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# INTERLIB

Journal of the Liberal International British Group



**August 4<sup>th</sup> Beirut: A year after the deadly port explosion, protestors take to the streets against government inactivity.**

**AFGHANISTAN SUDAN TURKEY WILDFIRES**

# EVENTS

**17<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> September** – Liberal Democrats Autumn Conference.

**8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> October** – Scottish Liberal Democrats Virtual Autumn Conference.

**9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> October** – Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru/Welsh Liberal Democrats Virtual Autumn Conference

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**Photographs:** Waleed Ali Adam, Sales from the Crypt.

**Cover Photograph** – Demonstration in Beirut against the government's ineptitude in dealing with the aftermath of the Port explosion of 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020, when at least 217 people were killed and 7,000 injured. We hope to cover this in more detail in the next issue.

## **Deadline for interLib 2021-07 - Conference issue**

We particularly welcome articles on international issues to be debated at the Liberal Democrats Autumn conference. May we have these by 31<sup>st</sup> August please, to lockharthastings@btconnect.com

# Afghanistan enters a new phase in its tragedy

## George Cunningham

Afghanistan entered a new phase in its tragedy today, with the Taliban on the outskirts of Kabul. Over forty years of war have led us back to “year zero” once more..

Events have moved quickly. Only two months ago, Dr Abdullah Abdullah, members of the Afghan Civic Democrats and the UNAMA talked to Lib Dems Overseas and LIBG members about their hopes to reach an inclusive political settlement acceptable to the Afghan people.

The blame game can be shared out amongst all those on the losing side: The Afghan government for its gross corruption that siphoned off hundreds of millions that would have otherwise – if wisely spent – helped those whose poverty and ignorance have provided fertile recruiting ground for the Taliban; the Biden administration that lamely followed the disastrous US policy of speedy non-conditions-based withdrawal by the Trump administration which included the criminal act of arm-twisting the Afghan government to release 5,000 seasoned Taliban fighters from prison (including the insurgency leader who then led the Taliban assault on Herat city); and the international community for pouring billions into the country’s coffers while not tackling corruption properly and wanting to believe too much what it was being told. And much more of course.

While others flee, the United Nations is trying to find its way in continuing its humanitarian support for the people of Afghanistan – which is needed more than ever. It had been cooperating with local Taliban leadership in areas under their control in the past and now has a vastly complex role to play if allowed to do so, given the human rights abuses that are already appearing as the victors reap their spoils of war, especially forced marriages with Taliban fighters.

Afghan society has seen progress since the US invasion of Afghanistan twenty years ago especially among the younger generation. An important example is widespread girls’ education in the cities which has now seen women starting to take their place in positions of authority in Afghan society, even if not yet sufficiently at the highest echelons of government; also competitions for qualified young persons to join the civil service. This educated generation, exemplified in civil society organisations such as the Afghan Youth Thinkers Society, which I have had the pleasure to work with in Kabul, and those who fought against government corruption, are perceived by the Taliban because of their ability to think independently as a direct threat to their theocratic rule, They need protection where possible.

That’s why the Canadian government has advertised a broader immigration programme which aims – over and above Afghans who directly worked for Canada – to cater for an additional 20,000 of the most vulnerable including women leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, persecuted religious minorities, LGBTI individuals, and family members of previously resettled interpreters. But time is running out to process and get them out.

The British Government needs to follow suit, especially with former Chevening scholars who are at huge risk and also permit those who have won scholarships for this coming academic year to come to the UK if they are able to leave.

Ed Davey did the right thing to write immediately to the British government on the unfolding disaster. But additionally, even if Afghanistan falls into darkness once more, we must do our utmost to rescue the flower of educated Afghan youth who can help rebuild it again one day.

*George Cunningham is the Chair of Liberal Democrats Overseas, and is a former Deputy EU Ambassador to Afghanistan (2016-18).*

This article first appeared in Lib Dem Voice, Sunday 15th August 2021 - 3:50 pm  
The PAF/LDO/LIBG Forum on Afghanistan took place by Zoom on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2021.



# Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary



## AFGHANISTAN REFUGEES

The fast-developing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan demands a generous and comprehensive response from the UK government. Specifically, the fate of millions of displaced people is one that requires international cooperation. Within this cooperation, it is vital that the UK offer good practice for other countries to emulate.

While the Prime Minister's statement in the Commons provides some reassurances, it also leaves many questions unanswered. We welcome his announcement that no Afghan nationals will be returned to Afghanistan. We also welcome his clarification that the resettlement of 5,000 Afghan refugees this year will be additional to and not replace the general resettlement scheme for refugees.

However, we agree with Liberal Democrat Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Layla Moran MP, that the Government's humanitarian response is too narrow in scope and lacks the ambition required to tackle this crisis. A paltry commitment to resettle 5,000 refugees, with a vague commitment to resettle 15,000 more in future years, abandons vulnerable persons whose lives are at the mercy of the Taliban following our and others' withdrawal. Liberal Democrats rightly criticised this and called for a much more generous scheme. The Party has also led calls for a safe humanitarian corridor to help those trapped outside of Kabul.

It is absolutely vital that priority is given to those who are most at risk of recriminations from the Taliban. That not only includes Afghan interpreters and those who worked with our armed forces, but also those who worked with our armed forces but were not directly employed by them and therefore do not currently qualify for the relocation scheme. We must also protect the families of those who risked their lives to help our troops by expanding family reunion and to allow them to travel to the UK safely. We must protect women and girls, LGBTQIA+ people, journalists, judges, and educators whose lives are now at risk due to the Taliban.

We fully support the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants' call to:

- *Scrap the 'resettlement-only' plans set out in the Nationality and Borders Bill, that would criminalise and/or deny full refugee status to those who make their own journeys to seek asylum in the UK. Including those originating from Afghanistan.*
- *Grant immediate status to Afghans asylum-seekers already in the UK*
- *Release all Afghan nationals from detention.*
- *Expand the family reunion route so that Afghans can be joined by other members of their family, such as parents and siblings.*
- *Join the international effort to evacuate and resettle Afghan nationals.*

Local authorities will have to carry the heaviest responsibility in relocating and housing Afghan refugees. Therefore, it is vital that the Government provides emergency funds now to ensure this can happen successfully and that these funds are not taken from the international aid budget or related humanitarian funding streams.

This crisis could yet see the largest displacement of people since the Second World War. A comprehensive asylum policy response based on evidence and empathy must be implemented now to avoid the darkest of consequences in the weeks and months ahead for millions of Afghans. Liberal Democrats have an important role to play as the UK's political champions of refugees in ensuring the Government acts decisively and upholds its duty to protect these people.

# The empire strikes back in Sudan.

## Rebecca Tinsley

Two years after the revolution, the Islamist old guard is fighting back

Women were at the heart of the protests that ended thirty years of brutal dictatorship in Sudan in 2019. Yet, only two years later, they face pre-meditated physical attacks<sup>1</sup> as they claim their space in the new Sudan. Islamists and traditionalists are fighting back<sup>2</sup> against progressive change, defending laws that punish women for seeking education and other opportunities. Meanwhile, a judge sentenced<sup>3</sup> a 21-year-old to Islamist-era cross amputation of a foot and hand for stealing \$48. The previous regime's 1991 criminal code also allows crucifixion and stoning to death.

### A history of violence

Women from the black African ethnic groups in the periphery of the east African nation have been the targets of rape, torture and murder for many years. But it is less usual for women identifying as Arab to face violence on the streets of the capital, Khartoum. Now, they are tasting the persecution endured by females in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states.

