts of Northern Syria. Turkey's rapprochement with Russia continued.

This caused a fightback against the approach. Being unable to establish a stable policy, by the end of March President Trump lost patience and declared that US will withdraw from Syria and shift to containment of Russia and allies in the region.

That all changed with the alleged chemical attack on Douma on April 7th. The Russians denied it, and claimed it was faked to scupper Trump's withdrawal declaration. These claims and counter claims however are not the point. There have been many such chemical attacks and in any case are barrel bombings and the broader 'exodus' tactic any less brutal ? The success of the Syrian/Russian brutality in regaining territory, and its implications for Mid East regional politics is really the point.

So the 'sticking plaster' nature of the attack on April 14 in the end reflected the absence of consensus in Washington DC. After the dust has settled, the hawks will be back. A wider war in Syria and with Iran will be back on the agenda.

For the UK, going along with a tokenistic attack and bypassing a UK Parliament where too many questions would be asked, is the easy part; the UK must show willing if it wants a Brexit trade deal.

The real test will be when and if the hawks prevail over the pragmatists in Washington DC. The US will then find out if, from their perspective, the Brits are vertebrates, and will also find out how effective Russian and Iranian military systems really are. The UK parliament will not only require a say in such an eventuality, but must also get a proper grip of what is really at stake and why.

### ***Paul Reynolds***

*Paul Reynolds is an independent adviser on international relations, economics, and senior governance. He is an elected member of Federal International Relations Committee and of the Liberal International British Group executive*

# Vince Cable sets out Liberal Democrat approach to talk of military strikes on Syria

We cannot stand by and ignore the horrific scenes from Syria. We condemn the Russian Government for vetoing a full UN investigation into chemical weapons use in Syria. The Syrian Government must allow full and unfettered access for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

The use of chemical weapons is a clear red line, and there must be consequences for crossing it. Britain is an outward facing nation, willing to play our part in upholding international law. The Government should share with Parliament the evidence it has of the Syrian Government's involvement, and that of their Russian backers, in last weekend's attack.

The Government must present the objectives of any proposed action to Parliament. A unilateral response by any country, outside of a wider strategy, without allies is not the way forward. There must be a debate and vote in the House of Commons ahead of any military action.

11<sup>th</sup> April 2018

In a later email to Liberal Democrat party members, Vince Cable added:

*In the next few days, it is possible the Government will ask MPs to decide on potential military action in Syria. This is not a decision we will ever make lightly.*

*As Leader, I want to be clear with you how I and our group in Parliament will make such a decision.*

*Firstly, in advance of any debate or vote, the Government should share with Parliament what evidence it has of the Syrian Government's involvement, and that of their Russian backers, in last weekend's attack.*

*Secondly, the Government must present the objectives of any proposed action to Parliament. Any proposed action should be targeted at reducing the capacity of the Syrian regime to repeat these attacks.*

*Thirdly, any response should be on a multilateral basis. A unilateral response by any country, outside of a wider strategy, without the support of their allies is not the way forward.*

*And of course, there MUST be a full and frank debate and vote in the House of Commons ahead of any military action.*

*We will judge any military action the Government proposes against these tests.*

*This is not a decision we will make lightly, or without the fullest consideration of the evidence. If you would like to share your views on this with me, please email [leader@libdems.org.uk](mailto:leader@libdems.org.uk).*

Such issues often see two contrasting factors pulling Liberal Democrats in different directions – a belief in the need to uphold international humanitarian standards and an aversion to violence. Often the two go together. Sometimes, especially in the face of a violent dictator, they do not. Hence the party both supporting western military intervention in cases such as former Yugoslavia, Liberia and to remove the Iraqis after the invasion of Kuwait, but also opposing it – most notably several years after the Kuwait invasion when Iraq was in the focus for claimed weapons of mass destruction.



That latter incident has laid a heavy shadow over any subsequent talk of military intervention. It shouldn't, however, be such an all-encompassing shadow that it makes us forget the overall success of military intervention in places such as the Ivory Coast or indeed the lesson of Rwanda. The problem wasn't western military forces being sent to Rwanda. It was that in the face of genocide taking place around them they did all but nothing. The subsequent apology from the Belgian government should always be remembered as a guard against the glib certainties that 'military intervention always makes things worse'.

They neither always work nor always fail. If you really want to make the right decision, you need far more attention to the specific circumstances than that.

**Mark Pack**

<https://www.markpack.org.uk/154510/vince-cable-sets-out-lib-dem-approach-to-talk-of-military-strikes-on-syria/>

BBC News on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> April

[Interviewer]: We can get the reaction now of Sir Vince Cable, who's the Leader of the Liberal Democrats who joins us from our London news room. Thank you very much for waiting on, hanging on, talking to us this morning. Of course, you've been listening to the press conference the Prime Minister has been giving, Theresa May, at Downing street. Would you like to give us your reaction?

[Vince Cable]: Well, first of all, just to acknowledge that British service personnel are involved and at risk and I think that's an important preface to any discussion. I'm disappointed and worried that the Prime Minister hasn't sought political approval in Parliament. I think, actually, it stems from weakness rather than strength, a fear that they might lose the vote. I think there does have to be a proper debate and vote when we reconvene. I'm a bit concerned this morning about the confusion of objectives. We've had General Mattis in America saying this is a one-off shot, but we had the press conference a few minutes ago with the possibility of continuing strikes if this problem continues.

Of course, the other overarching strategic consideration is that we are very much on the coattails of an erratic American President, the things he's been saying this morning have been fairly emollient about trying to rebuild relations with Russia and even Iran but may be saying something else this afternoon.

Having said all that, the one area where I do think we have common ground with the Prime Minister, it does seem absolutely clear that the Syrian Government have used chemical weapons, the Russian propaganda to try to defuse that argument, I do not buy that for a moment.



*Vince Cable on BBC News*

Vince Cable spoke on other occasions including:

Channel 4 News Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> April

<https://www.channel4.com/news/vince-cable-on-syria-military-action-there-has-to-be-prior-approval-by-parliament>

Good Morning Britain Friday 13<sup>th</sup> April

<https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/945488/Good-Morning-Britain-Kate-Garraway-Vince-Cable-called-out-Syria-war-debate>

London Broadcasting Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> April

<https://www.lbc.co.uk/radio/presenters/andrew-castle/sir-vince-cable-jeremy-syria-airstrikes/>

Talk Radio (You Tube) Monday 16<sup>th</sup> April

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3PKM9xmAo4>

Speaking in the House of Commons debate on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> April Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesperson Jo Swinson said that the fact there has been no civilian casualties shows the good work by the armed forces.

She said there was a "vacuum" in not speaking to Parliament before the attack took place, and now the UK needs to get a "wider international buy-in" in order to get far-reaching support for work in Syria.

Ms Swinson said that there are "genuine concerns" about the US president, relating to his temperament and the ability of the prime minister, or sensible people within the White House to communicate to President Trump. "Anyone who says this is simple, and that there is an obvious explanation, fail to understand the complexity of what needs to be done in the country."

BBC News Monday 16<sup>th</sup> April

## LIBG Chair Phil Bennion comments:

My own views on Syria in a nutshell:

- 1) We should not be starting from here. Previous uses of chemical weapons have gone unpunished. However, some response necessary to regain control. Damage of impunity done but efforts necessary to recover the situation.
- 2) Attacks seem to have met the aim of being significant enough to be noticed without being sufficient to elicit a Russian retaliation. However, this was highly risky as Paul Reynolds points out.
- 3) There was ample time to consult Parliament in an emergency recall and this should have been done in this case.
- 4) I oppose the Corbyn proposal of legislating that military engagement be brought before parliament as impractical in operational terms.

