

LIBYA, ELUSIVE REVOLUTIONS AND THE EMPIRE OF OIL TALK FOR JUST SHARE 21 September 2011

READING BETWEEN THE LINES

I would like to thank Rachel for setting up this talk for me.

If one sentence can summarise this talk it is to say that British Prime Ministers in the twenty first century cannot resist taking us to war. Why we enter into such wars and how it fits with what I have called the Empire of Oil lies at the heart of my talk.

I have been involved with JS for a decade or so now; and my first decision to help came in part from my fury at the British government's decision to back the war in Iraq. This led onto a book to set our rulers in the context on global Capitalism, which had been the theme first discussed when JS was set up. The empire of oil theme comes from my second book published this year. This included a critique of the war in Afghanistan and the complete lack of debate about what I believe to be the real reasons for our fourth Afghan war. Seeing us go to war again – this time in Libya - seemed a very appropriate time to speak for my second time at JS. Another reason for joining JustShare was my past involvement in the City. My first job was as an oil analyst and I remember sitting in St Paul's gardens after my first interview a few years before the Big bang in 1986 reflecting that left wing non Oxbridge, non public school types like me didn't normally work in the old City as analysts. But I did know the geo-politics of oil prices and how oil companies worked (I had worked for Exxon for 3 years). One of the first analytical things I learned in the new City was 'reading between the lines'. In other words, companies or OPEC oil ministers don't usually tell you in black and white what they mean; you have to know them and their shades of meaning. This is what you get paid to get right.

It was Blair, following on from Donald Rumsfeld was it not, that told us that the Iraq war was 'absolutely nothing to do with oil'. We now learn 10 years later that Iraq is second on the list (behind Saudi Arabia) of the largest potential incremental producers of oil for the next decade, while global oil players from Britain and China to India and the USA move in to announce new deals. The control of Iraq's future oil production, the client regimes attached (even if democratic) and the production space accumulated for global Capital was at the heart of the Iraq war. Even the Iraq civil war – which may still be followed by a Libyan equivalent – can be seen and understood as being useful to serve imperial interests. For with the civil war in Iraq, which I believe the State Department knew was coming, provided the justification to garrison Iraq. So never mind the talk about reducing combat troops check out the numbers of security consultants. The USA did not spend billions on the war and a \$1 bn on the Embassy wall just to keep the barbarians out. This was a war for control of the Middle East – which ultimately means the control of you guessed it – oil (& gas). The lessons learnt by the US in Latin America have enabled the construction of a new kind of Empire in the 21st century. This is not a territorial Empire like the old British one but an Empire I call the Empire of Global Capital. This exists with the US as leader and co-ordinator to expand the Empire of making profits. Truly this Empire is marked by the coins you possess.

AFGHANISTAN AND STRATEGIC INTERESTS

If this ex-City analyst thinks he has worked out Blair, what do we make of David Cameron on Libya? Within a year of taking power David Cameron told us in March 2011 that we had no 'strategic interests' in Libya. Yet already with 'no interests' we are set to spend maybe up a £1 bn – enough to re-instate a fair chunk of the higher education cuts.

The real strategic interest concerns Libya's huge oil reserves. It is why we have moved on Libya first and not so far in Syria. My hypothesis is the reverse of Cameron's - State Capitalist governments follow imperial interests, but need to hide the naked greed from us under a humanitarian veneer. Such governance is based on lies as easily as that of the Sun and the News of the World. A strategic war for control of Afghanistan has been wrapped in development speak. This great game – fallen into headlong by New Labour - is now being adapted further by the Coalition for Capital that now rules us.

Afghanistan has been presented as the 'good' war – where a terrorist force is our 'enemy'. The Taliban has handily taking over from Al Qaeda in this role. It is worth noting in passing that where we used both Al Qaeda & the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 80s for our ends, it would seem that both the new Libya security forces and the leader of the so called rebels in Tripoli have strong past Al Qaeda links. As I said to my son, living in Hackney in the riots, 'welcome back the 1980s'. My second book is dedicated to a charity called Afghan Action led by an Anglican Minister – Chris Beales. Afghan Action was at one point the largest British NGO employer in Kabul – making carpets. They got £1/4m from DFID to get going. Could they get anymore? Despite Afghan Action really building A it was easier to spend on arms. They did get more money to talk about A over here. My conclusion from their experience is that strategic military control and the propaganda attached matters more than real development.