Video<sup>4</sup> of a recent gang rape in Blue Nile was widely shared on social media as an explicit warning to women across the country not to demand equality. Uniformed men, thought to belong to the Rapid Support Forces – the rebranded Janjaweed militia which killed as many as 400,000<sup>5</sup> Africans in Darfur - were filmed perpetrating the rape. The video is part of a series of reprisal attacks on women following the signing of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The new Sudan government has not yet ratified CEDAW and is asking for exemptions. Yet, even in its amended form, CEDAW is unacceptable to Islamists and other traditionalists from all ethnic backgrounds who defend and perpetrate violence against women.

The attacks are linked to calls to bring back<sup>6</sup> the old regime's public order laws which punished thousands of women each year for vaguely-defined offenses. Women's rights groups accused Islamists of using the law to deter women and girls from leaving their homes to seek education or work. In 2009 the case of Lubna Hussein<sup>7</sup> gained notoriety when she was convicted of public indecency for wearing trousers, and jailed for six months. Amnesty reports that 40,000 to 50,000 women a year<sup>8</sup> were arrested and whipped under the public order laws.

Sudan's 1991 Family Law<sup>9</sup> effectively legalises marital rape and domestic violence, assigning control of all women and girls to male guardians. According to strictly interpreted Islamic law, a four-year-old son or male cousin is considered the moral guardian of a grown female relative. The UN says that 88% of women<sup>10</sup> in Sudan have undergone female genital mutilation.

In a recent survey, 34% of Sudanese agree<sup>11</sup> that men are justified in beating wives if they step outside the home without their permission, if they do not obey them, or if they decline to have sexual intercourse. These attitudes are not restricted to the older generation. The public assaults<sup>12</sup> on women have mainly been perpetrated by gangs of young men, cruising the streets in vehicles, spotting women whom they consider to be indecently dressed (in trousers, or without headscarves, hijabs, niqabs, etc.) and beating them before driving away. Passing men are reported to offer no help or support to the women, and on occasion they applaud as women are whipped. There have been hundreds of online messages<sup>13</sup> from men expressing approval of the attacks.

### Are women being sidelined?

Women led a series of peaceful protests in April calling for the abolition of discriminatory laws, and the adoption of international treaties and charters guaranteeing equal legal status. At one demonstration a man drove into the crowd<sup>14</sup> running over one woman and then physically assaulting several other protesters.

Women were key to the 2019 revolution that replaced Field Marshall Omar Bashir’s regime with a transitional joint military and civil council, and a civilian-led cabinet. There is concern women have once more been sidelined. Meanwhile, the transitional government is under pressure from the old guard on several fronts. Elements from the previous regime are alleged to be using targeted currency speculation<sup>15</sup> to undermine attempts to rescue the troubled economy. (Sudan’s annual inflation rate reached 341%<sup>16</sup> in March this year). Many of Bashir’s officials and supporters had financial stakes in government-connected businesses that are now threatened with increased scrutiny. Human rights groups also accuse the old regime’s remnants of stirring up ethnic grievances between Arab and non-Arabs in the nation’s peripheries.

Civil society groups have highlighted the continuing presence of Bashir-appointed judiciary in Sudan’s legal system. In June, Moaz Abdel Majid Ismail, a 21-year-old man was sentenced to traditional “hudud” punishment for stealing goods worth \$48. Hudud is the cross amputation of a hand and a foot. As recently as 2013, three Darfuris were sentenced to be crucified under the 1991 code, and two women were sentenced to be stoned to death in 2007. This puts the country in breach of international and regional treaties which Sudan has signed.

**Women fighting back**

In spite of the threats to their safety, women in Sudan are countering the traditionalist narrative. Sudanese diaspora members are also vocal. For instance, a UK-based group of Sudanese women’s rights activists,



*Demo in Ad-Damazīn marching to the Blue Nile state Ministry of Justice, May 17 (Waleed Ali Adam)*  
co-convended by the NGO Waging Peace, came together weekly for 9 weeks to find ways to help for the survivor of the Blue Nile rape and her family.

