

# **ELUSIVE REVOLUTIONS AND THE ARAB SPRING**

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## INTRODUCTION: RUTH FIRST ON LIBYA

In 1974 Ruth First, then teaching me at Durham, published a book called ‘The Elusive Revolutions’ on the army coup that brought Colonel Gaddafi to power in Libya in 1969. Ruth was a remarkable lady, blown up by the South African Security Service in Mozambique in 1982. She was wife to Joe Slovo, the leader of the South African Communist Party. When you are aged 20, being taught sociology of development at Durham by Ruth, you don’t quite understand the privilege.

As some have debated ever since October 1917 about the Russian Bolsheviks, Ruth could not decide whether to call Gaddafi’s rise to power a coup or a revolution. Even in 1974 she saw a revolution so ‘perverse’ that it was impossible to pin down. The army’s ‘copybook putsch’, as she also called it, was based on an incredibly limited social base – despite Gaddafi’s frequent empty rhetoric about the masses. The coup of 1969 had in effect been a rising of the Interior (from where Gaddafi and two of his key henchmen came) against the kingly Establishment on the coast. After March 2011 and the NATO bombing, it is again outsiders - Berbers from the mountains with some ex-Al Qaeda help- who first took Tripoli in August 2011, rather than the Western-sanctioned client elites.

‘Elusive Revolutions’ still seems to me a good summary of the political economy of the Middle East/North Africa since 2011. NATO’s massive bombing campaign on Libya made possible an imperially generated alternative coup. It created the victory of one side in what still may become a regional, militia and faction-driven fight for the country. Is there any chance of a functioning Libyan democracy and civil society? Probably about as much as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt or Pakistan; with the most likely emergence of a strong-arm President, backed by the imperial powers.

For the outcomes of these ‘revolutions’, strangely celebrated in the Western media, are as yet very unclear. I don’t remember the real democratic Iranian or Venezuelan revolutions being so celebrated. If the corporate media is often an unconscious purveyor of imperial thinking – hence their coverage of Iran and Venezuela - what lies behind this odd celebration of ‘revolutions’? Is it merely that the journalists like to celebrate the potential triumph of parliamentary democracy? Maybe so, except that in Cairo, Benghazi or Tripoli the revolutions did not come about by parliamentary means.

What is welcomed on the streets in Cairo or Benghazi was not welcome on the streets of London in 2010 in the student protest against the British coalition, and certainly not in Bahrain, where British weaponry is used to attack dissent. Is it perhaps the case that by celebrating the ‘revolution’, our military intervention is then legitimised, when it may not be geared to a genuine democratic outcome either in Egypt or in Libya? For such genuinely democratic outcomes may collide with the Empire of Capital’s ‘strategic interests’.

## **CRUDE MOTIVES:**

### **IRAQ AND LIBYAN OIL**

When UN Troops invaded Iraq in 2003 most of the critics argued that this was a war for oil. The argument of my two books (“Crossing the River of Fire”, 2006 and “Nowhere to Lay our Head”, 2011) was that it was more than this alone. It was a war for Empire; not just the US Empire, but even more a war for the expansion of Global Capital. The need to control oil and gas in the Middle East, and potentially then in Central Asia, Africa and Latin America, was nevertheless at the heart of the war. The pressures put on 'rogue States' – Iran, Libya and Syria – plus interventions in Mali, Pakistan, Somalia or Yemen for example, tell us a great deal about the new century's imperialist project.

So when Tony Blair, following on from Donald Rumsfeld, told us that the Iraq war was absolutely nothing to do with oil, I knew for sure that WMD were a cover. We now know 10 years later that Iraq is second on the list (behind Saudi Arabia) of the countries with the largest increase in oil production, while global oil players from the UK and China to India, besides those of the USA, have moved in. The control of Iraq's future oil production, the client regimes attached (even if they are democratic) and the production space accumulated for global Capital was at the heart of the Iraq war. Iraq is the Middle East symbol that the lessons learnt by Britain and the US over 200 years in Latin America have enabled the construction of a new kind of Empire in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is not a territorial Empire like the old British one but an Empire nevertheless: the Empire of Global Capital. This exists, with the US as leader and co-ordinator, to expand the Empire of making profits.

The key in both Iraq and Libya is that their full re-incorporation – with their old State companies often privatised to boot – will mean oil output is far greater and more profitable. A major clue is the huge increases in Iraqi oil reserves now being tabled since the invasion. In 2011, British Petroleum accounts for proven reserves of 143 billion barrels. This amounts to an increase of 30 billion over 2010. So in one year Iraq has now added to its reserves an increase as large as the entire US reserve base. The knock-on is that Iraqi oil output is now set to boom too. By 2012 at 3 million, Iraqi output is now 50 % higher than 10 years ago and in November it was at a new 34-year high. Only in 1979, when Saddam, along with the Saudis, was trying to contain the impact of the Iranian revolution and OPEC price increases, has Iraqi output ever been higher.

Let's go on to have a brief look at oil in Libya. Here David Cameron followed Blair to tell us we had 'no strategic interests' in Libya. The war was not about oil but about defending Benghazi. Libya's lost oil quota only represented 1 per cent of world production, so the story ran on. Libyan output had fallen by 10 % anyway since 2007. OK so Libya has 3 per cent of the world's oil reserves but Saudi reserves are nearly 6 times greater than Libya; Iran nearly 3 times; Iraq's are now around 3 times too.

But the key is that Libyan reserves at 47 billion barrels (end of 2011) are 50% higher than those of the entire USA (who we are told has a booming oil output again). Not only has the US lower reserves, it is running them down at a far higher rate. Libyan oil reserves are 3 times higher than the EU wonder France. Italy and Germany – with their companies as main producers in Libya- were worried. In the last 3 years the increase in Libyan reserves has been of the same order as the total potential future reserves of the British North Sea (3billion barrels). So in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a largely unnoticed movement in Libyan oil reserves can have more consequences for the geo-political and economic prospects for oil than developments in the North Sea that were so vital in the 1980s..

## A CRITIQUE OF THE ARAB 'SPRING'

It is perhaps worth putting the term 'Arab spring' in the historical context of the outcomes of other earlier 'Springs'. The most famous 'spring time of the peoples' was in 1848. No country came out of 1848 with a more democratic regime, although it could be said to have laid the foundations for greater democracy eventually (after 1918) in France, Germany and Italy. Most did not lead in the short run to more democracy; indeed some led to the consolidation of military dictatorships. Often a democratic facade was given to essentially authoritarian imperialist regimes, as in France, Germany and indeed in Russia (after 1905). And to understand them, either in 1848 or in 1968, we also have to see the imperial and global contexts. This tells us already that the post-2011 Arab Spring needs also to be seen in a broader context – not the least in its use as a propaganda term (by all sides).

In France the rule of the Second Empire under another Napoleon (the Third) was consolidated – so France effectively had a military dictatorship - until the upheavals and revolts of 1870. In Germany the failures of the democratic Frankfurt Assembly led to the continued rule of the Prussian Junkers and to the flight of revolutionaries from Germany – the best known of these Marx and Engels. In Italy it led to the 'Risorgimento' where nominally Northern Piedmont and Lombardy 'united' the country by effectively conquering the South in the 1860s. So in this case the 'spring' was an excuse for conquest. The first Spring had been in Palermo, and Sicily, if anything, came off worst from the whole revolt: a tradition of defeat that goes back there to the late Middle Ages. What we can see potentially in Syria is another real revolt 150 years later used to justify a conquest; both conquests, it could be argued, to expand the sphere of Capital's control.

Russian authoritarianism became a by-word in Eastern Europe where the defeat of embryonic Polish nationalism after 1848 made it hard for Poland to emerge into democracy until as late as 1989. Similarly the Prague Spring of 1968 was crushed by Russian military power. The triumphs of November 1989, seen so often as a velvet revolution, in fact came less from a citizens' revolt (although their revolts mattered) but more from the collapse of the imperial power – Russia. When the Russian centre did fold in, the peripheral powers in Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as in the Baltic States, Central and Eastern Europe commenced their own struggles.

The lessons for the Arab Spring and the Middle East are then clear. Already the complaints rise up about the true nature of democracy in Tunisia, where this Spring began. It is not yet clear whether President Morsi is effectively providing a democratic facade for continued military rule. This facade of parliamentarianism has been the dominant solution before in the Middle East and continues under President Karzai in Afghanistan and even more so under the 'Hard Man' ruler of Iraq – Al Maliki. It could well be the outcome in Libya, as a parliamentary regime gives an old-style African cover to what has become a regional, factional and militia-driven struggle to control the oil revenues. In Syria Asad remains – another cover for army rule – while the Hard Man tradition, it should be remembered, remains dominant in Western supported oil regimes in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and could stretch as far West as Hungary. In the local context Saudi Arabia – the conquest State – threatens to take on the old Russian role of suppressing any dissent anywhere – but especially in Bahrain and Yemen, while pretending to do the opposite to control the outcomes in Syria.

## EGYPT AND LIBYA

### EGYPT: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL BATTLES

The term 'Arab spring' then was originally a Western construct. (most Arabs and the local press use other descriptions: revolution, uprising, awakening, renaissance, and Arab citizen revolt. The balance of all these conceptual possibilities varies from place to place). Its first use goes back to the time when Iraq was being 'pacified' after the re-conquest of 2003. Aside from the cover it provided for imperial control of Iraq it was particularly used by conservative US commentators who wanted to highlight an equivalent move to democracy in other places in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, but also in the nominal shifts to greater 'consultation' by the authoritarian gulf States. Especially great hope was placed in the Mubarak reforms. With the US influence growing in Lebanon and a more democratic Egypt, then Palestine, Syria and Iran would be put under more pressure for liberal reforms from within. Of course the USA could talk the nice carrot-speak of liberal reforms in Syria and Iran while always threatening to wield a big stick. It seems after 2011 that both options are constantly in use ; but against Libya and Syria - the weakest regimes - the military option has won out (using allies like Saudi, Turkey, Israel and Qatar as accomplices if at all possible).