Reading between the lines on the actual history – we can see that if the Taliban had not been there, the US would have needed to invent them to justify their military bases and garrisons. Both Bin Laden and the Taliban of course were set up and financed by the US to fight the Russians – just as the US was losing control in Iran after the revolution there in 1979. If you want to understand the war in Afghanistan go and look at a map. He who controls Afghanistan, as the British Empire knew in India, controls Central Asia. He who controls the Euro-Asian land mass, especially in the 21st century, controls the globe. If you read the writings of the old British imperialists like Curzon or modern US ones like Brzezinski (who got the Russian trapped there like Vietnam) they say this quite openly and clearly. A phrase now by the fund managers in the City the BRIC economies provide a key. The RIC economies - Russia, India and China - all border on Afghanistan (and Brazil is becoming a big oil producer) The huge US air base at Bagram sits strategically placed next to the fastest growing big economies of the 21st century. If the US cannot rule the world through economic might, it plans to sustain the rule of Capital through military might – spending more on her military than all the 6 next largest powers combined. This is not just rule for US capitalism, but for the Empire of Global Capital. So don't be confused if it is not just US oil companies that pre-dominate in the New Iraq - BP and Shell and the Chinese were some of the first to do deals.

ELUSIVE REVOLUTIONS

Reading between the lines of Cameron's message— we go to war so often in this era, as we have in the past, precisely because coalitions that manage the Capitalist State and its accumulation of wealth, believe it to be in their strategic interest. Even Cameron's use of the term 'strategic interests' is a give away to the real advice he has been getting from his foreign policy and intelligence advisors. What we have to read is the signals obscured behind the smoke screen they put up. For not only does it beg questions of British foreign policy in North Africa, the Middle East and across the developing capitalist world, it may also throw light on the domestic strategies of the coalition to beat us into submission. While Libya gets humanitarian intervention, we get the age of austerity.

For like Iraq and Afghanistan what Libya again reveals is the kind of State Capitalist political economy that is emerging in the capitalist crisis after 2008. If we move beyond the facile discussions of credit crunches and budget deficits to the nature of global capitalism in the twenty first century, Libya reveals something of the imperial and capitalist battles that have been and will be fought for what I see as a new era capitalist crisis and confrontation – take Greece, Ireland as early European examples. We may well face 1970s & 80s style issues of a roaring commodity driven inflation and a stagnant European economy of rising especially youth unemployment. It was this combination of issues – rising prices (especially food) and rising unemployment - when allied to western supported authoritarian dictatorships that lay at the heart of what some have called the Arab awakening or the Arab Spring.

In 1974 Ruth First published a book called '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 Communist Party in South Africa. She also taught the young Wilf sociology at Durham University and I had thought of doing my PhD with her. Elusive Revolutions seems as good a summary of the political economy of North Africa and the Middle East in 2011. For the outcomes of these 'revolutions', strangely celebrated in the Western media, are as yet very unclear. For all the hype as yet in Tunisia, in Egypt and especially in Libya there is no new democratic regime. In Bahrain and the Yemen protests continue and the old regimes have not fallen. If the corporate media is an unconscious purveyor of imperial thinking what lies behind this odd celebration of 'revolutions'? Is it merely that they like to celebrate the potential triumph of parliamentary democracy? Maybe so, except that neither in Cairo or Benghazi or Tripoli have the revolutions come about by these means. What is acceptable on the streets in Cairo or Benghazi was not acceptable on the streets of London in November and December 2010 in protest against the British coalition, nor in Manama, capital of Bahrain where British weaponry is used to attack dissent. Is it also 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 both of these outcomes may collide with our 'strategic interests'? Already the so called revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have both had their elections delayed. Tunisia's is now supposed to be in October, Egypt's in November; after then we will know the local politics better.

CRUDE MOTIVES

The media coverage of the importance of Libyan oil has usually run along the following lines. Although oil prices went up 20% in early 2011 around the time of the Arab Spring, Libya's lost oil output in 2011 only represents 2 per cent of world output. Its output fell by 10 percent anyway in 2009. Libya has 3 per cent of the world's oil reserves. So although it is not said - the war is not about oil then - goes the code.