Fatima Bensouda<sup>17</sup> retiring prosecutor at the International Criminal Court, recent visited Khartoum, adding impetus to efforts to extradite Ahmed Haroun, the former governor of South Kordofan, indicted for crimes against humanity and war crimes. Ethnic tensions in the remote western region of Darfur have increased alarmingly<sup>18</sup> as UNAMID, the UN/African Union peacekeeping force, withdrew. UNAMID sites<sup>19</sup> have been sacked and looted, and there are concerns that armed anti-transitional government groups will step up attacks on civilians.

Khalid Omer Yousif, Sudan’s Minister of Cabinet Affairs, argues that the revolution “ended the legitimacy of Islamists” and old regime loyalists. But he concedes that, “This is going to be a very long process and it must involve civil society and well as the transitional government.”

**Rebecca Tinsley**

*Rebecca Tinsley is Director of Waging Peace*

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/sudan-s-women-flogged-in-public-by-young-men-inspired-by-violent-social-media-campaign-1.1215635> Ahmed Maher, 5.5.2021
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/sudan-s-women-flogged-in-public-by-young-men-inspired-by-violent-social-media-campaign-1.1215635> Reem Abbas.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.acjps.org/sudanese-man-sentenced-to-cross-amputation-for-committing-armed-robbery/> African Centre for Justice & Peace Studies 2.7.2021
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-blue-nile-activists-campaign-against-sexual-violence>
- <sup>5</sup> Making and Unmaking Nations: War, Leadership, and Genocide in Modern Africa, by Scott Straus. Cornell University Press 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7443-bring-back-the-public-order-lashings> Reem Abbas 1.2021  
Chr. Michelson Institute
- <sup>7</sup> <sup>9</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/sudan-s-women-flogged-in-public-by-young-men-inspired-by-violent-social-media-campaign-1.1215635>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://blog.amnestyusa.org/africa/arrested-and-beaten-for-wearing-trousers-stop-the-public-flogging-of-women-in-sudan/> 31.3.2015
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.cmi.no/publications/7276-covid-19-and-the-urgent-need-to-protect-sudanese-women-against-violence> CMI Sudan Brief 2020:5 Samia al-Nagar, Liv Tønnessen
- <sup>10</sup> <https://www.unfpa.org/data/fgm/SD> Female Genital Mutlation Dashboard (FMG) Sudan
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/7276-covid-19-and-the-urgent-need-to-protect-sudanese-women-against-violence.pdf> CMI Sudan Brief 2020:5
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/sudan-s-women-flogged-in-public-by-young-men-inspired-by-violent-social-media-campaign-1.1215635>
- <sup>13</sup> <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/sudan-s-women-flogged-in-public-by-young-men-inspired-by-violent-social-media-campaign-1.1215635>
- <sup>14</sup> <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudanese-women-protest-gender-discrimination-and-demand-legal-reform> 9.4.2021
- <sup>15</sup> <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/forex-speculators-arrested-in-sudan> 29.6.2021
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudans-annual-inflation-rate-rises-341-march-2021-04-13/>
- <sup>17</sup> <https://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article69630> Surrender Haroun to the ICC, Bensouda urges Sudanese officials 2.6.2021
- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-57899843> Sudan's Darfur conflict's latest surge in violence displaces thousands, by Reha Kansara. BBC News, El Geneina, Sudan 21.07.2021
- <sup>19</sup> <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/region/fears-after-ex-peacekeeper-bases-%25C2%25A0sudans-darfur-looted>

# Erdoğan is under fire

## Ahmet Kurt

As I write, it has been more than ten days that Turkey has been struggling with wildfires. These fires have burnt more woodland than any others in the last ten years alone. Eight people have died, hundreds are injured, dozens of villages devastated, as well as countless houses lost to the fires. We are accustomed to mid-summer fires but this time things took a different course. The Ministry which is responsible for agriculture and forestry did not use specially designed fire dispersing planes and choppers. The government rejected foreign help from Greece and the EU and even started investigating those people who campaigned for help to fight the fires. On top of everything the media which is close to government and government's troll army keep spreading the word that "fires are the work of Kurdish militants". When you read this most probably the fires will already be out but the anger of people will not.