Internally what is actually happening in Egypt is a fight for justice and its democratic soul. The army (who control key segments of Egyptian industry), fight industrial workers and peasants to see who claims the benefits of the so called 'revolution', sometimes allied with Egyptian capitalists and landowners, sometimes not. The unpredictability of the Muslim Brotherhood's role stems from the same contradictions: by trying effectively to keep an all class alliance, the MB tries to balance the same conflicting interests- of the people versus the elite- whilst keeping its own autonomy and power. The Arab Spring was first claimed in this Egyptian context in January 2011 by the 'Liberal' one time Presidential candidate, Mohammed El Baradei, in of all places, Der Spiegel (a nationalist right wing pro capitalist publication- you might think this gives the game away).

Before Cameron announced our lack of strategic interests in Libya, William Hague, the British Foreign Secretary, was busily telling us that it was not 'in our interests' to see a 'de-stabilised Egypt or Tunisia'. Now in Egypt there is an acknowledgement that 'our interests' did have a part to play. Did Cameron & Hague attend the same briefing and are the ideas connected?

If Cameron's denial is not believable, it is worth considering whether also believing the opposite of Hague's announcement gives a better understanding of the imperial objectives in North Africa. Having ruled Egypt before, the British Arab experts in the Foreign Office might be playing a double game here and in Libya. A case could have been made that there may be a subsidiary British objective for Libya that would be content with a potentially disturbed stability in Egypt. It's certainly something that the Egyptian rulers are worried about. Again it is little known today but over Suez in 1956 Great Britain considered invading Egypt from Libya using their base in Tobruk (which, by the way, is a refuge today for ex Al Qaeda fighters).

### LIBYA: BOMBED INTO POST MODERNITY

Just as for Afghanistan and Latin America, early twentieth century Libyan underdevelopment was not the consequence of some primeval backwardness and tribalism, but the result of the destructive impact of the more developed world's imperial conquest. The NATO bombing of 2011, which started 8 years to the day after the shock and awe campaign on Iraq, was Libya's latest introduction to post modernity- a new beginning in bombing it backwards.

In Libya – unlike Egypt - it is only the oil revenues flowing into the centre that have created anything approximating a unified State. Libya is in effect three countries in one – two City States with their hinterlands (Tripoli and Benghazi), and the Saharan interior (Fezzan). Now what we can see is Libya potentially reverting to those natural divisions. The Foreign Office, like their equivalents in the Pentagon over Iraq (also a construct from 3 Ottoman provinces), would need to do no more than 10 minutes’ history to know this. After Libya had been conquered in 1943 – following a war fought in North Africa over Egypt – the British, French and Italians discussed splitting the country into three along these lines. The Italians would get Tripolitania; the British would get Cyrenaica. The French would get Fezzan – all the better to help them guard Algeria – something we have been reminded of in early 2013.

The Italian invasion of Libya back in 1911 symbolised their own desire for ‘lebensraum’ to settle their poor peasants and unemployed. The implications of that battle for Libya were dire. The Italians first fought the guerrillas with regular army units; then increasingly used planes and tanks; then concentration camps and ‘pacification’. The death toll was bloody. The population of Libya which is estimated to have been 750,000 in 1911 had fallen to 500,000 in 1942. The Bedouin population fell by between a half and two thirds. With Mussolini in power by late 1922 (just as Lloyd George’s coalition was brought down in Britain), the glory of Italian Empire meant the attempted total conquest of Libya. Although Tripoli had submitted to the Italians by the 1920s, in Cyrenaica a guerrilla war, with Egyptian support, continued. The Italians fought the people dirty; wells were blocked, livestock slaughtered and bombing was indiscriminate. 7 years later in 1929 a truce was negotiated and then ignored. Pre-dating the Israelis in Palestine, the Italians then in 1930 built a 200 mile barbed wire fence, 10 yards wide and 5 foot high on the Egyptian border. It was patrolled by air and by tanks; anyone penetrating it was shot. It took 20 years for the Italians to subjugate Libya. There were reputed to be 30 executions a day in Cyrenaica. Most Libyan families lost someone; Gaddafi lost a grand-father. Like Afghanistan today, there were two governments in Cyrenaica – the Italians by day and the local ‘Sanusi’ monarchist guerrillas by night. One Italian General is reputed to have said that they would conquer Libya even if the entire population of Cyrenaica had to be killed.

Even before oil, Libya was always a part of the imperial game. For the British and then for the USA, Libya was a military base with a ‘residual’ country attached. In 1939 the Sanusi monarchists were offered independence from Italy to encourage their fight. The British still bombed Benghazi in a 1,000-plane air raid; leaving barely a city, while fertile land fell into ruins. In 1942 Churchill wanted to fight to the death to save the Libyan port of Tobruk in his war for the Med.

#### AUTHORITARIAN DICTATORSHIPS AND OIL WARS

What then are some of the lessons learned in these wars of the last decade? For a 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialist they are strangely familiar – the Balkans, Central Asia, the Middle East, Mesopotamia, Persia and now Africa. Most of the Middle-East/North African countries undergoing upheavals since 2011 are both authoritarian dictatorships and oil producers. Even the smaller producers Syria, Tunisia and the Yemen’s have combined outputs as large as the present North Sea output in decline. Without oil the authoritarian regimes of Syria, Yemen, Bahrain or Oman could not fund their military to carry out repression – as oil provides at least 60 % of government revenues, and much smuggling income for the shadow economy too.

Libya was granted independence in 1951 largely because the imperial powers could not agree on who should have what. With 1200 miles of coast opposite the Southern belly of Europe, Libya had become an important military base after 1943, on which the US built a huge airbase at Wheelus, later also used in the Korean War. A form of client rule for the country needed to be devised, and the British liked deferential constitutional monarchs. King Idris was keen to rule Cyrenaica but not Tripoli in the West. For one thing Tripolitania out-numbered

Cyrenaica. In 1948 its population was 750,000 compared to only 350,000 in Cyrenaica and 60,000 in Fezzan. King Idris got the lot. The economic base in the 1950s was so weak that even then the government was the largest employer, and its payroll alone accounted for 12% of GNP. So State domination pre-dates Gaddafi, and also pre-dates the oil. In the 1960s foreign aid quadrupled, while aid and military bases together amounted to 35% of GDP (rather like Afghanistan today).

Libya did not get independence in the same way as Algeria, where it had to be fought for: in Libya in 1951 there was no mass movement, much less a movement for Independence. Ironically, given the debate over no fly zones aimed against Gaddafi in early 2011, the British were quick to sign a treaty in 1953 that gave them 'fly over' rights, while keeping their air, naval and tank bases. The Libyans did begin to show some relative autonomy: the French were told to leave Fezzan, in deference to the Algerian independence struggles. Libya was then included in the interestingly named Baghdad pact of 1955 that shored up the dynastic monarchies of Iraq, Jordan and the Gulf States – and which Egypt's Nasser opposed. These Absolute Monarchies now form many of the regimes under pressure in the troubles of 2011.

Modern Libya –especially Cyrenaica - has been heavily influenced by Egypt. The Libyan King had lived there in exile – there were more Egyptian teachers in Libyan schools than Libyans. It is not a coincidence that the appearance of a successful uprising to unseat President Mubarak in February 2011 was seen as a model by some protestors in Benghazi. Even more for Gaddafi himself, the so-called Free Officers' Movement of the 1960s was modelled on a similar movement in the 1950s led by Colonel Nasser. No wonder that Gaddafi was embroiled in Chad and the Sudan – again he had learned the lessons about artificial boundaries left by the colonial powers. We are now seeing the further consequences of artificially created States – as in the enormous French Sudan – now better known as Mali.

#### GAME OVER MUBARAK

'Game Over Mubarak' was a popular Egyptian slogan in early 2011. The Mubarak games – in complicity with the USA - may have come to an end. But unfortunately for Egyptians, another game goes on – starting with the military and the Muslim Brotherhood - as more strikes and protests break out in early 2013.

In the usual round of TV interviews in the midst of the first February up-rising, one US diplomat on CNN said that the US concern was not about 'choosing' who should next lead Egypt. As we have learnt from Blair, Cameron and Hague ( ), from the point of the US elite this is exactly what the new Egyptian 'game' is about. It is not the exact person who matters – in Iraq the US had had to settle for Al-Maliki, who was not their original choice, or Karzai in Afghanistan who was more so. Client rulers are needed who will accept their status with regard both to the US, the Middle East and crucially Israel.

One strong suspicion remained until the 2012 Egyptian election (and potentially beyond), that one US administration strategic option was to prepare the Egyptian military, behind the façade of a phony 'electoral reform', for the future possibility of an even more brutal crackdown. At present the US seems to be keeping all its options open by backing all sides - bar radicals and strikers, that is.