One key figure which takes a tiny bit more research is then often omitted – it is the absolute level of Libyan oil reserves. Even here there are games to play. For the left-ish media, a favourite comparison is to say they are the largest in Africa – which is true. For the right, better to compare them with Saudi Arabia: Saudi reserves are nearly 6 x greater than Libya; Iran nearly 3x; Iraq's are more than double. So it's not so 'strategic' then.

The more telling comparisons – and the timing of the changes - I have not seen the media make. For Libyan reserves at 46 billion barrels in 2010 are 50% higher than those of the entire USA. Despite importing more than 60 % of her needs the USA produced 4.5x more oil (7.5m) in 2010 than Libya. Not only has the US lower reserves, it is running them down at a far higher rate. And the comparison with the EU is even more startling. Libyan oil reserves are 3 times higher than the entire EU (including Norway's 7bn). No wonder France is keen to increase their stake and the Italians and Germans (whose companies are major producers in Libya) are worried. In the last 3 years alone (since 2008) the increase in Libyan reserves alone has been of the same order as the total potential future output of the British North Sea (3bn barrels). Now we are getting nearer to the geo-politics of the war games being played out in Libya for the next generation.

After the Iraq war, when Libya saw that its position as a rogue State was under direct threat again, Gaddafi's rapprochement with the West was welcomed. You may remember Blair's well publicised visit to Gaddafi's tent in 2004. At the same time, BP and Shell were signing on to new deals in Libya and increasing estimates of Libya's oil and gas potential. Estimates of Libya's reserves first shot up in 2003 (from 29-36bn) just as the Iraq war started to pushed up oil prices 6 fold from bottom to top (\$20-\$120).

Nearly all of the countries undergoing upheavals in 2011 are oil producers. Syria, Tunisia and the Yemen combined produce more than the Sudan (a favourite worry of the Christian and NGO missions) and nearly as much as the UK. Both Algeria and Libya are now bigger producers in the twenty first century than the UK and both are members of OPEC. Yes, Libya's oil production in 2010 was relatively small – 1.7m- but the key for Global capital, like Iraq, is that a future re-incorporation could make it considerably greater. Already the talk is of 3mbd by the end of the decade – back to its 1970 level when Libya was very important when the Suez Canal was closed.

If we had really wanted to save lives in Africa I could think of far better ways of using the odd £1bn than on military hardware in Libya. And never forget the \$2 trillion spent in Afghan – to no useful developmental ends – despite the rhetoric. These wars ARE about strategic interests – and oil is uppermost – let no-one fool you.

FROM 1911 to 2011

On 1 Sept 2011 the Times was busy telling us that the new Libya government was welcomed in Paris, 42 years to the day since Gaddafi had taken power. It is an insight into the imperial corporate media's sense of history. For this is so poor and/or biased that no-one so far that I have seen has pointed out that this Libyan campaign is exactly 100 years on – 1911 to 2011 – from the Italian invasion that first dragged Libya into our destructive 'modernity'. Then the resistance around Benghazi went on until the 1930s. Some estimates suggest that 750,000 Libyans out of a population of 2 million were killed or forced into exile. Until the oil came, Libya's main export was of abandoned military hardware from WW2. It was that poor.

Libya should also be set in the context of African oil developments as a whole. The next biggest oil reserves are in Nigeria. And the latest clash in Sudan has been over the division of oil output and revenues between the N & S. If you look at my first book you will see the history laid out after our invasion of Egypt in 1872 and onto the Civil War in the Sudan. Like Nigeria the Sudan was an entirely false State made for the convenience of British imperial rule. And we wonder why Africans always see their States as corrupt and power as the basis for wealth; we taught them. In my first book I also looked at Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda (a new oil producer) – famines are not just the consequence of climate change but of how we left the ownership of land for cash crops and exports.