For the last ten years many of the forest fires were deliberately started; the reason is that after every fire, despite the current legislation, the Erdoğan government allowed the opening of the areas which had burnt for developments, most notable hotels and housing. On the second day of the last fires, the government housing body published ads in the daily papers (obviously the papers were all government supporting ones) showing the new types of housing which would be built on those affected areas; then Erdoğan himself visited the areas and offered his 'great vision' to the people: do not worry we will give you a cheap credit then you will live in your new houses it will be as easy as paying the rent'. After ten days we have learnt that the ministry of agriculture spent its budget on some petty things and as a result fire dispersing aircraft were kept on the ground because of some unknown regulations etc.

Large numbers of Afghan citizens who are trying escape the Taliban atrocities are fleeing to Turkey these days. Over the last religious holidays, the number of phone calls made to Afghanistan from Turkish phone operators consisted of the largest number of the total out of the country calls. The result of this research was caused a huge uproar in the country; then the opposition started put two and two together. Before the USA withdrawal from Afghanistan Joe Biden and Erdoğan had a talk; when this talk took place Erdoğan brought only one interpreter with him, a young woman who is the daughter of an important MP of his party. She has twin citizenships USA and Turkish. According to an unconfirmed report, at this talk Erdoğan promised to take many Afghan army members as refugees to Turkey. Numbers are not known nor the details of this secret agreement. In return Erdoğan wanted to take the control of Kabul airport. Erdoğan's end game not very clear on this issue but when one looks at recent drug hauls which have been caught in and outside of Turkey, one gets very suspicious. People close to the AKP have been implicated in some of these. The existence of agreement was denied by the Americans but the number of Afghans arriving in Turkey through the Iranian border has multiplied in recent days. There is too much at stake for Erdoğan, so he could do anything for to keep himself in power. when one looks at the events from this angle anything is possible.

Day by day the anger of people is rising in Turkey. Everybody with the exception of hardcore Islamists are aware of the corruption, siphoning, deliberately destroying every single working body in the country. Erdoğan and his cronies are obviously no longer managing the country anymore in the way they used to do. Every single incident gets inflated in the eyes of people. Since Erdoğan 's party lost the 2019 municipal elections, his iron throne has turned into very fragile one of glass. There are widespread rumours about Erdoğan 's health; according to some rumours his illness gone into terminal stage. In-fighting among his party and his coalition partner maybe the proof of these rumours. Because journalism has been dead for some time in the country all we get are rumours. Although best analytic articles coming from the left opposition, they are unable to get together and unite. Lately they have become too much of a clique of big city middle class social media warriors rather than forming a credible anti-fascist front. Liberals<sup>1</sup> are still licking their wounds from the days of supporting Erdoğan. The first and second largest opposition parties, the CHP<sup>2</sup> and HDP<sup>3</sup>, are trying hard but still cannot come up with a "New Turkey Depiction" or a "post-Erdoğan " depiction either. However, if a clean honest election takes place, they would surely win with at least a ten percent margin.



The Kurdish opposition (mostly HDP) - has to deter Erdoğan's divisive attacks against the party almost every day. There are elements within the HDP that still believe that there can be a ground for a new peace agreement with Erdoğan. These elements and Abdullah Öcalan (from his gaol cell) are constantly eroding the HDP.

When one looks at the short history of Turkey, developments and again history of the region and western world's tactical and strategic changes towards the region and the world; one could only say "there is another Bonapartist moment is coming for the country". Among the many reasons for this conclusion, one of the most important one is that nobody believes Erdoğan will relinquish his power peacefully. The main reason for this is his government is too deep in corruption.