# Blood on Britain's Hands.

## Paul Reynolds

The British public have mostly heard of the war in Syria, now back on news screens after the bombing of Eastern Ghouta. Few however have heard of the equally brutal war in Yemen, barely two hours flight to the south. When the Yemen war does filter through to the mainstream media it is often characterised as a proxy war between Saudi Arabian Sunni Muslims and Iranian Shia Muslims, played out by local rivals. The rivals are commonly described as the 'recognised' Saudi-backed Sunni government led by President Hadi, on whose behalf the Saudi blockade and bombing is being conducted, against Shia Muslim 'Houthi' rebels backed with Iranian weapons and cash for control of Yemeni territory.

Dig a little deeper and the standard expert explanation is that following the military survival of the Assad regime in Syria with Russian help and Iranian support, the Iranian government is in pursuit of military expansion across the Middle East, including in Yemen, and must be stopped. This is the stated logic for Western (and British) support for the Saudi bombing and blockade and resultant human carnage, mass cholera outbreak and child starvation.

One should be wary of such overarching geopolitical rationales for war. The US entered the Vietnam war to prevent Chinese communist expansion in SE Asia. The overarching theory glossed over the fact that the Vietnamese and Chinese had antagonistic relations, and it inadvertently precipitated the rise of the China backed communist Pol Pot regime in neighbouring Cambodia after bombing the border areas - the opposite of what was intended.

### ENDURING CATASTROPHE

To avoid a similarly enduring catastrophe for Western policy over Yemen, it is necessary to attempt an impartial look at the events that led up to the war. This is important because of a wider danger. If politicians buy the 'Iranian expansion' narrative wholesale, for many of them the only remedy if there is an impasse in Yemen will be a full-scale war with Iran, which will almost certainly draw in Russia and China. There are already enough people chafing at the bit for a war with Iran, for a variety of reasons.

Yemen is the Middle East's poorest country. It emerged badly in the 20th century from the colonial era, having endured Ottoman control in the north and west, and experienced British control fanning out from Aden in the south and the east. The independent Yemeni Republic formed in 1962 excluded the British Protectorate in Aden and southern Yemen, which subsequently became an independent Marxist state in 1967 with Soviet influence and money, riding on a wave of anti-colonial feeling. The current Yemeni state resulted from the merger of southern and northern Yemen in 1990, as Soviet money dried up following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In July 1978 the military governor of Ta'izz, Colonel Ali Abdullah Saleh Afash became President of the Yemen Arab Republic (northern Yemen) and the following month showed his approach to power by executing 30 potential military rivals.

President Saleh, became the new president of united Yemen after the 1990 merger. By then he was already known for his 'hoarding' of economic assets and for controlling the military and government via economic favours and chilling threats. He was a classic 'strong man' favoured by colonial states; able to hold the tribes together, and to enforce an international business deal; not unlike Hafez Assad in Syria with the Soviets, or Ben Ali in Tunisia with the French.

Saleh, a Zaidi Muslim (closer to Shia Islam than Sunni), had a 'hot and cold' relationship with the northern Houthi tribes, who are mostly Zaidi. When disquiet among the population about Saleh's kleptocratic approach to government led to Houthis mobilising against him in 2009 and 2010, Saleh appealed to the US



for help. Saleh took advantage of the anti-terrorist focus of Washington DC by describing the Houthis as affiliated to Al Qaeda, (who had been blamed on the USS Cole bombing). Despite the fact that this was plainly inaccurate, the US Congress largely bought the narrative about the Houthis and stepped up aid and military support to their ally in Yemen.

However, the Arab Spring protests from Houthis and other groups in Aden, Ta'izz, Mukhala, San'aa and elsewhere continued and grew to large scale demonstrations in major cities. In January 2011, 16,000 people braved the prospects of a violent reaction from Saleh's security apparatus and demonstrated in the capital San'aa. Largely peaceful protests continued, but by end-March violence had spread.

By the summer of 2011 Saleh had left for Saudi Arabia for treatment after being injured on an attack on the presidential palace. Prior to Saleh's exit the US and the Saudis, and the rest of the GCC, had negotiated a deal for Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, Saleh's long-term ally, to become interim President. A year after the demonstrations started, the deal was extended to President Saleh to step down permanently and go into exile in Saudi Arabia, with immunity from prosecution.

While Saleh's exit was to an extent cheered, none of the rest of the protestors demands were met; a more democratic and decentralised constitution, less corruption, rule of law, more jobs, and above all removal of absurd restrictions on small scale businesses, farming and trading.

It wasn't just the lack of reform promises that muted the cheers. President Hadi was known as a Saleh loyalist without the strength or tribal/popular base to establish stable government or pursue demanded for reforms; an impression reinforced when it became clear he has quickly fallen under the close control of the Saudis, who were dead against democratisation in Yemen.

This was a particular problem for the Houthis, who had been allies of the Saudis in addressing tribal conflicts on the Yemen-Saudi border, but by then had antagonistic relations with the Saudi regime - who feared Zaidi Islam might lead to growing Shia Iranian influence on the Arabian Peninsula.

In foreign ministries in the region there was much 'rolling of eyes' when Hadi became president. Predictably, the coherence of government quickly began to atrophy. From the summer of 2011 to autumn of 2014 the situation deteriorated, with large parts of the army either siding with Houthi forces or joining up with ex-president Saleh's security team against Hadi. Parts of the country controlled by the official government, began to shrink and quickly were reduced to small enclaves.

By autumn 2014 the Houthis and Saleh loyalists, with large parts of the army taking their US weapons with them, had taken control of the capital San'aa. Hadi's official government forces were quickly confined to Aden and other parts of the south, at least partly because he was seen by many as supporting a foreign power in bombing his own country.

The US has reportedly become unpopular too, not only because of the targeting support to the Saudis but also because of popular perceptions about civilian deaths from American drone strikes on Al Qaeda suspects. The Saudis launched their pre-emptive attack on Yemen in March 2015, using air strikes and a blockade in an attempt to pre-empt potential future Iranian influence.

Despite the official US position in 2015 that Iran has had little influence over the Houthis, and that there was scant evidence of Iranian weapons and money transfers to Yemen, there was nevertheless support from the US for the Saudi attacks. Other more anti Iran parts of the US administration had set up a team to advise the Saudis on targeting and strategy, in Riyadh, and had already sent covert special forces into key areas in Yemen in order to assist in the 'pre-emption'.

Three years later the war continues. There have been more than 10,000 fatalities. As at January 2018 there were more than one million reported cases of cholera and more than 2,500 related deaths. The already weakened economy has all but collapsed and the UN reports that two million children are suffering from acute malnutrition, with thousands reportedly dying of starvation already.

The US reduced its targeting operation in Saudi Arabia after the prospect of war crimes proceedings emerged, arising from the air strikes. The UAE, pursuing its commercial interests, has backed militias linked to separatists in the south who have taken control of Aden and edged out any forces allied to Hadi. Government control in Yemen is now confined to just a few small patches.