Why since February 2011 have the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – now in Presidential power via Mohammed Morsi - talked cosy to the supreme military council? Apart from being more conservative than some might think, the MB have said it was because of a 'threat on their borders'. I suggest the implied threat to the nationalist MB in Egypt (who fought the British from 1919-56) comes from their worry about Cyrenaica. As it suited the 'realpolitik' of the USA to allow a civil war and fragmentation in Iraq and Afghanistan – on the basis of divide and rule - then civil war and stalemate in Egypt may be a preferred scenario for

imperial interests. Why should this be so? The most important reason is that having had Egypt safely under their wing (mediated via Israel) since 1974, the imperial powers do not now want to 'lose' it. A 'democratic revolution' may mean a more aggressive nationalist stance from Egypt; and specifically against the West's important Client State, Israel.

A nationalist movement dominated by the MB may be akin to that in Iran under Mossadeq in the 1950s: anti-imperialist but not necessarily anti-capitalist. More worrying for the imperialists would be a return to an Egypt of the 1950s – a Nasser- like regime dominated by an aggressive military (an aggressive Algerian military in league with Putin funded Gaddafi at the end).

In 2011 gaining Libya as a proper client State was therefore a good compensation – using the cover of so called revolutions – for any 'losses' for the West in an Egypt potentially going more anti-west and anti-Israel. Biggest worry of all: the development of a radical 'Islamic regime in Egypt – a sister to Iran – which has been the main US and Saudi enemy in the region since 1979. Keep an eye on the stand-off in Bahrain with a majority Shia community and ruling Sunni royal family, which could become another proxy battle between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

It is still far too early to say whether any of these elusive revolutions will be a success. In Egypt, replacing Mubarak is not a revolution. Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak were all creatures of the army. For 60 years the military ruled - replacing many years of British martial law before it. There is now a media consensus that Mubarak was replaced because of the up-risings – and Syria is assumed to be akin – which it is not. Yemen had equal and less reported troubles and a new client ruler was found. Yes the army moved in Egypt because of the up-risings – but they wanted Mubarak out of the way anyway.

The possible outcome in Egypt could be far less of a 'revolution' – hence the continuing strikes and protests - and far more about finding another suitable client ruler – with a bit more nationalist democratic rhetoric. The struggle in Egypt to make a revolution continues.

#### A NEW ENERGY CRISIS ?

Today we may face an oil price-driven inflation (hitting food prices especially) and a stagnant EU economy of rising (especially youth) unemployment. We should remember that it was this combination of rising prices and rising unemployment - when allied to western supported authoritarian dictatorships- that lay at the heart of what some have called the Arab Spring.

Along with the turmoil in the Middle East/North Africa, we now face a potential Energy Crisis which for me is part of a larger capitalist crisis. For a historical comparison the global economy today is better compared with that of the 1920s, not the much more quoted 1930s. This is partly because, as in the 1920s, other key parts of the global economy – in Asia, Latin America and even Africa, are growing. It is the EU (and Japan) that are stagnating – as Europe was in the 1920s. In the UK in the 1920s there was a triple dip – at the start (1920-1), in the middle (1926) and at the end (1929). There were 20 years of relative stagnation – it took until 1934 for UK Gross Domestic Production per capita to go past that of 1913. A long bust can follow a long boom- look at Japan since 1989. George Osborne needs this analogy to be wrong, otherwise defeat confronts the Coalition in 2015. In the 1970s the recession was caused by rising oil prices. Today oil is not the cause - but the recession looks likely to be accompanied by rising or high oil prices.

For all the politicians' talk of a low carbon world, what Britain actually faces – and the world economy even more so - is continued dependence on fossil fuels. In 2011 oil, gas and coal accounted for 87% of the world's energy consumption. Global dirty coal use rose by 5 % and by 10 % in one year in China alone. When Britain was at her economic peak we produced

around 250 million tons of coal - some for export. China today produces 2 billion tons a year – nearly 10 times as much. Despite huge spending on renewables, on the International Energy Agency forecasts we will still depend on fossil fuels for 80 % of our energy in 2030.

#### FLOATING ON A WAVE OF OIL

Lord Curzon, Vice-Roy of India and Foreign Secretary (and nearly Prime Minister in the Tory austerity years of the 1920s) spoke of Iran as one of the pawns on the global chess board, after the UK invaded it in 1914 when Iran declared itself neutral like Belgium. After the Great War his view was that the allies had ‘floated to victory on a wave of oil’ – the allies had the oil for their military machine and the Germans did not. In Tripoli in 2011 it looks as though in oil-rich Libya the allied-supplied rebels won partly because they had oil for their attacks, the Gaddafi regime had less.

When George Bush II initiated the war in Iraq it was part of the project to keep the 21<sup>st</sup> century under capitalist control. These boys are playing it long – a century long. And as Iraq oil looms up a decade later as ever more important, give it another decade or so and Libya oil might prove Mr Cameron right in his intervention - from the empire’s point of view. But of course he took us to war like Blair for the Empire of Capital – quite the opposite of what he claims.

The oil price has been driven to new long run equilibriums by the global geopolitics of the Empire of Oil. As the events of 2011-13 Arab Spring have shown this will be as true in the twenty first century, as it was in the twentieth. The oil market has been telling us since 2011 that we are in a new energy era – and the political risks for our ‘energy security’ from North Africa and the Middle East lie at the heart of this. Our politicians know this instinctively too – that’s why they don’t tell us the truth about the wars they fight.

## **OIL AND THE BREAK-UP OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE**

### **BACK TO IRAQ**

The post 9/11 attempt to re-incorporate Iraq back into the sphere of global capital has its origins in the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. The needs of Empire ruled supreme for British policy on the Ottomans. After taking over Egypt in 1882, further attempts to break into the fringes of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East were precipitated by the discovery of massive oil deposits in Iran in 1908. The imperial competition for both territory and oil was most acute between Britain, France, Russia and the USA - nominally all allies after 1914.

The British, as ever, feared Russia taking too many pieces from the Ottomans: hence they divided Iran between them and accepted the stand-off which created Afghanistan. Disraeli, anticipating Neville Chamberlain, had even claimed 'peace with honour' after the 1884/5 Berlin Conference, which had limited the Russian-supported expansion of Bulgaria. Balkan Christians at this point would be sacrificed, despite Gladstone's scruples, as the price of keeping Turkish support against Russia, as previously in the Crimean war.

As the Turkish Empire grew weaker, Britain was first able to support the foundation of Kuwait in 1896-9, and then drew the boundaries between Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq in 1922. There was also conflict in the area between the UK and the US over oil. Although the US at this point produced 80 percent of the world's oil, it only had 1/12 of the reserves.

In 1916 the British and French had carved out the Middle Eastern oil reserves and respective spheres of control: the British were to get Palestine, Jordan and Iraq; the French Lebanon and Syria. Apart from the oil, the main territorial dispute had been over heavily Kurdish Mosul, which the French allowed to go into Northern Iraq. The US elite were furious: they were even implicated in raising the standard of Arab nationalism and anti-imperialism (anti-British that is) especially in Shiite Karbala. They were eventually cut into the deal in 1920.

War was not declared against Turkey as a German ally until November, but troops were sent in October 1914. Ferguson points out that in 1914 120 million of the world's Muslims, out of a total of 270 million, lived under British, French or Russian rule. The Turkish Sultan, in his role as caliph, with the Kaiser's explicit encouragement, declared a jihad immediately.

After taking Basra, the British had a disastrous campaign in Iraq. When Baghdad was taken in March 1917 the army proclaimed themselves as liberators. Kitchener had promised independence but only under a British 'protectorate'.

The Ottomans had mainly left the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala alone; indeed in 1915/16 there were strong protests against Turkish conscription. When a jihad was declared against the British in Iraq in Karbala in 1921, the first bombing and gassing of the Kurds was suggested by Churchill, when Colonial Secretary, to create a 'lively terror'. The RAF practiced its aerial bombing campaigns of 1943-5 first on Kurdish Iraqi villages in the 1920s. The policy was still sanctioned by the minority Labour Government of 1924. Kurdish leaders were shot without trial. Villages were destroyed for not paying tax.

### **KURDISTAN AND IRAQ: FROM COLONY TO SADDAM**

As with the US much later in Vietnam, Iraq was a testing-ground for new weapons in the 1920s - especially rockets and fire bombs with delayed action and phosphate. Bomber Harris learnt his trade here by suggesting that bombs should be dropped in every village that 'speaks out of turn'. The RAF liked the bombing as it was cost effective; used against Turkish troops in Kurdistan in 1922, the threat of such British weapons of mass destruction kept a revivalist

Turkey from re-conquering Iraq. As Simons concludes it was 'the RAF which was the midwife of modern Iraq' .

Seven years after the 'liberation', in 1924 the British set up the first constituent assembly in Iraq. This was followed by parliamentary elections in 1925 and the first of two military treaties, the second in 1930 with a Labour government, giving the British bases near Baghdad and Basra respectively. In this period, the UN mandate was 'manipulated' to provide a legal 'cloak of respectability' for effective colonial rule. Even when Iraq joined the League of Nations in 1932, both its domestic and its foreign policies of landlord (and largely Sunni) elite rule were sustained by the British military and dictated to by Britain- not unlike Iraq in 2005 under the US, except for the Sunni rulers, who have therefore formed the major part of the violent opposition.

Such an unstable client regime faced six coup attempts between 1936 and 41. When war broke out, a pro-German coup of March 1940, threatening to cut the oil pipeline to the Mediterranean, was put down with British troops from Basra in April. The King remained in power until 1958 with a regime in which two thirds of the cultivable land was owned by 2 per cent of the people. Fifty families owned 20 per cent of the land while the bulk of the population was landless.