### **Ahmed Kurt**

<sup>1</sup> Liberal International does not have a Turkish member party, so the word should be used in the small 'l' sense. Various Turkish parties are of described as 'liberal' by Wikipedia, usually in an economic or centre-right context. However, the reliability this information is questionable. Former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's Gelecek Partisi (Future Party) broke away from Erdoğan in 2019 and is not represented in the Turkish parliament. They would be regarded as hard-core Islamist and neo-Ottoman. Ali Babacan's DEVA - Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi (Democracy & Progress Party) also broke away from Erdoğan in 2019-2020. They have one MP and are probably the best approximation of a liberal party (small factions aside). In government Davutoğlu and Babacan pursued neo-liberal economic policy and part of the rift between them and Erdoğan was the AKP's drift to more Islamic economic policies.

Meral Akşener's İyi Parti (Good Party) have been associated ALDE, possibly through the CoR programme. but are not regarded as a liberal party in Turkey, rather Kemalist & secularist and less nationalist as they develop. Akşener is the main threat to the government, as her party appeals to right wing voters disillusioned with the Erdoğan. This has led to attacks on her by Erdoğan's supporters, most recently in Sivas<sup>4</sup>, which would normally be regarded as an AKP stronghold but places like this are increasingly targeted by opposition politicians.

<sup>2</sup> CHP - Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, Republican People's Party – broadly social democratic, Kemalist.

<sup>3</sup> HDP - Halkların Demokratik Partisi - Partiya Demokratîk a Gelan [Kurdish] - Peoples' Democratic Party) predominantly Kurdish and socialist or social democrat, they are the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest party in the Meclis, the Turkish parliament.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/aksenere-sivasta-saldiri-girisimi-1859497>

## **International Abstracts**

### **Journal of Liberal History, Issue 111/Summer 2021**

Domestic – Michael Meadowcroft's appreciation of the late Tony Greaves, Mark Frankel's article on Edmund Harvey, who was a critic of British colonial practices, John Ayshford on Ernest Simon and Jim McGowan on Gladstone and franchise reform. There are also notes on the passing of Trevor Smith, Lord Smith of Clifton, who like Tony, will be greatly missed, and the historians John Vincent and Angus Hawkins. There are reviews of Martin Gibson's biography of Rosebery's son, Neil Primrose and internationally, T.G. Otte's biography of Sir Edward Grey.

### **Liberator 408**

Internationally, Ian Bancroft writes on Kosovo, Marianne Magnin of Emanuel Macron & France, and there is an anonymous article on the situation in Myanmar. Rebecca Tinsley's article on Canada, from interLib 2021-05 also appears. Otherwise Liberator is engaged with the arguments for and against a progressive alliance, with Layla Moran, Michael Meadowcroft and Jonathan Hunt expressing their views. Liberator is available at <https://liberatormagazine.org.uk/mdocs-posts/liberator-408/>



# Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary



**At our AGM this September we will be discussing whether LD4SoS can continue or winds up at the 2022 Spring Conference.**

LD4SoS was set up in 2013 and has gone from strength to strength until this year.

Its early finances were very precarious but thanks to generous donations and considerable effort to recruit members to pay an annual subscription of £10 (or £5 unwaged) sufficient income was generated on a regular basis to support:

- an exhibition stand at the Spring and Autumn Federal Conferences
- a fringe at the Spring and Autumn Federal Conferences
- an AGM fringe at the Autumn Federal Conference
- attendance at other Conferences/events
- the purchase of publicity materials eg: a pop-up banner

Since Conferences have been virtual our finances have increased because events have been cheaper so after bills are paid, including a fringe and AGM at this September's Federal Conference, and taking into account the donations in memory of Tony Greaves we have a disposable income of around £1,500.00.