How do you stop a war designed to prevent something that was unlikely to happen in the first place? How do you militarily support a government administration and army which is reduced to a rump and very unlikely ever to take control of the country? How do you address the shifting tribal allegiances which have filled much of the governance vacuum? How do you address armed Islamic forces controlling large swathes of land in the mountains - something a decade of unpopular drone strikes from the US was supposed to prevent.

## **INDEFINITE WAR**

There are only two overall choices. One is the Afghanistan approach - allow the bombing and civil and wars to continue indefinitely, with vague military and political aims, hoping that something will turn up - other than waves of refugees. The other is to find a pathway to peace., which will require negotiations between internal factions, and between the external belligerents. A Saudi ceasefire will be required sooner rather than later.

If there are such steps to peace, and an attempt at addressing the original grievances of the early 2011 demonstrations, it is unlikely that it can be led by the US. This is not just due to the US involvement in the bombing, but because the new US secretary of state Mike Pompeo is a strident advocate of war against Iran and is known for promoting the idea of an Iranian threat in Yemen, Iraq and Syria. For peace in Yemen we may have to wait for a new US administration, or a newly active EU, Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League working with the UN.

Should Iran be a part of international negotiations ? There might be folly in this. Iran's involvement is likely to involve Teheran formulating demands. To put it bluntly, why give concessions to Iran to stop them from doing something they are likely not doing anyway? However an approach to Iran is required, for example to address objectively allegations they are the source of missiles fired by militant groups into Saudi Arabia and out to warships. Thus the institutional challenge for starting and managing a pathway to peace, represents a mountain to climb, but given the current death toll, it must be attempted.

Achieving peace is never easy. In the longer run, will allowing the brutality and carnage to continue, with its many unpredictable consequences for the countries of the region, be easier than achieving peace now? Almost certainly not.

### ***Paul Reynolds***

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# Yemen Forum

## **Dr Alan George (King's College, London)**

Paul Reynolds' Coronation Street analogy is most apt, particularly in the context of non-Yemeni players (in introduction, Paul had said that understanding Yemen in the present moment was like trying to tune in to an episode of Coronation Street without any knowledge of its previous 50 years):

Saudi Arabia & the United Arab Emirates (UAE, frequently referred to as Emiratis), leading a coalition of nine countries.

The USA

Iran (though I would be careful about the extent of actual involvement)

The UK & France, supporting the Coalition

China (may become more important).

Saudi Arabia is currently in conflict with the Shia Houthi grouping. The Houthi's Shia is not as that of Iran, in many respects it is closer to Sunni Islam, a nationalist grouping from the north-west of Yemen. Saudi Arabia alleges that Iran backs the Houthi, so the struggle is part of the wider regional rivalry between those countries and the internal Shia-Sunni split. Saudi Arabia also has local concerns, their Asir province has a fluid border with Yemen and they worry about the Houthis as a threat to that province. The presence of Al Qaeda and Islamic State associates is anathema to the Saudis, largely in the northern Hadramawt.

The UAE goes further, opposing more moderate Islamists such as the local affiliate of the Moslem Brotherhood or Islah linked factions who support the internationally recognised government.

The UAE is in the south and Aden, the Saudi's in the north west. They support militias opposing the Houthis but little else. Saudi Arabia supports the president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, but the UAE has its doubts, through his failure to consolidate in the south and his links with Islamists in the north.



*Dr Alan George*

In Aden and South Yemen there is support for local independence, the Southern Movement. Openly the Southern Transitional Council (STC) has been formed by the former governor of Aden, who had been sacked by Hadi. The STC demanded that Hadi dismiss the government, because of mismanagement and also because of Islamists within it. The STC surrounded the presidential palace in Aden and took control of the city after two days. The UAE supports the secessionists in Aden, though the implications of this are unclear.

The USA is primarily concerned with anti-terrorism, mainly from afar, by drones, but from 2015 elite forces have been in action on the back of UAE forces. This is controversial; it is hard to deny that the USA is not part of the Saudi-led coalition and is also supportive of the UAE. The USA, and the UK provide intelligence and arms.

Qatar was in the coalition but left in June 2016 after a spat with the Gulf Cooperation Council. They had tried to mediate between parties but are no longer an effective player.

Iran – the allegation that the Houthi were an Iranian proxy was hollow until quite recently but was stepped up after the 2015 Coalition. Both Iran and Hezbollah are aiding the Houthis in the field, but it is a low priority, more an opportunity to test the Saudis.

The UN – ineffectual

The Quint – USA, UK, Saudi Arabia, UAE & Oman

China – growing influence. A Chinese frigate evacuated foreign nationals in 2015. China delivered aid to

Aden, supporting Hadi. Their long-term aim is political stability. Initially they had supported the Houthi because they thought they might provide that. China had persuaded their ally, Pakistan, not to join the coalition. Since late 2015 the Houthi have lost ground and from January 2016 China has supported the Hadi government.

China has a naval base at Djibouti and has the One Belt, One Road project as a modern Silk Road, Aden is a branch of this and will be an increasing part of Chinese considerations.

### **Helen Lackner (SOAS)**

Dr Lackner said that she was going to cover the internal situation, the killing of ex-president Ali Abdallah Saleh, and the prospects for the future. She noted that the 27<sup>th</sup> March would be the 3<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the internationalisation of the conflict.

In the wake of the Tunisian revolution, the Arab Spring, in February 2011, Yemen faced a national uprising against president Ali Abdallah Saleh. This was one of the largest and most popular uprisings of the Arab Spring. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mediated after a failed assassination attempt, and power was handed to former vice-president Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. By 2012 the transitional regime had failed, leading to an alliance between Saleh and the Houthi and a threat to take over much of the country. Saudi Arabia has intervened since 2015, but the war is largely a stalemate. The Saleh-Houthi alliance was based on having the same enemy, but otherwise participants hated each other. It collapsed in December 2017 and the Houthi assassinated Saleh on 4<sup>th</sup> December 2017.



***Helen Lackner***

The Houthi are now fully in control of most of the former Yemen (as opposed to South Yemen). The Houthi run very much a police state, very unpleasant. They took control of Sana'a. International sources of income stopped in 2014, so they tax anything that moves. Sana'a is now the customs post, despite being inland. Most of those under Houthi rule are unhappy with the situation, but the Houthi think that they are winning. In 2004 they controlled next to nothing, now they have killed Saleh and control most of the north west of Yemen. But killing Saleh was not necessarily a wise move.

There is a regrouping of people related to Saleh – his party, the General People's Congress (GPC), other Islamist groups and northern tribes. At a military level, this regrouping will be a major force, and will impact on Hadi's regime, which is also from a GPC background. This may account for secret negotiations with the Houthi.

The outcome of three years of war has been a decline of GDP of 47%. 79% of the population are poor, only the war profiteers are not poor. But there are practical agreements on both sides, you can still get fresh Saudi dairy produce in supermarkets in Sana'a. Sending money is difficult. 80% of the population needs humanitarian assistance, but only 30% are targeted by the UN. Yemen also has a cholera crisis, too which has been added diphtheria. Although the Saudi Arabian Coalition has done well in maintaining support in the West, it is losing its reputation on the humanitarian front, and has set up a rival system to that of the UN, whilst claiming to cooperate.