Libya too has always been seen by the West as a part of the imperial game – in which its incorporation for military purposes was the key to its modern history. For the British and then the USA, Libya was in effect a military base with a 'residual' country attached – remember Tobruk? In Libya it is only the oil revenues flowing into the centre that have created anything approximating a unified State. Libya is a colonial creation after 1911. It is in effect three countries in one – two City States (Tripoli and Benghazi) with their hinterlands and the Saharan interior (Fezzan). Now what we see is Libya potentially reverting to its natural divisions. The folk in the foreign office, like those in the Pentagon over Iraq (also 3 Ottoman provinces) would need to do 10 minutes history to know this. After Libya had been conquered in 1943 – after a war first fought in North Africa over Egypt – the British, French and Italians discussed splitting into three along these lines. The Italians – the attempted conquerors since 1911 – would get Tripolitania; the British would get Cyrenaica (closer to Egypt) and the French would get Fezzan – all the better to help them guard the back door into Algeria (where they were fighting a nasty war of Independence).

The relationship between Egypt and Libya has in the modern era often been interconnected. Modern Libya, particularly around Benghazi, has been heavily influenced by Egypt. So it is not a coincidence that the appearance of a successful uprising to unseat President Mubarak in Egypt in February 2011 was seen as an aspirational model by some protestors in Cyrenaica. 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 in Egypt.

DE-STABILISING EGYPT?

What then are some of the lessons learnt in the wars (and the crucial areas of those wars) of the last decade? For a 19th century imperialist they are strangely familiar – Persia, the Balkans, Central Asia, Mesopotamia, and now Africa. In both my books I argued that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the pressures put on 'rogue States' – Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Syria reveal our new century's imperialist project – to remake the world in the image of and for Capital. Let's look at Egypt in this context.

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'. So what are the real imperial worries about the evolving situation in Egypt? From Hague there is at least 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 may be 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. For a case could have been made for a subsidiary British objective in Libya being precisely - to potentially disturb the stability of Egypt.

It is little known again today but in 1956 over Suez the British seriously considered invading Egypt from Libya from their still continuing base in Tobruk (A refuge today for ex Al Qaeda fighters). Indeed in 1958 British troops were flown over from Cyrenaica to threaten Nasser's Egypt under a 1953 treaty where in theory Libya had been granted independence. Why since February '11 have the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) talked cosily to their supreme military council – still run by a Mubarak ally? The MB say because of a 'threat on the borders'. This could hardly have been Gaddafi – who had 42 years to threaten them before. I suggest the implied threat to the nationalist MB in Egypt (who have long fought the British since 1919 and will be major players in a more democratic Egypt) is rather closer to home. As it suited the 'realpolitik' of the USA to allow a civil war and fragmentation in Iraq and Afghanistan – on the divide and rule principle, then civil war and stalemate both in Libya and Egypt may be preferable to imperial interests.

Why should this be so? The most important reason is that having been safely under their wing (mediated via Israel) since 1977, the imperial powers do not now want to 'lose' Egypt. If a 'democratic revolution' means a more aggressive nationalist stance from Egypt, and specifically against their most important Client State in Israel, then it may threaten the imperial hold on the Middle East – now stronger than ever after what I see as the victory in Iraq. A nationalist movement dominated by the MB akin to that in Iran under Mossadeq in the 1950s: anti imperialist (but not necessarily anti capitalist) could be one problem. As the protests outside the Israeli embassy in Cairo 10 days ago go to show a more democratic Egypt could be a more nationalist Egypt – and more anti the Zionist State to boot. It is no coincidence that the 2 most democratic Islamic countries (this is not to ignore their repression and authoritarian tendencies in either) – Turkey and Iran - are both increasingly anti the present set up in Israel. So might Egypt become.

FROM RAPPROCHEMENT TO CONFRONTATION: 2003 – 2011

Even more worrying for the imperialists would be a return even to an Egypt of the 1950s – a Nasser like regime dominated by an aggressive military. An aggressive Algerian military (in bed with Putin) funded Gaddafi's military equipment at the end, for example Worst of all would be 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. This is why a stand off in Bahrain into divided Shia and Sunni communities becomes another proxy battle between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

With the invasion of Iraq and the US view that the Iranians now posed the main threat to the Western re-alignment of power in the Middle East, it seems clear that the West changed strategy on Libya and Iran after 2003. The 'Terrorist State' of Libya was to be partly appeased. While Iran - given more power de facto by the rise of Shia Iraq - was to be attacked at every turn. With this in mind the British and French seem to have ditched their old appeasement in late 2010 so they could be positioned afresh when it looked as if Gaddafi might be on his way out. Gaining Libya properly is a good compensation for any losses in Egypt and for a continuing struggle with Iran. For an imperial capitalist economy that runs on oil re-incorporating Libya using the cover of so called revolutions – is a balancing gain if a more democratic Egypt went more 'anti West' and anti Israel.