However this year we have struggled to:

- produce a monthly Newsletter and other mailings to update our members on campaigning issues
- regularly post on Facebook and Twitter
- regularly post on the website

## **We need volunteers to help us with:**

- researching and providing articles for a monthly Newsletter and if necessary specific campaign mailings eg: petitions to sign, writing to MPs etc
- tweeting on behalf of LD4SoS and posting on Facebook
- providing back up for posting on the website (articles posted here automatically go onto our twitter feed and Prater Raines are working to provide a linking direct to Facebook pages). Website articles can provide the basis for newsletter articles!
- researching and updating our policy papers and information documents

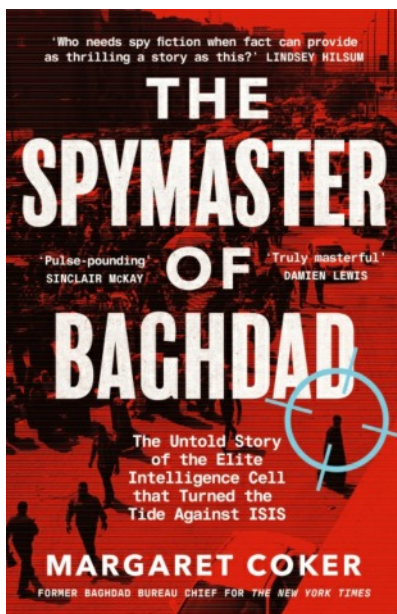
**Can you help?** Please reply to Chris at [ld4s0s5@gmail.com](mailto:ld4s0s5@gmail.com) if you want to know more or think you could join our team and ensure LD4SoS carries on to fulfil its mission of "standing up for asylum seekers and refugees in our country"

*interLib regards LD4SoS as one of the most successful and useful groups within the Liberal Democrats and hopes that we have given them support over the years. As the government becomes devoid of compassion their work has become more and more necessary - not least in the disaster that inevitably follows our shameful abandonment of Afghanistan - the LIBG Forum in the wake of the 'War Against Terror' was not alone in reckoning that at least a 30 year engagement would be necessary.*

# reviews

**The Spymaster of Baghdad by Margaret Coker**  
Penguin Viking 2021 £20.00  
isbn 9780241409091

The title sounds like a John Le Carre novel, but this story, by the former Baghdad bureau chief of the New York Times, is a page-turning true life espionage tale of jaw dropping courage. The world beyond Iraq has been repeatedly told that the Iraqis were useless in the face of Islamic State, and that American special forces were responsible for crushing the jihadists. True, the Iraqi army collapsed at Mosul in 2014, allowing IS to establish its brutal caliphate, stretching almost to Baghdad. However, a group of Iraqi intelligence agents played a vital role in preventing dozens of IS atrocities and eventually defeating them. Meanwhile, on the battlefield, the Kurdish Peshmerga did the heavy lifting.



This book follows two brothers working for the Falcon group of agents, one of whom went undercover in a IS cell for 18 months, eventually paying with his life. Tasked with driving car bombs into heavily populated Shia neighbourhoods, he stopped more than 30 massive explosions that would have killed thousands. The story of how the intelligence services fooled IS into believing their operations had been successful is fascinating.

The book also traces the intellectual journey taken by a Sunni chemist who is so appalled by the rise of the Shia majority that she joins IS. At least, she tries to offer her ricin-making services to IS, but because she is a woman, they have no interest in her skills. Despite the dreadful way she is treated by IS, she continues to believe in their cause, so great is her hatred of the Shia authorities.

Coker describes the suffocating way in which many Iraqi families function, circumscribed lives within the home. Archaic notions of respectability and