The Saudis want to get out. How will the new US Secretary of State react? Hopefully better than Tillerson, his predecessor. There are efforts to restart negotiations. Martin Griffiths, the UN's mediator has met Saudi backed Prime Minister Ahmed Obaid bin Daghr, but not Hadi as yet. Griffiths was the founding Director of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Geneva (HD Centre), is the executive director of the European Institute of Peace and has served in several U.N. roles. But UN resolutions add nothing new being mere restatements. Differences between Saudi Arabia and the UAE will become more significant. The killing of Saleh weakens Hadi, who is already weak. Saudi support for him is probably reducing. [UN Security Council Resolution 2216](#)<sup>1</sup> raises the question of whether or not the USA will become more interventionist. Trump will meet the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (20<sup>th</sup> March 2018 – ironically Congress was discussing the reduction of US involvement in Yemen at the same time).

## Dr Abdul Galil Shaif Kasim

The south, Aden, is of international strategic importance. 12% of international trade passes through the Gulf of Aden, including most of the oil. Aden thrived under Britain (who's rule is now looked back on nostalgically). The National Liberation Front (NLF) and the Front for the Liberation of Occupied South Yemen (FLOSY) fought each other as well as the Britain, and the People's Republic of South Yemen proved negative, dominated by factional politics. Unity with North Yemen came in 1990. I'd believed in Yemeni unity but it was a bitter experience; oppression, a lack of opportunities and loss of jobs. People looked for a better system. The Southern Movement - al-Hirāk al-Janūbiyy, commonly known as al-Hirak, was a large movement, possibly 80% of the people supported it, but it lacked unity, with too many leaders. In 2007 the Southern Transitional Council (STC), al-Majlis al-Intiqālī l-Janūbiyy was formed to unite al-Hirak under one leadership. It controls most of the south and presents the best option for the international community despite their failure to engage with it. Gifford may lack the usual UN baggage and should engage with the STC.



*Dr Abdul Galil Shaif Kasim*

The Houthi are the best organised force in Yemen. They forced themselves onto the scene and now control Sana'a. They are Shia sect, a strong organisation with the capacity to fight militarily. War was supposed to end within nine days. The Hadi government is not in charge of Yemen, why the international community believes otherwise is absurd; Hadi is an employee of Saudi Arabia. It is a question of legitimacy. On April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Aidarus al-Zoubaidi, the Governor of the Aden, was fired by Hadi, ending any cooperation with the STC. Northerners never accept that Southerners can lead. Hadi ruled in the north, the STC in the south. The GPC is Saleh's family affair, wanting to go back to Sana'a and playing a double game.

Saudi Arabia and the Emirates see themselves as the regional powers, and don't want a strong Yemen, whether north or south. Democracy is anathema to both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They are surprised at the resistance that has been mounted by the Yemenis. The UAE has an

economic agenda. Aden is a busy port but has suffered a loss of influence to Berbera (in the internationally unrecognised Republic of Somaliland), with whom the UAE has a good relationship.

If Aden works economically it could be a rich country. The STC must be involved in any negotiations on the future of Yemen, otherwise there is another conflict in the making. Islah etc. are ineffective; the National Conference in Sana'a are irrelevant – Hadi's men. The latest UN resolution is based on National Conference outcomes, but the situation has moved on and it won't succeed. The war is now irrational.

### Questions:

Paul Reynolds commented that it is unusual to see the word 'democracy' used in reports.

#### ? Israel has not been mentioned.

**HL** Israel will let Saudi Arabia do its thing; they want an open Red Sea.

**AG** No active Israeli involvement, but concerned about possible Iranian influence with the Houthi. Israel has no capacity to pull strings. Iran hardly influences the Houthi.

**AGSK** Israel doesn't need to do anything, Arabs are killing themselves. Palestine is off the agenda, Arabs are killing themselves.

#### ? External parties and local players – is a bi-national state possible as a solution?

**HL** I don't think the STC represent all of the south. The STC is more successful than earlier attempts at southern unity, but the position is not clear. Yemen is more likely to be a multiplicity of statelets, much as it was under the British Protectorate. Hadi is insignificant, but it is difficult to decide who should be involved in negotiations – there are too many entities – Hadi, the GPC and Islah in the north. If two regions, why not just split?



**AG** I agree with Helen, the concept of North-South is redundant – possibly six or seven statelets (as suggested in the recent Chatham House publication<sup>2</sup>). These are the players that matter. The STC are significant in Aden. I'm optimistic about the UN. Martin Griffith understands mediation and may become a mover once sympathetically engaged. Think Lebanon in 1974, Libya now. Those entities were always there but subjugated by central governments, when that fails, come to the fore. Hadi does as the Saudi's say, he's their cipher. The STC is heavily dependent on the UAE.

**AGSK** Has the STC learnt from the mistakes of the past to be able to form a state in the south? Why was Hadi defeated in the south? Because the south wants the north out. The north is not conducive to democracy. Why is there resistance to the southern cause? The north is more complex than the south. Is there a will in the international community to allow the south to develop?

Is there a possibility of three states? The STC in the south, the Houthi in the north and Hadi in the liberated areas of the north. The Houthi and the STC both hate Hadi.

**Phil Bennion** mentioned rapprochement between Saleh's faction and the Houthi in this context, there is a danger of a direct north-south civil war if they get back together.

**AGSK** There is no evidence that north and south states could work, but they did exist before 1990. Then, the south was supported by Russia. Now the situation is different. South Yemen has oil and gas, the port of Aden, fishing, honey and coffee. The STC could do the same as Somaliland and be potentially a rich state. Internal conflicts are the difficulty – al-Hirak was weak. The UAE needs to see sense in this and develop the economic potential. Two regions, then a referendum to decide the future might be a way forward.



**AG** The north is more tribal and less obedient to government, the south is culturally more inclined to it, perhaps, but it is not a homogenous country. The Hadramawt is not connected to the rest of the south. It is thus difficult to have a coherent state. Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi united their countries by terror. There is a lot of rhetoric around democracy in the Middle East, but it is not about as it is practiced in the western sense. Democracy is a process and will eventually bring change, ie: as in Tunisia, but it is not instant, especially where there are tribal and armed groups.

**HL** I see no Saleh-Houthi alliance, revenge is the main motivation of Saleh's people. The GPC will regroup with Hadi people. Only Houthi ideology will bring back the rule of Sana'a – retrograde Islamism. The decision on six regions was Hadi's – the National Dialogue Conference<sup>3</sup> – they were not taken seriously. There were considerations of water and social & economic viability. Divisions are as strong in the south as they are in the north. Old borders will not resolve anything, the divisions would reoccur soon after. Only Hadramawt is viable, it has oil, water, agriculture and capital from Saudi Arabia.

**AG** Saleh's followers seek big-time revenge. Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar's vice-presidency is Hadi's only brilliant move. Washington fell for it, nobody else wanted him.

### ? Aden was previously democratic, why couldn't it be in the future?

Most states in the Middle East are post-colonial, they are not necessarily voluntary.

Vice-President General Ali Mohsen is well armed; he did not move against the Saudis, but was quick to move on the secessionists in the south.

### ? What of the three-state solution? North, based around religious Zaidis, Middle & South?

**AGSK** – saw no problem in this, only that the west would have to wake up to the situation. He asked 'What was wrong with this in western eyes'?



**Phil Bennion** replied that none of the new post-colonial states that had been accepted by the international order had been successful and that made them wary of others. East Timor, Eritrea and South Sudan were all in a worse condition than that which went before.