Cameron and Hague rushed in to line up with a Sarkozy who look determined on action, as Blair rushed in to support Bush (knowing that he could not stop the US going to war) over Iraq. Sarkozy looks to have rushed into Libya for 3 reasons: the French want a long term stake in the oil share out; Sarkozy needed to wrap himself in some patriotic cause when his poll ratings are flagging for the Presidential Elections, and perhaps most of all, as Germany commands the EU economically ever more, the French elite are still looking for ways to make their strategy in the Mediterranean work for them. Mubarak had been Sarkozy's co-chair in their grand design for a Med Union – implicitly designed to provide a counter to Germany's EU economic might.

For the USA, a Democrat President may wish to appear against foreign wars – but the killing in Afghanistan has increased under Obama's surge. It is more likely that with the US drones killing at will in Pakistan and the Yemen it is easier to leave one war theatre to the EU. The US does have interests in Libya – oil from Africa can get easier to the USA if there is trouble in the Middle East. Bellicose noises from Hilary Clinton have matched Hague's. Leave the Europeans to show a bit of fight for once. And Obama showed with the disgraceful execution of Bin Laden that he too is quite prepared to do a bit of extra judicial killing if it might help his poll ratings versus high unemployment. In warning the Libyan not to engage in violent retribution he is like the old Victorians – do what I say not what I do.

THE LIBYAN PRESENT AND THE NTC

As with Egypt, Libya had managed its only free elections 60 years ago – with political parties allowed to campaign - in 1952. The result revealed a country divided in two between a loyal King Idris party in Cyrenaica and a National Congress Party (NCP) wholly successful in Tripoli. The NCP claimed the elections had been fixed and all political parties were promptly banned by the King. Public political life has been shapeless since. I suspect that if the elections were held today the divided result might be much the same 60 years on. This as it was in Spain in its first free elections 40 years on after the divided result of 1936. You might well find Tripoli voting one way; Benghazi the other. So control of semi autonomous Misrata or the Fezzan interior (as big as France and Spain combined) have become key political as well as military battle grounds.

The old Libyan ‘Transitional National Council’ was a proxy government of Cyrenaica. Note in the last 3 weeks it has changed its title – now it’s the National Transitional Council (NTC) - with the new emphasis being on national not transitional. This is a double deception. The NTC may not prove to be transitional – but semi permanent. It is also barely national. It is a set up dominated by 2 renegade members of the old regime, supporters of the old Cyrenaica monarchy, some CIA hoisted ‘assets’, a few oil entrepreneurs and some genuine middle class human rights reformers all armed and advised by a variety of Western and Qatari special forces. This self appointed mish mash – ragtag rebels - as yet can have no pretence at being a democracy – or indeed a revolution. It is clear after the execution of General Younis (borrowed from the Obama/special forces/Bin Laden play manual) that there are conservative Islamists involved – maybe Afghan and certainly Al Qaeda in style. It is quite clear that so called rebel fighters in Misrata – and maybe also in Tripoli - will not take orders from Benghazi. Younis’ killing looks already to have been the result of a faction fight between him and the Chair of the NTC Mustafa Jalil; Younis appears to have been killed by ex Al Qaeda members now working as the NTC’s security forces.

This fractured alliance is liable to be torn apart at any time – and the divisions would certainly be revealed in any semblance of democratic elections. The mountain Berbers who have largely conquered Tripoli owe nothing more than nominal allegiance to Benghazi which is any case riven by 20-30 armed factions. As ‘Victory’ in Iraq after sanctions, invasion and civil war did not result in a ‘revolutionary’ new regime, as the Egyptians and Libyan peoples may hope for, but a re-invention of a new style of client regime, - with a new hard man leader (Al Maliki in Iraq) posing in the guise of a parliamentary democracy. Libya under Jalil may already be heading this way.