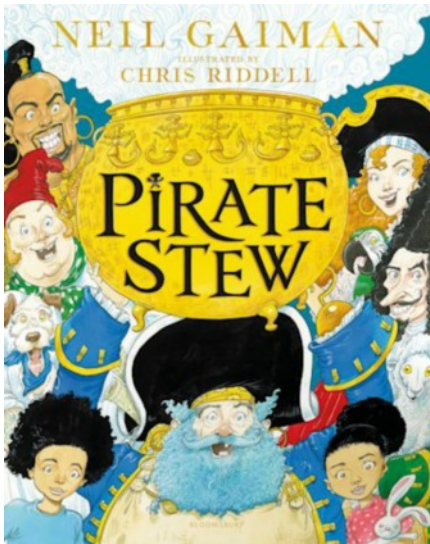
honour have a crushing effect on daily life, with parents living in fear of the judgment of nosy neighbours. The book explodes several myths. One is that with the exit of Saddam, Shia and Sunni were suddenly at each other's throats. It is clear from Coker's experience that there was long-standing loathing between Shia and Sunni, with Saddam managed to keep a lid on it through fear.

Another is that foreign IS recruits were significant whereas in truth they made up only small numbers of jihadists. Instead, it was easy to attract the thousands of Sunni officers sacked by Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority. They did not subscribe to the sectarian extremism of IS, but they saw it as a means to getting rid of their new Shia rulers. In addition, Saddam-era officers were schooled in how to use terror and brutality to achieve their aims so they did not blanch at IS's methods.

*Rebecca Tinsley*

**Pirate Stew, by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Chris Riddell**  
Bloomsbury 2020 £12.99  
isbn 9781526614728

I was disappointed by this book when I first read it, a surprise since I've usually enjoyed the works of Neil Gaiman and Chris Riddell. Riddell's *Goth Girl* and *Ottoline* have been well received in these pages, and Gaiman has brought us a definitive *Sandman*, whilst his 1990 collaboration with Terry Pratchett, *Good Omens* should be read before binge-watching the outstanding television series.



At 48 pages, it seemed longer than most similar books, and I had doubts about it holding the attention of small children. Beautiful though it maybe, a judicious edit might have helped it flow. But who am I to judge? Unable to test-run because of Lockdown, I fretted too long; but dispatched to a pirate cove, with two of the scurviest buccaneers<sup>1</sup> that ever sailed the seven seas, the book has been read over and over again, along with eating / the butter, taking the soap... putting them in places where they be found as hidden treasure... I repent. As with all pirate stew, the proof is in the eating.



*Stewart Rayment*

<sup>1</sup> Hand-knitted pirate dolls from Sales from the Crypt, Queen's Arcade, Hastings, TN34 1PA - <https://www.salesfromthecrypt.co.uk>

**In the Thick of It: the private diaries of a minister, by Alan Duncan  
William Collins 2021 £25**

Several journalists reviewing Alan Duncan's diaries have expressed pious disapproval of the former Foreign and Commonwealth Office minister's acid descriptions of his Conservative party colleagues.

But anyone inside a political party, as opposed to commenting on the Westminster Village, will be unsurprised by his venom. Activists of any political colour may appreciate how infuriated Duncan becomes by the ambitious and delusional mediocrities around him who win attention and advancement.

His diaries provide an intimate view of how the swivel-eyed Brexiteers finally gained total control of the Tory Party, much to his dismay. Initially a Leaver, he campaigned for Remain, having grasped the impracticality of departing the EU. He became increasingly convinced that the Leavers were unhinged and careless about the country they claim to love.

Duncan's interactions with the remote, graceless and socially awkward Theresa May prompt one to wonder how someone so lacking in political talent or manners rises to be prime minister.

Similarly, his observations about Boris Johnson's term as foreign secretary make it clear the man is incapable of focusing on detail, caring about anything but himself, or telling the truth. Boris's promotion of scheming non-entities like Gavin Williamson reflect his disregard for what might benefit the government or the country.

Duncan also regrets the increasing FCO tendency to pull punches, especially regarding Israel, terrified of offending the Americans whether under Obama or Trump. He concludes that 'Global Britain' is the opposite: a puny country, failing to find a role in the world.

Finally, his love for his husband is touching, as is his courage in confronting foreign officials with his LGBT status, irrespective of their prejudices. This is an entertaining read, but perhaps worth waiting until it is in paperback or on Kindle.

*Rebecca Tinsley*