**AGSK** replied that the situation in Yemen couldn't get any worse. Yemenis themselves should choose what they want.

**HL** suggested sending people on field visits to the north. She cited to case of Samani family. She added that Saleh had oppressed all, unless they were part of his clique. She doubted the number of troops that Ali Mohsen reputedly led; the situation was not progressive because of straight deals with Saudi Arabia. Collusion between each of these and Saleh's followers was part of the reason why there was not a solution.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>UN Security Council Resolution 2216. 14.4.2015 (Russia abstained)

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11859.doc.htm>

<sup>2</sup>Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order, by Peter Salisbury. Chatham House 20.12.2017

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/yemen-national-chaos-local-order>

<sup>3</sup> The National Dialogue Conference took place from 13<sup>th</sup> March 2013-24<sup>th</sup> January 2014 in Sana'a and was brokered by the UN and the Gulf Cooperation Council as part of the transfer of power from Saleh to Hadi. It proposed federal Yemen of six regions, Sana'a and Aden having special status. Southern representatives didn't accept the federal solution, and despite the UN deeming that it was a success, little of lasting significance came out of it.

*The LIBG Forum on Yemen took place on the 19<sup>th</sup> March at the National Liberal Club, London.*

Dr Alan George is a visiting senior research Fellow at King's College London. He is a former assistant director of the Council for Arab-British Understanding,

Helen Lackner is an author and international adviser on social aspects of rural development in poorer countries and a research associate at SOAS, University of London. She has been involved in Yemen since the 1970s

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# Sexual Exploitation in the Aid Sector.

## Margaret Lally

### Introduction

The exploitation of vulnerable people is always wrong. Understandably there was a huge outcry after newspaper revelations that Oxfam GB (Oxfam) staff working in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake had paid for sex. Prostitution is illegal in Haiti where the legal age for consent is 18. Although none of the initial allegations of use of under-age prostitutes were substantiated it cannot be ruled out that some of the women were under age. 4 staff were dismissed; 3 resigned. Is this a case of a few “bad apples” and some process failures or is sexual exploitation happening on a much wider scale in the sector?

### What Happened at Oxfam

Let's focus on Oxfam for a start. In 2011/2012 it had over 5000 employees more than half of whom worked overseas. Approximately 500 staff were in Haiti. Even using internal surge capacity, Oxfam wouldn't have had enough permanent staff to respond to such a major disaster. Recruiting quickly and at scale after a major disaster is a big challenge - particularly when there is quick and generous public response, and the media is beaming in pictures of people not being helped. Oxfam brought in additional people primarily on short term contracts. Some of these would be specialists in logistics, engineering, sanitation and might work for other agencies, including the private sector, as well. They were interviewed and the CEO of Oxfam has stated that those who had “direct contact” with “beneficiaries” were DBS checked. But:

- At best DBS will tell you that individuals have not previously been identified as committing a criminal offence in the UK. Using prostitutes in the UK is not a criminal offence
- DBS checking would only apply to British personnel. At least one individual in this scandal was not British
- The definitions of beneficiary and eligibility for DBS checks are narrow.

Further, temporary staff will not be as embedded in the organisation as its permanent staff and may not have absorbed its values. Providing supervision and support to response staff is challenging, particularly in the early days of a disaster. Oxfam has rightly been asked if it did enough to prevent abuse happening, investigated and dealt with the perpetrators rigorously and were sufficiently open about what happened.

### Oxfam's response

Oxfam have accepted that its recruitment and disciplinary processes were not rigorous enough. The allegations were investigated by an independent staff team but Oxfam was wrong to allow some individuals to resign rather than be dismissed. The issue of providing references which meant the perpetrators could be recycled to other organisations is a bit murky. Oxfam have argued that for “legal reasons” it could not go into detail about an individual's conduct as they had resigned rather than been fired for misconduct. It tried to get around that by providing a reference which simply confirmed that an individual had worked with Oxfam between certain dates which it believed was a minimum obligation. Most UK employers would recognise this reference as worthless but that might not apply to overseas employers. One person did get employed by another country Oxfam – despite Oxfam UK circulating a list internally.

A key charge against Oxfam has been a lack of transparency to protect funding. It did not report the issues to the police or key stakeholders in Haiti (possibly to protect the victims). Nor were the matters reported to the UK police. Oxfam did inform the Charity Commission and DFID that individuals had been dismissed for sexual misconduct, but also said that this misconduct had not involved beneficiaries (an inappropriately narrow definition of the word). A press statement was issued saying that people had been dismissed for serious breaches of conduct. A summary of complaints of this nature are also noted in Oxfam's annual reports. The current CEO accepts that that the organisation was not transparent enough but arguably Oxfam did as much as most publicly funded organisations. Both the Charity Commission and DfID should have

probed deeper. In the end what matters, however, is whether or not people felt that they knew what had happened - and on that criteria Oxfam failed.

Did Oxfam do enough to identify and prevent abuse in the future? Changes were put in place including establishing a central safeguarding team and setting up a whistle blowing line. But the ex-Head of Safeguarding manager has gone on record to say her concerns were not taken seriously enough by Oxfam's leadership. Oxfam has now accepted that her team was over stretched, that there was a fear of reporting and that there was a failure to tackle on a systematic basis the cultural issues.

### **How widespread is this?**

Oxfam got quite a bit wrong – not least focusing on individual incidents rather than tackling systematic failures. But in this they are not alone. Over the last few weeks it has become clear that sexual abuse and harassment was not just an issue for Oxfam but for the sector as a whole, and also DFID. Perhaps we should not be surprised. In 2002 Save the Children (StC) published a report with UNHCR highlighting the role of powerful men as gatekeepers to food and security in disaster areas, and the consequent scale of sexual exploitation by aid workers and peace troops. When giving evidence to the DFID Select Committee Kevin Watkins (StC) noted that predatory males (and it is most often males) will seek out vulnerable individuals - and where better to do so than within a charity? Abuse and exploitation is not confined to international work but the risks there are greater. There has been a collective failure to address these issues that goes well beyond Oxfam. Charities and DFID have now started to join up the dots and recognise that abuse will happen and there needs to be a systematic global response.

### **What needs to happen?**

There are some practical steps. It is wrong that people who are working with some of the most vulnerable people on the planet do not have the same professional certification and regulation as educational, health, and social care professionals, and that perpetrators of abuse can move between organisations at will. This needs an international response. One proposal is for an international certification system of humanitarian aid workers which would effectively result in them having (or not) an international "passport" to practice. This would mean aid agencies could draw on people already vetted.

Charities have to be more transparent and less protection of reputation. The sector has to rebuild trust with the British public which is incredibly supportive of overseas aid but wants to know it is being delivered effectively. Arguably charities have had to focus too much on providing data for organisational donors and need to think about talking to their end donors (you and me) about what they do and the enormous difference it makes.

There has to be a better understanding of power relationships and an acknowledgement that power can be abused. As we have seen elsewhere women are often (albeit not always) in a less equal position to men and this creates conditions for exploitation. Development agencies which send teams to difficult environments when people are particularly vulnerable have to recognise this. Delegations are more likely to be led by, and staffed by men, simply because it is often harder for women to leave families at short notice. (In 2016/17 50% of Oxfam's employees were women; but this dropped to 38.6% for its international work; and it had fewer women in management positions overseas particularly at the top levels). More needs to be done to ensure women occupy positions of power. But also charities have to work even harder at embedding values which enforces the dignity of every human being whatever circumstances they are living in - everyone has to own these values and feel able to call out those whose behaviour contravenes them. There has to be a proactive checking that organisational codes of behaviour are fully understood and embedded into the culture of the organisation. Stronger investment by all agencies (and their donors) in safeguarding teams is also required.