Recognition of the NTC has also been about freeing the frozen oil assets of the old regime to help fund the civil war. For the UK government to say this is a result of the NTC’s ‘new competence’ (I quote Hague) is a farce. The choice between one authoritarian dictatorship and another looks the same to the recently conquered. The UK government has already chosen. How can there be self determination in a Libya dominated by up to 40 heavily armed militias? We have taken sides in this civil war. The people of Egypt have been warned, we are not neutrals.

‘VICTORY’ IN LIBYA

With the corporate media having virtually declared ‘victory’ in Libya after 5 months and at least £250m of UK arms spending, it is worth setting this so called revolution in the context of George Bush II declaring victory after 2 months in Iraq. Let there be no mistake – Nato’s massive bombing campaign has made possible the victory of one side in what still may become a faction driven and Western arms fuelled fight for Libya. This is not so dissimilar to Afghanistan where Nato backed the Tajik and Uzbek Northern alliance against the largely Pushtun Taliban. Now with elections fixed at least 18 months away, we are not likely to know what ordinary Libyans think via the ballot box or how the local politics will really work out. Is there any chance of a democracy in Libya? About as much as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt or Pakistan – with strong arm Presidents, backed by us. In 2004 the present Tripoli rebel commander, Abdel Belhadj arrested as an Al Qaeda member was passed back by the CIA and released in Libya in 2010, just as other ex regime leaders were defecting to the GB and French security services. A murky secret game part hidden from us is now on. We can see some attempted deceptions however. When Cameron declared last week that Benghazi ‘was an inspiration to the world as it threw off a dictator’, next to him on the platform stood Jalil, Gaddafi’s former justice minister, steeped in the old regime. Any discussion of Gaddafi’s past crimes must be associated with the new head of the NTC. And today’s Nato bombing of Libya is no more about a humanitarian morality than Northern Sudan’s bombing of the South to make sure it gets more of Sudan’s oil. Who knows if the deaths in Sirte from our bombings will now exceed the possible deaths in Benghazi from Gaddafi’s?

Other main players in the NTC are US PhDs. Ali Tarhouni lectured in business economics in Seattle before becoming the NTC oil minister. Mahmoud Jibril, PM of the NTC, has a Pittsburgh PhD. The PhD was supervised by Richard Cottam, a former US intelligence official in Iran. It sets the tone to the propaganda games being entitled ‘Imagery and Ideology’. Jibril also headed Gaddafi’s economic development board with the aim of bringing in new investment after 2003. While the corporate media has concentrated on the past links of the CIA and MI6 with Gaddafi, their secret role in the recent coup has barely been assessed. What is known is that after the defection of Nouri Mesmari to the French in Oct ‘10 it is likely that French/GB planning had been going on for future joint operations in Libya, as increased military co-operation was announced. This we know as it was leaked by the Italians. The up-risings in Tunisia and Egypt must have been a God send for the security services wishing to turn a coup into a new ‘rebel revolution’; borrowing the language from Gaddafi’s own coup. And as the *Guardian’s* Simon Tisdall said of their recent trip: “This was..the Dave and Sarko spoils of war tour.”

Let me be clear: my critique of what one writer has called the ‘imperial coup’ in Libya is not based on any support for Gaddafi’s authoritarian regime. Gaddafi’s so called revolution was installed by a coup on an older monarchic regime based in Benghazi supported by Britain. BUT the present NTC in Benghazi as yet has no more democratic legitimacy than that of King Idris in 1969. And like Gaddafi – who was an outsider to the establishment of 1969 - the fall of Tripoli seems to have been the work largely of outsiders from the mountains not the NTC regime.

WHO RULES THE MIDDLE EAST?

With the up-risings in mind, the US will worry most about this other key ally in the Middle East after Israel – Saudi Arabia. If one ran a morality poll on Saudi Arabia for corruption, authoritarianism and family fiefdoms it would score as high as Gaddafi. Apart from one fact – it was created and has been supported by us for a century. Yet the Saudis like the Israelis show a penchant for going off and playing their own game. To understand watch the Yemen closely. Already drones are being used here under the old game of fighting Al Qaeda. It should never be forgotten that the Saudis conquered Arabia with crucial British financial and military aid from 1899-1932. They have border disputes with all their neighbours: most of all with Yemen when the Saudis have acted for years to keep a compliant regime. The last time there was a radical regime in Egypt in the 1960s 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.