The Ba'ath party that first came to power in 1958, consolidated in 1968, and by 1979 had spawned Saddam Hussein, began in Syria and owed its origins to the protest against British rule in the 1920s. It was also viewed suspiciously by the French who thought the British and the US were using it to undermine their position. The first Iraqi Ba'ath party members did not appear until 1951 and even in 1958 there were only 300 members. Its vision was Pan-Arab, but, like similar developments in Latin America, based on an attempt to create a viable national capitalism with social welfare for the masses. As it came to power, welfare expenditure doubled even as land occupations and riots took place in Kirkuk.

Once they had adjusted, the US and the British found the Ba'athists useful for their virulent anti-communism. Indeed, the persecution of the Iraqi Communist party, which had organised the small sector of urban industrial workers, dominated the 1960s. The problems and benefits, however, revolved around oil. The 1963 counter coup against the Ba'ath came a few days after the announcement of a new national oil company; but the Ba'athists, once they had returned to power in 1968, eventually nationalized in 1973; a policy only reversed 30 years later by the US. Even the army coup of 1963, which led to a virtual state of war against the Kurds, had involved nationalization of the banks and industry. But they were a small part of the economy- the key elite control of the land was left untouched.

## FROM SADDAM TO DIVIDED IRAQ

Tikrit is famous historically, not only for being the birth-place of Saladin the Kurd, but for its memorial of severed heads following the 1394 Mongol invasion. This would also be a fitting memorial for the Tikriti faction's domination of the Ba'ath party. As Deputy General secretary of the party from 1966, Saddam Hussein was head of a Security State, which he modeled on the Nazi SS. Purges usually took out whole families.

The oil wealth then enabled Saddam to build up a private sector, with multi-millionaires beholden to him, whilst then squandering the oil proceeds on palaces and wars against Iran and Kuwait. The CIA links with Saddam had been maintained through the 1980s with the George Bush I administration agreeing weapon licenses right up to the day before the Kuwait invasion. The hope, even at this late stage, of pulling Iraq into the US orbit had led the Bush I strategists to assume that Iraq might just take the disputed islands in the Shatt al-Arab waterway. The US imperialism that later spawned Bin Laden from the struggle against communism in Afghanistan had also spawned a terrorist as Head of State in Iraq. The Bush

imperial family took ten years to undo this miscalculation.

Iraq is sometimes presented, like Vietnam, as an 'abysmal failure', but for its early apologists, like Fukuyama, it is a 'mistake', a line borrowed by New Labour. The policy of dismantling the Ba'athist State apparatus and army after 2003 is seen as a bad initial post war planning mistake, which then set the scene for the ensuing 'anarchy'. Blair's ambassador to the US has since written of being misled over this. The casting aside of the State Department at the last minute by Don Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney in favour of the Pentagon's 'plans' is seen as the crucial error. It may be that Ambassador Manning, Geoff Hoon (British Minister for War) and Blair were easily fooled. It is tempting to believe that Rumsfeld and Cheney were also simply fools to cast aside the State Department's knowledge.

However, a reading of the geo-politics implies that the US ruling elite were perfectly well aware of what they were doing. It is classic divide and rule – the Kurds grateful for at last having a proxy State (and potential oil revenues) of their own; the Shia just wanting to get on and rule, especially in the South. The State department must have known that a civil war in Iraq was highly likely. They also knew that it would provide ample justification for the US troops to stay, which is really what the neo-imperialists wanted.

For 5 years the British public were told that 'our' troops cannot leave Iraq as the civil war rages on. Yet it was crystal clear to anyone who knew Iraq's history that what had been three separate provinces within the Ottoman Empire States were likely to be set at war against each other. 'Our' role in the continuing civil war in Iraq has not been quite as simple as in the mainstream media presents. Our boys have not just held a humanitarian peace, anymore than the military did in Vietnam. The first change in 2007, it was claimed, was when 'we' had sided with some Sunni 'insurgents' against 'foreign al- Qaeda'. In fact since the surge of 2007-8 the key in the Sunni areas has been that 100,000 ex insurgents are paid to fight for the US. The British role was not and never has been as a neutral peace maker. Wittingly or not, we have been at the heart of a game to control global resources, often using local political conflict as an excuse for intervention.

## SHIA IRAQ AND IRAN

The biggest irony of the US propaganda for world consumption is the interventionist role of Shia Iran in Shia Iraq. Naturally, most of the Shia political parties have Iranian connections. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the most senior Shia cleric in Iraq, who became so important to the USA with his support for elections in 2005, was born in Iran and has extensive Iranian interests. The Islamic Supreme Council for Iraq (ISCI) - with whom the USA was much in league in 2003-6- has always had close ties to Iran. After Iran's 1979 revolution Shia religious and political leaders were executed in Iraq and many activists fled to Iran. During the Iraq-Iran war ISCI's Badr Brigade fought against Saddam. With the ending of that war, the Iranian government began to reduce its support, pushing ISCI's leaders to search for another backer. Towards the end of the 1990s they eventually found one: the US State Department. The Badr brigade entered Iraq openly from Iran in May 2003. ISCI was then part of the original US-appointed Iraqi government of July 2003. A better case of the US pot calling the kettle black would be hard to find.

The main battle in Shia Iraq 2006-8 has been between Nouri Al Maliki, the Prime Minister since 2006, and the Mehdi Army militia of the Sadrists. The original power base of its present leader, Muqtada al-Sadr (hence the 'Sadrism' label ) comes from Sadr City, a 'teeming slum' of two to three million poor Shias- sister city to Baghdad. The Sadrists have always viewed al Maliki, the ISCI and the Iranians with suspicion, partly because the Badr Brigade did not come into Iraq from Iran to help at the time of the Iraqi Shia uprisings against Saddam Hussein in 1991 and 1999. Just as the Sadrists were being presented by the US as Iranian pawns ISCI had become potential pawns of the USA. Only since the US attacks on Najaf,

Sadr City and in Baghdad during the US surge were the Sadrists forced to make overtures to Iran. This need was reinforced by a hostile secular middle class Shia who were finding the Sadrists too much like the Taliban.

The provincial elections of January 2009 would appear to indicate a nationalist rejection of ISCI's assumed complicity with the failures of US rule. Al Maliki, although nominally from the cleric-founded Dawa Party, has increasingly played the nationalist card, taking credit for the 2008 agreement for US combat troops to withdraw. Besides buying support from tribal leaders in both Sunni and Shia areas, Al Maliki has also gained credibility by endorsing the Iraqi army attacks in Basra in 2008 which eventually led Al Sadr to declare a ceasefire and has kept the death toll down since. Sadrist front organisations still rule in much of Sadr City and gained better success in the elections than ISCI. With 38 percent of the vote in Baghdad and 37 percent in Basra, Al Maliki could become Iraq's new strongman client ruler – perhaps not so different, after all, from Saddam.

Rather more cleverly than the US, perhaps, the Iranians have been prepared to back all potential Shia contenders to keep their options open. From 2005 the Iranians were giving some help to the Sadrists and, like the US, paying some to fight in 'their' Mehdi Army. At least it means that the Allied propaganda is now partly right and certainly self fulfilling. As one Kurdish leader argued, it is much more sensible for the Iranians to fight the US in Baghdad (or Basra) rather than in Tehran.

## THE MAGICAL STATE

### VENEZUELA AND IRAN

Ultimately, this battle between state capitalists determines the price of oil. Controlling the oil rent has external geo-political and huge internal implications. In Venezuela the oil resource supplied what the Venezuelan anthropologist Fernando Coronil called the 'magical State'; controlling the State becomes the magical route to its riches. As emphasised by the 'Arab Spring' and the continuing imperial threat to Iran, it has become ever clearer that any Energy crisis – most clearly seen in rising oil and gas prices – will accompany a growing State capitalist crisis in the West. The US attempt to use its military power and its proxy wars to assert its control of this struggle for continued global hegemony against the threat from China (and perhaps Russia) is clear.

In terms of its impact on oil prices the struggle for hegemony in the Middle East only became noticeable in the 1970s. Both the over-throw of Mossadeq's nationalist regime in Iran in 1953 and then the Suez Crisis were big clues to the future. The oil barons and the political strategists had known this before – but plentiful supplies from the Middle East especially from Saudi Arabia helped put off the pressure through the boom of the 1950s. I shall look briefly here at 2 examples from Iran and Saudi Arabia to look at the political struggles that led to the formation of the national oil companies (NOCs).

Let's put the Iranian struggle in a brief post-World War Two context. From early on in Iran, oil revenues enabled the expansion of the Central State; even by the 1920s they provided 25% of state revenues, and in 1922, the new military spent half of it. A new agreement in 1933 improved relations between BP and Iran so that oil production doubled from 1927-37. As early as 1930, Iran had overtaken Mexico to become the 4<sup>th</sup> largest oil producer. By the late 1940s oil had a larger impact as new wealth flowed into urban industries especially Tehran, which grew to be 7 times larger than the next biggest city, Isfahan. In both 1914 and 1941 the UK and Russia invaded for the oil, while Russia also took the Iranian Azerbaijan harvest.

By the 1944 elections there were two major political parties in Iran: the Tudeh (the 'Party of the Masses of Iran'), which was a nationalist party, but had a strong communist influence in its leadership; and the National Front (NF), which was led by landowner politicians like Mossadeq. The early post war democratic coalition of the combined Tudeh and National Front in Tehran lasted only 77 days and with US and British support a new young Shah was brought back. By 1945, the US was guaranteeing Turkish and Iranian independence under the Truman Doctrine of 1947.