To be fair Oxfam did understand this at least at the theoretical level. It has done good work on developing strategies for empowering women (which I have in the past used as a model). In 2010/11 at the Commission on the Status of Women Oxfam advocated for an international monitoring and accountability mechanism

based on their framework of gender-based violence /violence against women and independent reviews have highlighted that the culture and gender sensitivity of some their work e.g. cash for work programmes. But there is a difference between having good policies and strategies and having values which are constantly reinforced and shine through in how everyone works.

We also have to ask why are westerns are always helicoptering into disaster zones – why not train up more responders in the areas/regions known to be at risk when this has been known to be a gap for some years now? DFID funds organisations such as the Red Cross to train individuals from across the globe who can led disaster response. But there are still too few coming from African and Asian countries. Having said that in a major disaster – 220,000 were killed in Haiti – others will also be needed. Ideally many should come from the surrounding region. It will still be necessary to bring Europeans but they should be part of a wider team. This of course will not stop exploitation – it is not the prerogative of Europeans.

Finally we need to challenge those who use this issue as a mechanism for to divide and beat up the charity sector. It is interesting the amount of media bile that has accompanied Oxfam but not say StC, ICRC or Dfid. True Oxfam managed to handle the publicity badly but the ongoing bashing of the charity may also be associated with Oxfam’s outspoken comments on the impact of capitalism on the poor.

The government must not be allowed to use scandal as an excuse to cut funding to development agencies or to shackle the terms of that aid. The Lib Dems (through Tom Brake’s private members bill) got the government to commit to giving 0.7% in aid. At the recent BOND (the umbrella group for international organisations) Conference the Secretary of State for Overseas Development (Penny Mordaunt), in an under-reported speech said some potentially worrying things about how the aid budget might be used in the future. In particular she referred to greater cooperation between DFID and the armed forces and increasing partnerships with the private sector. In her view aid had to be working harder for UK prosperity and security. Nothing wrong with that - unless it distorts making the needs of beneficiaries the first priority!

It’s been a bad couple of weeks for Oxfam and the humanitarian sector. Important issues have been raised which need to be addressed but let’s not lose sight of the good that is achieved by the majority of charity workers who give selflessly to those in need.

### ***Margaret Lally***

Margaret has worked for an international aid agency but the views she expresses here are her own.

## **An assault on an MP is an assault on democracy**

LI treasurer Dr. Dzevdet Chakarov MP (Movement for Rights and Freedoms party [MRF], Bulgaria) has called for the perpetrators of an attack against the leader of Liberal Democratic Partise of Macedonia (LDP), Milevski Goran MP, to be brought to justice.

Mr Milevski was assaulted in Macedonia Square, in the Macedonian capital Skopje, on Sunday in an unprovoked attack. While the motivation for the attack is unclear, Liberal International has a long-standing commitment to stamping out violence in politics.

Reacting to the news, Dr. Chakarov said: “It is with deep regret that I received the news of physical attack against our colleague Mr Goran Milevski from LDP Macedonia. Violence is unacceptable in any form or circumstance and an attack against an elected public official should be widely condemned – an assault on an MP is an assault on democracy.”

“I call for a quick, in-depth investigation by the competent Macedonian authorities in order to clarify the facts behind this crime and bring the perpetrators to justice”. We join Dr Chakarov. In wishing Mr Milevski a speedy recovery. Political violence has, alas, been a feature of Macedonian politics over recent years, particularly around the involvement of Albanian parties and politicians in government, but the motive for this attack remains unknown.

# The Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy.

## Phil Bennion

On 20<sup>th</sup> February I was privileged to attend the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, an event co-sponsored by Liberal International, which features former political prisoners talking about their often quite harrowing experiences. I attended on behalf of LI Human Rights Committee along with secretariat member Tamara Dancheva, but it would be possible for readers to attend this annual event as long as they pre-register.

In the foyer a hanging display of photographs of political prisoners worldwide received much attention and Tamara and I were able to raise the profile of liberals imprisoned around the world, including Anwar Ibrahim, Leila de Lima, Ilham Tohti, Raif Badawi and Kem Sokha.

The speakers were inspirational starting with Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the Organisation of American States (OAS) who spoke about Venezuela. The force of law has been removed by the state with 2000 opponents detained, 150 killed in protests and around 1000 extra-judicial killings. Corruption and mismanagement had caused the economic crisis which was now leading to starvation and lack of medical supplies.

We then heard from Asli Erdogan, Turkish human rights activist and novelist who was arrested following the 2016 attempted coup. She told us that security forces had burst into her flat in combat gear and arrested her for “Destruction of the Unity of the State” on account of being on the advisory board of a small newspaper. This crime carries the death sentence so she took the opportunity to leave pending trial. She told us that one TV presenter had been arrested for giving supposed subliminal messages on the day before the coup through his broadcast. He was given a life sentence.

Next was Guillermo Farinas Hernandez from Cuba who had grown up supporting the revolution. His parents had fought against Batista and his father had joined Che Gueverra to fight in the Congo. He started having doubts at the age of 18 during the 1990 exodus when 130,000 Cubans chose to leave. During his time in the army he fought in Angola and witnessed murders and barbaric repression of villagers. He concluded that the Cuban regime is more about control than the wellbeing of its citizens and eventually became an activist for democracy.

Pastor Evan Mawarire from Zimbabwe (leader of protest group This Flag) had been arrested after organising a national strike using his Facebook page. He was imprisoned and charged with subversion, but the courts had retained sufficient independence to release him. He went into exile but returned last year when he was immediately arrested for trying to overthrow the state. Again released by the courts he was then arrested in the midst of delivering a service in his church after protesting over food prices. He was acquitted again in November days after the overthrow of Mugabe.

Effy Nguyen is the son of Vietnamese political prisoner Nguyen Trong Ton. He had witnessed his father being arrested by security forces at his home in 2011 when he was imprisoned for subversion after being critical of communism. His father was released in 2013 and continued to campaign for democracy until he was abducted last year. He was beaten and left to die, but survived the attack. He was arrested again in July and the family were not allowed any communication until recent weeks.

In the next session on journalism we heard from Pakistani journalist Taha Siddiqui, who had received threats about his participation in the event. He said that more than 100 journalists had been murdered in Pakistan in recent years and now the Blasphemy Laws were being used to close down news outlets. He suggested that the military were involved in this repression of free speech. Mr Siddiqui used the courts to



uphold his own rights but 6 weeks previously an attempt to abduct him had failed. He believed that he would have been assassinated and consequently disappeared. Such disappearances which have been a longstanding issue in less safe areas of the country are now spreading to safe cities like Lahore and Islamabad.