The last thing many of the Arab League regimes would want, maybe even any new Egyptian one next door, is a real revolution. As Saudi moves troops into Bahrain and ruled through martial law (an old British game in Egypt), the British State has not cared much about the dictatorships it has sold arms to. Reading British media reports blaming Libya's dictatorship on the 'mad dog' called Gaddafi alone it is worth remembering that he has built his rule on methods like martial law directly taken from British rule in North Africa and the Middle East. And from rulers like King Saud who we have supported in nearly a century of building their conquests in Arabia.

It is still far too early for any of these elusive revolutions to 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 have ruled - replacing many years of British martial law before it. They still rule. Already street protest scream that the head of the Egyptian army 'Tantawi is another Mubarak'. As yet even the limited objective of replacing authoritarian dictatorships with more democratic regimes – something along Iraqi lines – looks a way off. The likely outcome in Egypt could be far less of a 'revolution' and far more about finding another suitable client ruler – with a bit more nationalist democratic rhetoric. One US Statesman was quoted on Mubarak's fall – this is not about the USA choosing a new client ruler. I'm afraid both in Libya and Egypt this is exactly what the present games are about. The most popular slogans in today's Cairo are 'liars' and in Alexandria 'everything remains the same'

Likewise, whatever popular revolution there may have ever been in Libya, it looks at present to have been hijacked and the fall out could go on – as in Iraq and Afghanistan – for decades. For 'our' real strategic imperial interests in Libya not only have to do with the control of Libyan oil but also with the control of Egypt – and thereby control of much of the Middle East too.

FLOATING ON OIL

I apologise to all those expecting a more theological talk. But I felt in this context that it was more important for the church and NGOs that JS represents to see the political realities - when neither the corporate media nor our government have much interest in enlightening us.

Today the church is called to speak out as a prophetic witness against the global consequence of the Empire of Capital to folk who cannot see it. This is all the more difficult, not so much in the mainstream church which is at least trying to grapple with the issues, but with the corporate media and mainstream politics, where both the church and even more a radical message from within it can often be marginalised. This marginal position was experienced by the early Ecclesia before the advent of Christendom.

The reason I called my second book 'Nowhere to lay our Head' is not to do with the problems of a homeless radical preacher. It was to point to Jesus' politics hidden in parables. The Birds of the Air was a common usage after the Israeli revolt against Greek rule for Empire. Some of this story is told in the Book of Daniel. By Jesus' day the Birds of the Air had become a symbol of the Roman Empire swooping down and robbing the peasants trying to sow the soil. While the foxes with their cleverly hidden dens was a clear reference to that fox Herod. Such are the client rulers of Empire – with Herod followed by Mubarak and Ben Ali - and Blair and Cameron and Hague. Jesus took his favourite description of himself – the Son of Man from the Book of Daniel – and he could not find a home in his own land that had betrayed itself to the Empire.

Seeing the BBC since victory in Tripoli has been proclaimed one wonders why they haven't just put 'Rejoice, Rejoice' on the screen and have done with serious analysis. The Romans could make a devastation cried the Caledonian leader Calgacus and call it peace.

Lord Curzon, Vice-Roy of India and Foreign Secretary (nearly Prime Minister in the Tory austerity years of the 1920s) proclaimed after the Great War that the allies had 'floated to victory on a wave of oil' – the allies had the oil for their oil machine and the Germans did not. Why else did Hitler founder at Stalingrad if it was not to take the oil of Baku? Pace 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 ran out of it.

When Bush initiated the war in Iraq it was part of the project to keep the 21st century in American – and capitalist - control. Our boys today are playing it equally long – a century long. And as Iraq oil looms up a decade later as ever more important; give it a generation and Libya oil might prove Mr Cameron right in his intervention - from the empire's point of view. But of course he will have taken us to war like Blair for the Empire of Oil – quite the opposite of what he claims.