Mossadeq's NF was a coalition stretching from conservative clerics to left wing secular nationalists. The only thing that held it together was a common campaign against Great Britain. As in Nasser's Egypt, the NF was anti-communist but BP nationalization was in its programme. 75 per cent of the industrial workforce was unionised and oil worker strikes in 1944 and 1946 emphasised their power. The Aramco (Saudi Arabian Oil Company) deal in Saudi due to start in 1951 – on much more generous 50/50 terms (taken from the example of Venezuela) - undid the Shah's deal with BP. Iran, however, was then BP's sole source of crude. When more oil strikes and martial law followed in March 1951, parliament voted in April to nationalise BP, but it was not until May that Mossadeq became PM as the Shah attempted to put the lid on the situation.

## IRAN: BOYCOTT AND STATE CAPITALISM

What most internal analysis of Iran tends to side-step from here is the boycott of Iranian oil by all the major oil companies after nationalisation. In the battle that he saw (correctly) between a declining UK and a rising US imperialism Mossadeq had hoped to gain from US support against BP. But this was 1951, not 1971. It was before the Western boom had truly got underway and before the rise of independents like Italy's ENI hungry for oil. BP had already been struggling to find outlets for its increased Iranian output as Saudi output surged. The key to note is that the Iranian oil crisis of 1951-3 and the complete elimination of Iranian oil from the world market had no impact on oil prices. Today this would be impossible. It was the oil companies more than the CIA that destroyed Mossadeq's regime. The CIA simply filled in the last chapter. Mossadeq's own coalition was also fracturing. The leading Ayatollah of the time fell out with him as Mossadeq requested a temporary dictatorship. The Iranian bourgeois who had gone along with it all now saw they were losing out because of the boycott. But there were demonstrations against the Shah, with Tudeh support in Tehran and a general strike in Tabriz and Isfahan. The Shah fled to London. Here was a trial run for 1978-9. The entry of the working masses onto the streets scared the landowners and nationalist supporters of Mossadeq, who was eventually overthrown in the coup of August 1953, financed by the US and UK .

Iran in 1953 was not ready for a revolution. Within another generation and after a sustained and divisive oil boom, the 1970s were to provide a different outcome – the creation of the National Iranian Oil Company in July 1979. The State's desire to then stimulate 'modern' industries in Iran is understandable. With a population 4 times higher than in the 1950s, peasants were still leaving the land and the oil industry only employed 30,000. But Iran's oil workers – often forgotten today in the debates about the liberal 'greens and the so called conservative hardliners - have been one of the most concentrated groups of the urban industrial proletariat in the Middle East and were to be a key component of the protests of the late 1970s. The old Iranian petty bourgeois which lay behind the political pressures for democratic reform from the 19<sup>th</sup> century were also being squeezed by State generated wealth. In 1979 the floodgates of at least 50 years of anger opened. Most of the old Establishment in the army and secret police 'changed sides'. For all the headiness about this national democratic revolution the old instruments of the autocracy remained intact. Iran after 1979 has been rather like France after 1789. As one writer put it: 'we asked for rain and we got a flood'.

In 1976 there were 183 multinationals in Iran, but their investments were heavily concentrated around energy, and the State owned – and still owns – most of the banking Capital. Nuclear developments started then under the Shah with the co-operation of the USA. By the end of the Shah's reign, and even before the oil was nationalised in July 1979 the State was the largest employer, the largest industrialist and the largest banker. Iran has not changed much on this front.

## SAUDI ARABIA: THE CONQUEST STATE

It was not until I studied its history carefully that I realised how implicated British colonial and imperial policy has been in the creation of Saudi Arabia. A nasty, corrupt, aggressive and militaristic major oil producer bears the substantial imprint of British (and latterly US) foreign policy.

The arrogance of Saudi rule is not known by most in the UK but is perhaps seen more clearly if one knows how the regime treats dissenters or women. The national title is in itself revealing. Saudi Arabia is a hangover from Medieval Absolutism – like Plantaganet England, or to make it more modern, think of calling Britain 'Windsor England'. For England is not owned by its royal family, and nor should Arabia be claimed as owned by the Saudi royalty.

Yet if we study Saudi history we can see that the Saudi State of the twentieth century is a 'conquest State'. It has also been described as the 'world's leading autocracy'; if one brackets Saudi Arabia with Burma and North Korea it gives an indication of its dictatorship, but Saudi is 'leading' because it is undoubtedly more powerful.

It is a State where the British funded its conquests a century ago and have been happy to gain billions in arms sales as soon as Saud had some oil money. It is a Warlord State which makes the Taliban warlords look to have a small line in war by comparison, and it has bought arms in a way that makes Gaddafi look like a nomadic tent dweller. It is a State that has been- and still is - aided and abetted by us.

It should never be forgotten that the Saudis conquered Arabia in the twentieth century and have border disputes with all their neighbours. Most of all, Saudi Arabia has attempted to dominate Yemen where the Saudis have acted for years to keep a compliant conservative regime in place since the revolutionary threats of the 1960s. The last time there was a radical regime in the area under Nasser, the Saudis and the Egyptians fought a proxy war in the Yemen. If the Yemen wobbles, it is Saudi's Southern under belly that gets exposed. Whether this is eventually to be repeated with Iran over Bahrain remains to be seen.

It is the oil money that has funded the Saudi fiefdoms and enabled not only it, but the other Gulf States to remain run by their Sultans. These conservative regimes, supported by imperial interests, will remain a block on all global progressive developments not only in Arabia, but across the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

As the British Empire reached its largest ever territorial extent in 1918 it created in the Middle East what one British General (Archibald Wavell) called a 'Peace to End all Peace'. In the joint French and British deal over the area Arabia fell into the British sphere of paramount influence. The regime and conquests of King Ibn Saud fitted British requirements for a series of 'protectorates' and client rulers.

The 'peace' created by the Liberal-Tory coalition of 1922 was not designed for the peoples of the Middle East but for the needs of Britain and France, and for the rationalisation and destruction of the Ottoman Empire.

## ENDLESS WAR IN ARABIA

Traditionally Arabia had faced the Ottoman Empire, Egypt and Iran as its rivals. What then became Saudi Arabia, as Saud proclaimed it in 1932, starting from the Najd, his historic base in Central Arabia, to his conquest of 80 percent of the territory of Arabia (but less of the population) – came about mainly because the British wanted a reliable client State to replace Ottoman rule. With the British still ruling Egypt (but under pressure there) and in danger of losing control over Iran to the Russians, Arabia was a useful strategic addition to the British imperial armoury. So much so that the Saudi State was virtually a 'British invention'. Ibn Saud's brutal conquests of Najd, Hasa, Qatif and Jubayl were recognised as early as 1915 with the crucial addition of the competing Rashidi emirate, which the British had formerly backed, by 1921.

The ideology of the new Saudi Conquest State was what has become known as Wahhabism. It is important not just to see this in religious terms – as some extremist Islamist movement. One crucial aspect – helpful to the British Empire – was that the re-unification of much of Arabia (to a degree not achieved since the seventh century) did not therefore depend on nationalism, independence or any strong rhetoric of self rule against Empire. Wahhabi religious rhetoric was to be the unifying concept of conquest. This had a historical as much as a religious base. For Saud's family control of Arabia had last been based (in the eighteenth century from 1744-

1818) on Wahhabism's ideological coercion. Although the Saud family had no historic links to Mecca or Medina, the control of the Western province of Hijaz (which included those two cities) was thereby imbued with a religious significance – claiming a Saudi Arabian importance for Islam which it had previously lacked. Wahhabism also justified Saud's centralising tendencies. A much more traditional Najd based philosophy won out over the more cosmopolitan Hijaz and Hasa. This controlling conquest-driven philosophy – supported by Britain as it had done for Ugandan and Ethiopian expansion - dominates the rest of the Arabian peninsula, and is especially important when we come to look at Saudi relations with Yemen in the South.

The Ottoman Empire first incorporated Hijaz and Hasa (the West and East coasts of Arabia respectively) in the sixteenth century – but as in Yemen the mountainous interior – the Najd – was never conquered until 1818. That Ottoman revival was led by Egyptian forces in Arabia who beheaded the Saudi leader. It could be said that Egypt and Saudi have been rivals ever since: in the new post-2011 context it will be interesting to see what modus vivendi will be worked out between the Egyptian military, Saudi oil money and whatever joint operations are under way in Syria. In 1824 the new Saudi King re-captured Riyadh but was killed, while his son was imprisoned in Cairo. From then on the Egyptians played on rivalries within the Saud royal family. They also backed a rival emirate from the North – the Rashid family, which in turn attacked Yemen and took Hasa in 1871.

By the 1870s the British were warning the Ottomans off Aden, their base in Yemen. One countervailing power lay in their treaty with Kuwait. It was Kuwaiti dislike of Rashid power than led the Kuwaitis to back Saud again in 1899 – so that the centenary of modern Saudi Arabia was celebrated in 1999.

#### THE TIME OF CORRUPTION: AUTHORITARIAN RULE IN ARABIA

Until 1924 the British supplied Saud with rifles, machine guns and a regular subsidy. King Ibn Saud has been described as a 'Bedouin chief for hire', a role to be repeated 60 years later when the Saudis part-funded the original Taliban in Afghanistan to help the US fight the Russians. From 1902-24 it was the British subsidy and support that changed the balance of power in Arabia.

Early Saudi raids often went beyond today's borders – Karbala near Basra in today's Iraq was raided in the first Wahhabi era in 1801; a century later raids into today's Oman, Syria and Yemen took place. When the UK subsidy was stopped, the Saudis took Mecca in December 1924 and Jeddah in December 1925. At this point, the British started to worry about their recent ally; in 1929 the RAF bombed Saudi forces to protect the borders of both Iraq and Jordan.