The next session was devoted to China. Yang Jianli is President of Initiatives for China, an organisation that represents lawyers who have got into hot water with the authorities for representing people on the issues such as property rights. One such lawyer Wong Chiang Jia has been in prison for three years without access to his family. He was particularly incensed with China promoting “Human Rights with a Chinese Face” here in Geneva at the UN. We also heard from Lam Wing-kee, the bookseller who was abducted from Hong Kong by the Chinese authorities, fundamentally controverting the agreement of “One Country; Two Systems”. He was kept in solitary confinement for 6 months then suddenly taken back to Hong Kong and released. The third speaker in the session was Golog Jigme, a Tibetan monk who has been trying to stand up for human rights activists in Tibet for 10 years. The situation has deteriorated in recent years with Tibetans denied freedom of expression and religion and the right to protect their fragile environment. He was arrested



***Phil Bennion & Tamara Dancheva***

in 2008 and subjected to torture as the authorities tried to pressure him to name others. After 5 years he escaped from prison and after 20 months in hiding, crossed to India in 2014. Journalist Jonny Gould then interviewed Farida Khalaf, a Yazidi woman who had escaped Islamic State slavery. She was training to be teacher when IS attacked in 2014. She said that even before IS Yazidis were persecuted in Iraq. She had been abducted by IS and used as a sex slave and her immediate family were killed. Her uncle was told that she had been killed too. She found this out eventually when she managed to escape and go into hiding.

The morning session ended with the Womens Rights Award which went to Julienne Lusenge who in Congo (DRC) set up SOFEPADI, an organisation devoted to rescuing the victims of sexual violence and trying to end the use of rape as a weapon of war. In her own words “we work with victims and turn them into agents for change”. An inspiring lady.

After lunch we were treated to a panel debate asking the question whether Venezuela should be expelled from the UN Human Rights Council. The speakers were Luis Almagro of the OAS, Chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre Irwin Cotler, who was also a member of the OAS enquiry on Venezuela and

Antonio Ledezma the Mayor of Caracas, who escaped imprisonment by the Maduro regime in Venezuela. He said that the basic necessities for living are no longer available in the country as it has been plunged into penury by the government’s misguided policies. For the Canadian speaker Irwin Cotler the question was rhetorical. He described Venezuela as a state sliding into dictatorship and a special prosecutor at the ICC investigation has already concluded that the country is in contravention of its UNHRC obligations. Almagro took a cynical view of the UNHRC, saying that many countries with a seat on the Council have records of human rights violations. Cotler was more positive as he pointed to a Canadian campaign that had been successful in getting Russia voted off so if delegations are mobilised they can get Venezuela voted off. We then heard from Kasha Jacqueline, an LGBT rights campaigner in Uganda where homosexuality remains illegal. She has been persecuted for being gay and she only managed to stay in education because her mother had told the authorities that she was “sick”. Kasha and her colleagues have now taken the government to the Supreme Court in Uganda to have the anti-homosexuality laws deemed unconstitutional and they won. However the laws still have to be repealed.

There followed a discussion on the recent protests in Iran, which had caught everyone by surprise in spreading across the whole country in the space of 4 days. Maryam Yazdi told us that the protests had their roots in various material grievances and the government still finding the resources for overseas adventures



when its people were in poverty. People saw little difference between the so called reformer Rouhani and the populist former President Ahmadinejad. The government gave too much attention to missile programmes and to little to human needs and human rights. Maziar Bahari told us that the Ayatollahs are unaccountable and that Khamenei's apologies for the poor material conditions are becoming repetitive. Average incomes are only a third of basic needs but the elite drive Lamborghinis and have mansions abroad. The Ayatollah has said that he will listen to the people and bring forward changes. The regime had come to power in 1979 on the back of summary executions and the minorities had suddenly become 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens, which they remain. The people now expect real reform but are pushing to achieve this by peaceful means. The final speaker in the session was Maryam Malekpour whose brother has been in prison since he was abducted in 2008. Her brother had moved to Canada long before where he was a software writer, but was visiting Iran to see his dying father. His family did not know that he was in prison for several months after his disappearance and he was eventually sentenced to death after being tortured. Maryam left Iran when an arrest warrant was issued for her and she is now in exile in Canada. She thinks they were innocent bystanders in a government purge of online political activity.

The final session was a discussion on North Korea and included Fred and Cindy Warmbier, parents of the student Otto Warmbier who died days after being returned to the US by the North Koreans. Otto was just 21 and he visited North Korea on a package tour. The tour group were forced to leave without him. They had just visited South Korea during the Winter Olympics and met President Moon. Mr Warmbier said he held no malice to the North Korean people and hoped that he would live to see them have the same prospects and rights as the people of South Korea. We then heard from Kenneth Bae, a US citizen of Korean decent and a missionary who took Christian groups to Korea. He tried to set up a mission in North Korea but was arrested and tortured for trying to overthrow the state and sentenced to 15 years. He was released after 2 years after President Obama sent a special envoy on his behalf.

The Courage award went to Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian political activist formerly associated with Boris Nemtsov who has now founded his own movement Open Russia. This inspirational young man has survived two poisoning attempts which he attributes to the Russian secret services. He predicted that Putin would easily win the election as it is easy to win elections when the opposition is either in exile, in prison or dead. Why should such a popular leader fear a free election?

The event was concluded by Irwin Cotler who left us with a salient thought. "Too few people are willing to stand up without first looking round to see who has stood up before them. That's what makes this event so inspiring – it is a gathering of those who have stood up."

### ***Phil Bennion***

Phil Bennion is chair of Liberal International British Group.



Grigory Yavlinski of YABLOKO won 769,644 votes in the Russian presidential election, gaining 1.02% of votes cast. This was much in line with opinion poll predictions, but it is important that the Liberal flag was flown. Overall, there was a 67.5% turnout, with 73,578,992 votes cast.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) said that the election "took place in an overly controlled legal and political environment marked by continued pressure on critical voices, while the Central Election Commission (CEC) administered the election efficiently and openly."

It is not easy to gauge how many people followed Alexei Navalny's call to boycott the election (interLib 2018-01 pages 18-20), but there were 791,258 blank or spoilt votes cast (1.08%). Navalny, of the Partiya Progressa, was banned from standing in the election, as Yavlinski was in 2012.

# International Abstracts

Hitting Putin where it hurts, by Misha Glenny.

New York Times 15.3.2018

*Incisive analysis of the short-comings of Theresa May's response to the attack on Sergei & Yulia Skripal. When will the woman wake up and sack the national embarrassment Boris Johnson?*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/15/opinion/russia-britain-theresa-may.html?ribbon-ad-id=1&rref=opinion&module=Ribbon&version=context@ion=Header&action=click&contentCollection=Opinion&pgtype=article>

'America First' bears a new threat: military force' by David Sanger & Gardiner Harris.

New York Times 24<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

*Bad news. The hawks around Trump (for the time being, at least).*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/24/us/politics/trump-national-security-bolton.html>

## **Briefing: The Democratic Republic of Congo.**

The Economist February 17<sup>th</sup> 2018 pp. 22-26 also Leader page 11

*Unsavoury reading in advance of the Forum (to be announced)*

## **Liberator 389**

Margaret Lally's article on Oxfam and Paul Reynolds' article on Yemen, which appear in this issue of interLib are also in Liberator 389 for those who prefer the printed page. Domestically, Paul Hindley and Sue Simmonds review recent publications of the Social Liberal Forum, Trevor Smith looks at the collapse of Carillion. Tony Greaves looks at the Liberal Democrats' Southport Strategy Motion, whilst David Grace and Jennie Rigg look at some of the party's idiosyncrasies. Alex Dee is focused on the Alderdice review of Liberal Democrat relations with ethnic minorities. Jonathan Calder reviews Chris Reynard's autobiography. So far as the national media was concerned, much was made of the ousting of Claire Kober as Labour leader of Haringey Council – Momentum being squarely blamed; a rather more balanced account by Nigel Scott highlights Liberal Democrat involvement. Liz Barker looks at the problems of charities and the Charities Commission with the present government.