The Saudis kept on expanding: as the British now blocked expansion to the North and East, the Saudis moved South and West. South of Hijaz was the fertile emirate of Asir, traditionally a buffer zone with Yemen; this was taken in 1930. Just to add to the British worry both in Hasa in 1913 and in Taif in Hijaz in 1924 there were substantial Wahhabi-led purges against Shia populations. The massacres in Hijaz were substantial, with one estimate of up to 400,000 killed and 1 million who fled.

By the time of proclamation of Saudi Arabia in 1932 the new kingdom in Arabia was the size of the USA East of the Mississippi. A British syndicate had found oil in the 1920s but did nothing, for the British already had oil in Iran and Iraq. After 1945, the new oil wealth was to transform the Middle East's political economy.

As with so many areas under colonial and/or imperial rule, the natural divides of Yemen – largely between North and South but also between Sunni and Shia and rural and urban – came

to a head with the impact of modernity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The key came with the overthrow of the old Zeidi Imams – rulers in North Yemen in 1962. The civil war that resulted in the North brought both Nasser's Egypt and Saudi Arabia into direct conflict but also had knock-on effects into the South.

Zeidi Sunni fighters under Imam Yahya had rebelled against Ottoman rule – encouraged by Britain in 1905 (coinciding with other 'spring rebellions' in Russia and Iran) and North Yemen was recognised as an independent State in 1911. There were boundary clashes between North Yemen and the British in Aden throughout the 1920s; so much so that the RAF bombed the major city, Taiz in 1928. By 1934 Yahya had conquered most of North Yemen, but the border with Saudi Najd was split by desert and little defined; the British left the two to squabble over it through the 1930s. Indeed fighting in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is still going on in this border area. As today in Libya the new Protectorate – in a deal with Britain signed in 1934 - was designed to protect British interests, not the people.

### SAUDI AND EGYPT: A COMPETITIVE RELATIONSHIP IN YEMEN

Given the Arabian, Middle Eastern and international contexts, it is impossible to overstate the importance of Saudi Arabia's role in the Yemen since the 1930s. Given that the Saudis have continually come to the rescue of the authoritarian rulers of the North Yemen – and more recently of the whole of the Yemen – it is a role that has helped lock the Yemen into a cycle of poverty and war. This is despite Yemen's long term oil potential too.

After establishing their rule in Arabia by 1932, the Saudis had toyed with the idea of annexing the Yemen. Britain - feeling the pressures of border conflicts with their own control of Iraq and Jordan- had warned them off; as symbolised by the deal of 1934. However, three times in the next generation the Saudis came to the rescue of North Yemen's rulers – in 1948, 1955 and 1962. As in 2011, it is interesting to see how much protests in the Yemen coincide with heightened tensions elsewhere in the Middle East. Protests first broke out after the war in 1947 at the time of the British versus Israeli struggle. The RAF again bombed recalcitrant peasants, Yahya was killed, and after the attempted coup of 1948, Sanaa the capital was sacked by the Saudis.

Absolutist rule was indelibly linked to the people's poverty. High taxes were pushing many Yemenis to migrate to Ethiopia, the Sudan, the US and the UK. By the 1950s with a population of around 4 million, the Yemeni peasants were free but poor: up to 80 percent, most of whom lived on the plains, were share croppers; the rest in the mountains were small farmers. Sometimes up to 75 percent of their income would be taken in tax and debts; with interest rates of 200 percent and bribes common. Pressure against the old regime built to a head – so that by 1962 virtually all segments of North Yemen society were opposed to it. Coffee exports had fallen to a quarter of the level of 20 years earlier. The army was growing restive after a military alliance with Egypt in 1958. Influenced inevitably by Nasser and the Baathists, with some Islamic protest too, the opposition called for reforms and the President was nearly assassinated in 1961. In September 1962 tanks fired on the Imam's palace, killing him. Then the vestiges of North Yemeni absolutism were overthrown: slavery, hostage-taking and the Imam's role were all abolished. The ruling family had its land confiscated.

The Saudi Royal family stayed friends with Egypt under Nasser with a defence deal in 1955; set against the British-inspired Baghdad Pact. Over Suez the Saudis supported the Egyptians, who were training the Saudi army. The Saudi royal family nominally adopted the rhetoric of Arab nationalism, but all changed after an attempted coup against the Saud family in 1957. Although they too had their coups, the Saudis nudged closer to the Iraqis as a counter-weight to Egypt. The final break came over the civil war in North Yemen. As the Egyptians sent in troops to the Yemen within the first week of the 'revolution', the Saudis broke off diplomatic relations in November 1962. By then there were 20,000 Egyptian troops in North Yemen. In

Jan 1963 Egyptian planes bombed Saudi positions near the North Yemeni border. But Royalist troops fought back and between 1962 and 1964 15,000 Egyptian troops were killed. As in Gaddafi's 'revolution', the crowds were mobilised, but the rulers were 'terrified' of any mass organisation controlled from below.

#### YEMEN: COLONIAL AND IMPERIAL INHERITANCE

If one was dependent on the corporate media for a view on the Middle East since the start of the Tunisian and Egyptian upheavals in 2011, one would see authoritarian dictatorships versus youth on the streets; repressive and ruthless regimes haphazardly shooting their own people. The West is depicted as a benign bystander keen to see more liberal democracies develop in the area, making sympathetic noises about unnecessary killing or embarrassed side-steps around the criticism that they may have sold weapons to the regimes. Any casual study of the actual history of these nations shows this to be yet again a propaganda version. Colonial rule and imperial domination so drive the modern history of Yemen, Syria and the Gulf states that the West has never been a benign bystander.

The history of modern Yemen can be dated from the British take-over of Aden – the best potential port site on the Arabian Peninsula – in 1839. Aden had been a successful entrepot during Europe's middle ages; when Marco Polo visited in 1276 it had a population of 80,000. Even with a population of just 500 in 1839, British Indian troops had to fight for 3 days to win it. Just to emphasise its imperial role the Aden colony and surrounding 'Protectorates' were run from India until 1927. Britain wanted Aden as a bunkering facility on the Gibraltar to India route via Malta and Crete. As late as 1964, Aden was the fourth largest bunkering port in the world, surpassed only by Liverpool, London and New York. Who remembers now all that black and white TV coverage of our boys threatened by terrorists back in Aden in the 1960s? Today's coverage is as if 'we' had never been.

Although both Egypt and Turkey attempted to take Yemen, neither ever controlled the Yemeni mountains. Egypt attacked again in 1849 by which time the Turks controlled Yemen's Red Sea coast. An attack on the Capital Sana'a led to a massacre of Turkish troops. Yemen became known as Turkey's 'graveyard' .

As the North Yemeni war degenerated into a stalemate in 1965-7, and the Egyptians held onto the triangle bounded by Sanaa, Taiz and Hodeida, war and arms became a major form of survival in Yemen (as in Afghanistan now). Selling and using arms for all sides became the main game, so much so that some fighters were accused of being 'royalists (the opposition) by day and republicans (pro-regime) by night'. The big oil producers like Iran and Saudi Arabia may be 'Magical States' for their ruling elites and for international companies, but the magic often wears thin for the majority of their own populations, and for countries who are unfortunate enough to be their neighbours.

## **SYRIA, SOMALIA AND BAHRAIN**

### **SYRIA: AT THE CROSSROADS OF EMPIRE**

Reading the modern history of Syria since 1918 it seems that it is Syria that has been at the ‘centre of the cross currents’ of Empire rather more than Israel. This was just as true in 2011, as the Arab Spring made its appearance in Syria too. What we call Syria today has, like Israel, been fought over throughout history between Egypt, Babylon, the Hittites, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Turks. Cairo and Baghdad had crucial influence on Syrian developments then as they do today.

Syria is often a ‘mirror of rival interests’. Given that most of ‘our’ day to day knowledge of the country is transmitted through an imperial and corporate mindset dominated broadly by ‘Western’ interests, it would be wise therefore to be suspicious of which faces of the mirror are presented to us. What may appear to be a true picture of Syria – its protests and violence – is only what our rulers wish us to see through their own mirror. Given the lack of analysis generally in the West on Syria, it is through a mirror darkly at best.

Syria, like the Golan Heights, is a good observation post from which to observe ‘great power politics’. These power games are a murky enough read in themselves, and they are further confused by Syria’s ‘complex internal politics’.

It has an ancient economic history as a centre of entrepot trade in the Eastern Mediterranean to rival that of Venice and Genoa further West. But the modern politics of Syria is a story of the problems both of the colonial occupation after 1918 and of the fight against it. In this it shares a politics with surrounding States – with Algeria (particularly the French experience), Egypt, and Iraq – all of whom have been both allies but sometimes enemies. The Great Power context not only involves Syria being fought over in the cold war between the USA and Russia, but also, within the Middle East, between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As with the civil war in the Lebanon after 1975, all these powers have been and still are represented in the factional fighting within Syria. To be rather suspicious of the Syrian rulers blaming outsiders for every protest is understandable; but no political position in Syria has proven itself to be neutral in this struggle. Syria’s weak social structure and economy, despite being a substantial oil producer, can only add to the instability and uncertainty. Lebanon’s civil war sets an awful precedent for Syria post 2011.

As in Afghanistan or Iraq, the West blames Syria for not accepting the colonial boundaries they set after the 1914-18 Great War. Syria’s old geographical borders were formed by the Med to the west and by the Arabian Desert to the south. Other borders tend to be framed by the Taurus mountains to the North and the long stretch of less inhabited desert to the East and the Euphrates; 65 percent of today’s Syrian land mass is virtually desert. What Seale calls this ‘natural’ Greater Syria has never been politically united for 1200 years under local rule.

Nor until the influence of the colonial powers did Syria’s ‘mosaic of minorities’ find it impossible to live together. Before 1918 this included 25,000 assimilated Jews. The Christian Maronites only lived in a small part of today’s Lebanon.

### **GREATER SYRIA: A COLONIAL CARVE UP**

In 400 years under the Ottoman Empire there had been little development in the average Syrian’s standard of living. 70% lived off agriculture. There was little difference between Christians and Muslims in their relative poverty. Despite Syria playing an important role in Eur-Asian trade in 1910, manufactured imports were double that of Syria’s food exports.

High punitive tax levels for the share croppers of absentee landlords who lived in the towns did not aid productivity.

Britain blockaded the Eastern Med in World War One and Syrian trade was savaged. Work in the land was devastated as men left, conscripted into the Ottoman army. Around Damascus, for example, orchards and olive groves were dug up for fuel. Around 150-300,000 Syrians died of disease and famine.

The major economic problem Syria inherited after 1918 is that, like the Austrian Empire, the old Arab part of the Ottoman Empire was broken into 8 component 'nation' States by Britain and France. Aleppo in today's Northern Syria had served as a port and trading city for a much bigger area stretching into Anatolia, Cilicia, and today's Iraq and Iran including Mosul and Baghdad. Damascus had similarly served Arabia, Jordan, Palestine and the Lebanon. The Syrian nationalists saw it as natural to fight for a Greater Syria, which would include overlordship of these areas. Even without Zionism this would have meant an inevitable conflict with Israel and thereby the USA.

The post 1918-22 boundaries left Aleppo and Damascus like Hitler's Vienna: heads with no bodies, cut off from their economic hinterlands. The usual neo liberal 'Western explanation' for Syria's economic plight handily blames a combination of Baath bureaucratic socialism and/or Assad's dictatorships while conveniently ignoring the real history of a colonial carve-up that destroyed the natural linkages of Syria's ancient entrepot economy.

In May 1919, elections were held for the Syrian National Congress and 80 percent of seats went to conservative members of the dominant landowning classes. In June, it repudiated the Sykes/Picot carve up and the Balfour Declaration that was to have the eventual effect of setting up the State of Israel. To the vast majority of 'nationalist' Syrians, French rule was not acceptable. Their ideal was of a devolved State of Greater Syria with autonomy for Lebanon and Palestine. At the same time the US King-Crane Commission confirmed Syrian popular opposition to a potential French mandate. Despite the commission's movements being controlled by the British army, 80 % of 3000 petitions were for a United Syria and 74% for absolute independence. The results show an even split for democracy and for King Feisal of Arabia; so a Constitutional monarchy could have been a desirable outcome. Only 4% wanted a British mandate. Not many more (15 percent) - and those only in the West, in what was the core of 'Christian' Lebanon - wanted a French one. The Commission pointed out that there would be nothing wrong with more Jews coming to 'Israel' and simply living as Jewish Syrian citizens. However since a clear majority of Syrians were against the formation of a Jewish state, the only way to establish such a state would be with armed force.

#### THE FRENCH SHRINK AND CONQUER THE NEW 'SYRIA'

The conclusions of the commission were rejected by France and ignored by Britain. The report was only released to the public in 1922 just as the French had conquered and consolidated their control of Syria.

By November 1919 the British were handing military control in Syria over to the French. In March 1920, the congress in Damascus declared the independence of Greater Syria and proclaimed Feisal King. As a counter the British and French went public on their decision to award a mandate to France signed in April and published in early May. At the end of the month leading nationalist Christians proclaimed Lebanon's independence from Syria.

In May 1920, in order to hang on to the bits of the Syria they had kept apart from the new greater Lebanon the French signed away Cilicia into Turkish hands. By July 1920, the French military command issued an ultimatum to Feisal giving him the choice between submission or

abdication. Realizing that the power balance was not in his favour, Faisal chose to cooperate and refrained from declaring war against either. However, the Congress now attacked him and his own Minister of War set out to fight. The Alawi areas had been no go areas for the French from the beginning, and now revolts and guerilla attacks broke out. The formal pitched battle for Syria ended with the Battle at Maysalun Pass in July 1920 and Damascus was taken.

But despite further French attempts to maintain control by encouraging sectarian divisions and isolating the rural areas, the guerilla revolt spread from the countryside and united Syrian Sunnis, Shiites, Alawis, Druze and Christians in opposition to French rule. The pressure on the smaller Syria remained – the agricultural hinterland in the North traditionally run from Aleppo was attacked in August 1920 and taken by the Turks in October 1921.

Having given up so much to the Turks the French waged war on the resistance in the remains of the shrunken Syria. The Euphrates area closer to the deserts of the East was subdued by December 1921. The ‘no-go’ Alawi areas were conquered between April and October 1921. To subdue Damascus, the French military responded with brutal counter-insurgency techniques that prefigured those that would be used later in Algeria and Indo-China. These techniques included house demolitions, collective punishments of towns, executions, population transfers, and the use of heavy armour in urban neighborhoods. The revolt was eventually subdued through French aerial bombardment of civilian areas, including Damascus.

In all the years of watching modern TV coverage of the fighting in Beirut and in Lebanon generally, nor in the recent coverage of Syria, has there even been the sniff of a mention of the way the French conquered Syria – or indeed the British and French fight over Syria twenty years later – nor of the artificial creation of a Greater Lebanon far larger than the Maronite Christian homelands justified. Western public opinion has been left in the dark about the real history and our colonial and imperial complicity with armed repression. The French search for Empire by military force is a burden (as in ‘Italian’ Libya) from which Syria has not been able to recover.

#### SOMALIA: RULE BY COLONIAL AND IMPERIAL PIRATES

The story normally told about Somalia is one of a brutal civil war and famine, of poverty and starvation, of ‘Rogue States’ and piracy. The untold story of its real history is of the destruction of ancient way of life, once the norm across the planet; of a mixed nomadic pastoral, agricultural and trading life destroyed yet again in the Horn of Africa by the impositions of Colonial States, by the wars of competing imperial powers and the creation of a warlord society where piracy and stealing of both land and labour becomes the way of life. It is in fact a story of our destructive imperial modernity that, as with our own poor, we try to blame on the Somalis themselves. We were the pirates and we have created a pirate society.

For unlike most of the new nation States of modern Africa, which if based on a ruling ethnicity were added to by artificial colonial and imperially supported expansions (with Ethiopia next door as a prime example) Somalia could stake a major claim for having far more of a common language, tradition and ethnicity. Somalis are one of the largest ethnic blocks in Africa. It was if the imperial powers, instead of finding natural divisions around which ‘divide and rule’ could operate, took it upon themselves to generate the divides which have multiplied in Somalia to the degree that killing and famine is now a major outcome.

Instead of looking to climate change, we should look in the first place to history. It is our colonial and imperial heritage that has effectively been mounted on the back of Somalia and has destroyed it. For as Somalia entered the modern world in the late nineteenth century scramble for Africa, the people found themselves divided into 5 of the modern nation states. Three of these were colonial creations and followed imperial battle lines – French Djibouti,

British Somaliland and Italian Somalia. Two followed from the British use of client States who were allowed to conquer and expand their vast territories: Ethiopia, with British aid in putting down resistance, was to conquer the Somali inhabited Ogaden, and Kenya was to take on Somalis in the Northern Frontier District; an ominous remainder of the kind of British frontier that has led to endless war on the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In 2011 Somalia has been dominated yet again by drought, famine and refugees. As in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a militant 'Islamic terrorism'; Al Shabaab – translated as 'the youth' – looking like the Taliban (meaning students).

There are two further ways in which the imperial themes of 2011 resonate in Somalia. First there is the Italian colonial history which links to the Libyan experience. Like Libya, Somalia was fought over between British and Italians, especially in 1940-1. Coming together in the 1960, the gap between the North (British) and South (Italian) made the newly independent Republic a state divided at least by differing and unnecessary language and bureaucratic traditions.

Second, it is important to see the important economic link across the strategic Bab el Mandab Straits (through which passes at least 3 million barrels per day of oil) between Somalia and Yemen. What happens in Arabia and in Yemen matters a great deal in Somalia.

#### SOMALI EXPANSION AND IMPERIAL PARTITION

The trading history of modern Somalia is driven by its links across to the Arabian peninsula to provide food for the British colony at Aden in the Yemen; then, as Aden went into decline in the 1970s, to do the same for Saudi Arabia.

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Somali people's story is one of expansion. As late as 1965 only one in eight Somalis was a 'sedentary cultivator'. Somali herders moved over the centuries from the hot Northern coasts of the Horn of Africa further South into lands cultivated by more Bantu peoples – sometimes ruling over them like a military aristocracy, called the 'Somali conquest of the Horn'. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> the Somalis had spread over an area of 400,000 square miles. The Somalis were proud of their contact with Arabia and Persia, and Arabic still serves as a second language.

While the Ethiopians looked to Portugal's maritime power for help, the Somalis looked to the Turkish Ottoman Empire. The Turks took Massawa and the rest of Eritrea in 1557; they were defeated eventually by the Ethiopians and withdrew by 1633. From the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries it was Omani rulers originating from Muscat and locally based in Zanzibar who dominated the Horn disputing Mogadishu with the Somalis. Although rule from Oman was relatively light – consisting of a yearly tribute - when the British came on the scene in the early nineteenth century, they encouraged first Mombassa (now in Kenya) and then Mogadishu to revolt between 1814 and 1828.