## LIBG FORUM



## Chinese Influence in Africa; Who Benefits?

Monday 21<sup>st</sup> May

Speakers : Rebecca Tinsley (Waging Peace) and Paul Reynolds.

More speakers to be announced.



National Liberal Club, Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE

(Tube: Charing Cross or Embankment)

Doors open 6.30, debate at 7. 00pm



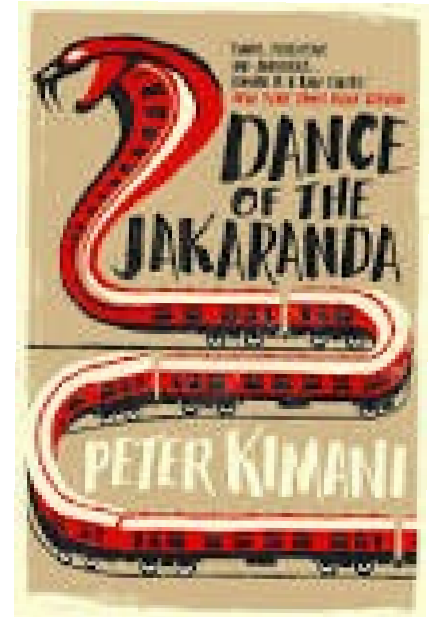
Liberal International British Group. [www.libg.co.uk](http://www.libg.co.uk)

# reviews

**Dance of the Jakaranda, by Peter Kimani.**  
Saqi 2018 £8.99  
isbn 9781846592096

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the British recruited 30,000 Indian workmen to be engineers on a massive project: building a railway from Mombasa on the Indian Ocean to Lake Victoria, via Nairobi. An estimated five thousand of them would die in the process, while six thousand remained in Africa, their descendants becoming the shop keepers so disliked by many modern black East Africans.

Dance of the Jakaranda is a novel told from the perspective of a Punjabi engineer who is swindled by one of his colonial masters, as well as a fellow Indian. The story also follows an English missionary who sees the injustice of Britain's colonial project. There have been plenty of novels written about this era from the perspective of the debauched ruling white elite. Hence, it is refreshing to find a new African voice, especially as Kimani writes beautifully and clearly. He does not take the easy route, portraying the Africans whose land has been stolen as entirely innocent and angelic. Nor does he hide the gross entitlement and corruption of the African elite who replaced the entitled and corrupt British administrators at independence. The origins of Kenya's current problems are made obvious.

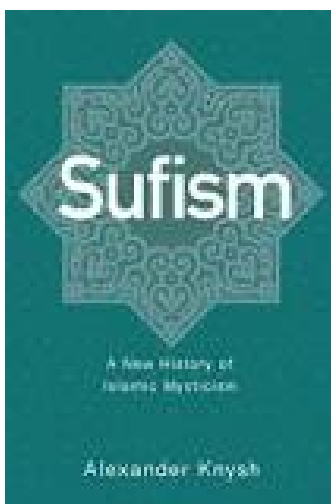


Readers should be warned that the novel's female characters reflect the continuing low status of women in many parts of East Africa. They only appear in the plot as sex objects, literally. They wordlessly submit to any passing man, despite the crushing stigma that they know will attach to pregnancy out of wedlock. This owes more to male fantasy than a realistic portrayal of Kenyan women. But that is to miss the point of the book, which is boys and trains and generations of secrets and lies.

*Rebecca Tinsley*

**Sufism, a new history of Islamic Mysticism, by Alexander Knysh.**  
Princeton 2017 isbn 9780691139098

Without going into the intricacies of Sufi Islam, the immediate value of Alexander Knysh's book is his case studies of Daghestan (Caucasus) and Hadramawt (South Yemen). Knysh contends that Sufis brought stability to the Islamic world at a time when it was weakened by the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate to the Mongols in 1258. Much later, they would be demonized in their leadership of resistance movements against imperialism. Otherwise, we might encounter Sufism through a sublime poet like Rūmī, who transcends mere



religion. Without going into religious elements of the book that I'm not competent to judge, I note that reputedly influential, though controversial characters like the Persian Awḥad al-Dīn Kirmānī (d. 1238) are not mentioned.

Respectively in Daghestan and Hadramawt, they have maintained themselves within the power elites of those regions and as such have to address the various problems encountered, not least the antipathy of Saudi/Salafi religious imperialism and its militant wing ISIS affiliates. It seems they are intolerant of all, if the recent bombing of a Sufi mosque in Sinai is anything to go on.

Within in this, we get answers as to why Daghestan did not follow Chechnya in seeking to overthrow the Russian yoke and why the Hadramawt has greater cohesion than the rest of Yemen.

*Stewart Rayment*

The ancient Romans referred to Yemen as Arabia Felix, but there is little that is happy about the country now. Often divided in modern history, it is now in danger of total disintegration. With only very limited oil resources, it is by far the poorest country in the Middle East, and unlike the other states located in the Arabian Peninsula, it has never been allowed to join the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) - though the cohesion and usefulness of the GCC itself have been undermined with the recent stand-off with Qatar.

Far more acute than the lack of oil, however, is Yemen's depleted source of water; Sana'a risks becoming the world's first capital city to run out of water completely. In rural areas that used to be fertile, subsistence

agriculture is a dwindling lifestyle, as predominantly young men migrate to the cities in search of work. Such migration is of course a common feature of many developing countries, but it has been more acute in Yemen than in many other states. Moreover, the government of the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh compounded the situation by its corrupt handling of the economy, which enriched a small elite while impoverishing the masses. Hence the size and vigour of the anti-Saleh demonstrations that erupted during the 2011 so-called Arab Spring.

However, even at the height of the uprising, the situation in Yemen was never black and white. There was always a complex nexus of rivalries, based on tribal loyalties, regional variations and a certain degree of religious difference. All too often the current conflict in Yemen is oversimplified as a battle between the Sunni-backed, internationally recognised but largely exiled government of Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi and the Shi'i-backed Huthi rebels, but as Lackner's excellent book explains with admirable clarity, Yemen's modern history is far more complex than that.

And as she points out, the military intervention of a Saudi led coalition in 2015 turned a political and humanitarian crisis into a catastrophe. The Saudi blockade of the port of Hodeidah, for example, led to widespread malnutrition - not least among infants - that has been described by the United Nations as the most serious humanitarian crisis of our time. A major outbreak of cholera last year compounded the situation. As Lackner rightly argues, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman probably launched the Yemen War in the hope that a quick victory would cement his rise to power. But nearly three years on, the situation is a quagmire and it is the Yemeni people who are suffering.

Lackner is the ideal guide for readers wanting to understand some of Yemen's complexities and how it has ended up in its current dire situation. She worked in the country for 15 years - largely in rural development - and has been researching it for far longer. Her love of the place and its people shines through the text, which is academically sound but totally accessible to the general reader.

I travelled widely in Yemen myself in the 1980s and 1990s, which Lackner now sees as the good old days. Whether it will ever be possible for such a period of relative calm to return in the near future remains to be seen, but even if so, the cost of reconstruction is going to be gargantuan, as the destruction of Yemen's infrastructure and unique cultural heritage continues apace.

*Jonathan Fryer*