From then on the British became the dominant force in the Horn, fighting the Somalis around Berbera in 1855. Slowly but surely British imperial ambitions dragged them into Somalia – rather as happened with the USA 100 years later. The first pressure on the British position came from the French, who purchased Djibouti in 1862. When Britain occupied Egypt in 1882, the need to re-bind Somalia into the British control of the Horn grew. The Italians, always on the look out for neglected areas of potential imperial settlement then became a convenient ally against the French and the Turks, replacing any dependence on unreliable Egyptian troops. By a protocol of 1894, and with eyes especially on the Ogaden, the Italians were encouraged to take Eritrea and then move inland towards Ethiopia. Even after they were defeated by the Ethiopians in 1896, the Italians were allowed by the British to keep Eritrea, setting the bounds for what Ioan Lewis (in "Understanding Somalia and Somaliland", 2008)

calls the 'imperial partition' of Somali which was sealed by treaty in 1897. The Somalis had been sold piece by piece and Ogaden given over to the 'Ethiopian sphere'.

Somali 'tribes' signed up to exclusive British 'protection' deals firmed up by 1888, when British Somaliland was handed over from the Government of India (who had administered it from 1884) to the Foreign Office for rule. Thus the British consolidated a protection racket, but their rule was made more difficult by the absence of a clear internal ruling class structure for them to manipulate. Given a nomadic pastoral society dominated by family clans, there was no State, no chiefs and no pre capitalist landlords on which British colonialism could base a further exploitative structure. The clan leaders may have been called Sultans but they often lacked formal institutional power.

## THE TIME OF EATING FILTH

There were, however, other weapons to hand for the British to use. Having allowed the Italians a certain amount of leeway, after 1896 the British changed strategy. Their interests were now 'pruned' to satisfy Ethiopia, who were financed and armed via tax free Somali ports. Somali resistance began almost immediately in 1898. It is worth noting, given the persistence of Somali/Ethiopian wars, that the Somali resistance against Ethiopia was also imbued with a struggle against both imperial and colonial power. As in the UK, where the Celtic fight against English power and land-holding had always an element of anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle, so too did the Somali struggle against the British-backed Ethiopians. It was quite explicit too as 10,000 British troops – nowadays they would be called special forces, or advisors, or trainers, or even just private consultants – fought with the Ethiopians. We bought our armies; mercenaries in Somalia are based on a great British tradition.

After a major defeat in 1903, the Somalis resorted to guerrilla war. The number of Somali troops involved was quite small – 5 to 6,000 fighters- but the wars divided Somalis badly, as the fighting also involved attacks by the 'dervishes' (as they became known) on British-protected tribes. Nominally a peace treaty was signed in 1905 but by 1910 colonial forces had been edged back to the coast. And this was followed in 1911-12 by the first of the major modern famines.

Economic development was stifled at birth – livestock exports fell 50 percent for example between 1900 and 1906. In Somalia it became known as the 'time of eating filth'; a particularly apt description of the overall Somali experience. One estimate was that a third of Somalis may have been killed. If it seems puzzling why Al Shabaab bombs education buildings, as if to say we don't want your 'aid', the history of colonial and imperial actual interventions in Somalia – humanitarian-seeming or otherwise - starts to explain it.

Somalia remained a neglected outpost of the British Empire from the 1920s until its independence in 1960. Only the Italians had a development plan for the country in the 1920s. The Italian banana plantations on the coast, like those of Central America, were autonomous and had little beneficial economic impact elsewhere. The merchant capitalists who dominated the livestock trade never penetrated the interior. As in the Yemen, or in Somalia and Afghanistan today, Europeans could often not leave the coastal towns without armed escorts.

Nor could the Ethiopians and the Italians agree their frontiers, which eventually led to invasion in 1935. Harsh Italian rule then united the Somali clans against them on both sides of the national border. As with the destruction of the resistance war a generation before, in 1940-1 the British blockade virtually brought Somali trade to a halt. The growing State bureaucracy up to and after independence, and the merchants' leading political role meant increasing demands on the traditional pastoral economy. The growth of a parasitic military after 1960 made this increasingly worse. The imports pulled in to keep these new classes in style also

meant the need for increased exports to pay for them and hence the exploitation of the land to sustain it. For the nomadic pastoral economy this spelt disaster.

## BAHRAIN: THE QUISLING STATE

Bahrain, like Iran and Iraq, is one of the few Arab states with a Shia majority (70 % of the population) but, like the old rulers in Baghdad, its monarchs are Sunni. In January 2103, Bahrain's high court upheld sentences handed down by military tribunals against 13 leaders of the 2011 movement, some of whom were given life in prison. In March 2011 thousands of protesters took to the streets of the capital, Manama, to demand political and social rights. Bahrain's security forces killed at least 30 people during the weeks of mass demonstrations. Over 1,000 people were arrested for taking part, with many held incommunicado and tortured. Thousands of public sector workers have been fired. A protest encampment in Manama's Pearl Roundabout, modelled on Tahrir Square in Cairo, was crushed by tanks and 2,000 troops brought in from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.

In September 2011 a civilian court – held after further protests against the military ‘tribunal’- sentenced 20 medical doctors and nurses to prison for between 5 and 15 years. The doctors faced a variety of outlandish charges, including stockpiling weapons in hospitals, ‘occupying a hospital’ and attempting to overthrow the monarchy. ‘We were.. threatened with rape. They threatened our families’, said one woman doctor. The defendants were prevented from speaking in court but said they had been tortured into giving confessions. Their ‘crime’ were to treat wounded protesters and then speak about the extent of casualties to the international media.

Al-Wefaq, the main conservative Shia opposition party that resigned its parliamentary seats in 2011, has called for a constitutional monarchy with an elected Prime Minister to replace the present al-Khalifa, the King's uncle in post for 42 years. There is talk of dialogue but a commission of inquiry, which acknowledged ‘excesses’, has been ignored.

In May 2012 the US resumed weapons sales in a new \$53 million arms deal. This replenished the stock of armoured personnel carriers used against protesters, besides missiles and night vision equipment. The US Navy's Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain. In 2010, the US sold \$200 million worth of weapons, up from \$88 million in 2009.

There are frequent small protests in the working class Shia suburbs of Sanabis in Manama. Though the trade union leaderships did not officially call a general strike, an estimated 70 percent of Bahrain's workers were on strike in March 2011. When Sunni police moved into Shia slums house by house, striking oil refinery workers at the state-owned Bahrain Petroleum Company reduced output to 10 % of capacity.

Sham elections held in September 2012 to fill 18 seats in the 40-seat legislative council—the lower house of a rubber-stamp parliament stacked with the King's appointees—were largely boycotted with only a 17 % turn out. ‘The PM could not be elected’, says Robert Fisk. Because the ‘Saudis would not permit it...(and) they now control Bahrain. It has become a Saudi palatinate, a confederated province of Saudi Arabia, a pocket-size weasel State from which all journalists should in future use the dateline: Manama, Occupied Bahrain’.

## HIGH STAKES OVER BAHRAIN

As he talked about Bahrain in his speech on the Arab Spring in May 2011 President 'Obama stumbled over his words, as if realising he was on difficult ground. Saudi Arabia did not even get a mention' (BBC highlights 18 May 2011)

Former US Defence Secretary Gates said during a visit to Bahrain that 'baby steps' toward reform weren't enough. This apparent US enthusiasm for change has been anathema to the conservative regimes of the Gulf. A senior Saudi official said the intervention was needed to protect Bahrain's 'financial district...from violent demonstrations'. 'We don't want Iran 14 miles off our coast'. Some U.S. officials counter that Iran, so far, has been only a minor player in the Bahrain protests and that Saudi military intervention could backfire by strengthening Iran's hand.

'There is a serious breach' between the Gulf and the USA over the Arab Spring states a second Saudi official. The Obama administration has looked to be altering the USA's long-standing commitment to the status quo in the Gulf, believing that change in Bahrain - as in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya - is inevitable and desirable.

The Gulf regimes have come to mistrust Obama, seeing him as a weak president who will sacrifice traditional allies in his eagerness to be 'on the right side of history'; likening Obama's rejection of Mubarak to Carter's 1979 abandonment of the Iranian Shah. The Saudi regime is reportedly furious that Washington withdrew its support for Mubarak and Ben Ali of Tunisia.

In the United Arab Emirates another official said: 'We and the Saudis will not accept a Shiite government in Bahrain. And if your president says to the Khalifas what he said to Mubarak [to leave office], it will cause a break in our relationship with the U.S' The threat was that they would play the China card in a bid for more security assistance.

In Obama's speech of May 2011, the right to chose leaders was extended to Syria, Iran and maybe Yemen but not to Oman or Bahrain or Saudi Arabia. Syria turned into an Iranian ally, whilst Bahrain was blamed on the Iranians too. There was no mention of Gulf troops but the Bahrain opposition should be let out of jail.

Two years on from Obama's Cairo speech of 2009, Egyptians, and many in the Middle East had become deeply disillusioned with Mr Obama. They believe he has not delivered on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and that he was slow to respond to the uprisings in the region.

The threatened libel suit (by Bahrain against Robert Fisk of the "Independent") is intended to intimidate the media and stifle any discussion of the Bahrain-Saudi link and Saudi Arabia's broader role. The UK government admitted that it had trained the Saudi forces used in Bahrain, for 'internal security and counter-terrorism'. In 2010 Britain exported weapons worth £110m to Saudi, and in September of that year, the United States negotiated a \$60 billion arms deal, the largest in US history, with the Saudis. With such actions, continuing the long history of interference in the region, the so-called "Arab Spring" shows little promise of turning into glorious summer.