

## **Joseph Mairs Memorial 2013 Address**

### **Mordecai Briemberg**

Thanks for inviting me, and it is a pleasure to be with you again in what I can only say are “exciting times” -- here in Canada and elsewhere in the world.

For one thing there is the Idle No More movement.

But my topic is the Middle East, and the Idle No More movement isn't connected to the bubbling turmoil of the Middle East -- or is it?

Let me jog your memory: let's go back to Wisconsin 2011, two years ago when Governor Walker was proposing legislation attacking the rights of public sector workers, as part of the pursuit of a neo-liberal agenda. Protesting workers had surrounded the Capitol building in Madison and were occupying it inside. This coincided with another mass movement thousands of miles away in North Africa, Cairo Egypt to be exact. There masses of Egyptians were occupying the central square, Tahrir Square. Tahrir in Arabic means “Freedom”.

In a spontaneous and surprising gesture of mutual solidarity the American workers in Madison Wisconsin renamed their place of occupation “Tahrir Square”. And Egyptians in Tahrir Square Cairo joined a support gesture that had developed among some Americans in the US: they phoned long-distance to a pizza parlour in Madison to pay for pizzas to be delivered to the workers occupying the Capitol building in Madison.

Despite the smothering and unrelenting anti-Arab and anti-Moslem propaganda generated during a decade of US wars against Iraq and Afghanistan , for me personally this symbolic but very public gesture of solidarity, of common interest, from Wisconsin to Cairo, fills me with hope.

In this flash of solidarity there is the recognition of a common foe and a common aspiration. The common foe is global neo-liberalism; the common aspiration is for democratic and economic rights.

What is this global capitalist project of neo-liberalism? For one, it is a project to eliminate regulations, restrictions, on the operation of the capitalist market. For another, it is rampant privatization that shreds systems of social support won after years, indeed generations of struggle. And for another, neo-

liberalism is the celebration of the resulting obscene and unparalleled inequalities of wealth, perhaps the most extreme in modern history. In foreign countries this concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny, tiny minority is labelled “corruption”, to distinguish it from the same phenomenon that happens in the West. Of course our society is not sunk in corruption. *Of course that couldn't be!* But here, as elsewhere, this obscene concentration of wealth is the result of structured, and intentionally pursued, neo-liberal policies.

Three recent waves of explosion of youth-led, popular rebellion in Canada link us to what is happening globally in the fight-back against neo-liberalism. Occupy was the first youth rebellion, with its 1% versus the 99% eye-popping slogan. The second wave was the Quebec student movement against the government's effort to limit access to public education by raising tuition fees. The political acumen and carefully sustained organization of the students galvanized Quebecois across the age spectrum, and mobilized them in casserole demonstrations. Now a third wave, this time of indigenous youth call-out to defend their lands, and everyone's environment. And this wave also has pushed to the forefront the grim realities of their peoples generations-long, still enduring, cruel colonization.

I suggest for your reflection that these are similar painful grievances to those underlying the swirling popular struggles in the Middle East, now drawn to our attention by the “Arab Spring”. A “spring” which is not one season, but a process. In this process, the sustained efforts of progressives in Egypt are truly inspiring. I say that without for a moment under-estimating how far they still are from achieving a secure end-point. But revolution never has been a quick victory anywhere.

In addition to the shared global struggle against neo-liberalism, let us also briefly look at the Middle East from the shared vantage point of colonial victimization: foreign conquest, the drawing of lines on maps and imposition of new boundaries, the stealing of resources and the transfer of peoples from one place to another. Just reflect for a moment on the history of the Palestinian people, with the imposition of a “Jewish state” on their lands, and the forced dispersal from their homeland.

Awareness of these realities requires an attention to history that spans centuries. Yet we live, as the American satirist Gore Vidal brilliantly pointed out, in a culture where “history is Thursday”, something that happened earlier this week.

It was in the aftermath of World War 1, only a few years after the death of young Joseph Mairs, that the British and the French, victors in that war against Germany and the Ottoman empire, broke their promises to the peoples of the Middle East, the promise to reward their support with independence. Instead these empire builders drew new lines on maps, created new countries, installed flunkies to do their bidding, and divided the spoils, not least oil, between themselves. That pattern has continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into this one.

Mali, a new name, has burst out of the shadows into lead stories on our television screens. And who drew the lines of that country, whose “northern region” is larger than that of France itself? Of course: the same country that has sent its soldiers to reoccupy its old colony.

Why would Mali make our news headlines when it only was notable for the misery of its people, ranking 175<sup>th</sup> out of 187 countries at the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Index? Well China seems to have been interested, for it was giving hundreds of millions of dollars to the Malian government recently. But now, for Western powers, Mali has become another opportunity for foreign intervention and war-making.

And war-making is very important. This road to human disaster and political folly as we have seen for so many years now in Iraq and Afghanistan, is nonetheless a central tactic for trying to halt the process of democratization and ending resistance to neo-liberalism, that is the Arab Spring.

Remember: Libya. France, Canada, Britain, the U.S. saw Libya as an opportunity to try and halt what had happened in Tunisia, was happening in Egypt, Bahrein and elsewhere in the Gulf. Libya was an opportunity to apply what they had dubbed the “R2P” policy, military intervention justified as the “Responsibility to Protect”. To prevent greater catastrophe.

This doctrine has been used in Afghanistan – aren’t we waging war to protect Afghan women from oppression? And in Iraq, weren’t we intervening to protect Iraqis from a dictatorial Saddam?

Gerald Caplan writing in the Globe and Mail last week, commenting on the situation in Mali, redefined the meaning of R2P, saying it stands for “Right to Plunder”, not “Responsibility to Protect”.

It was NATO military intervention in Libya which shattered that country, leaving numerous ruthless armed groups competing for control, and Libya’s military arsenals open to plunder. The Tuareg nomadic people of neighbouring

northern Mali, who had been trained and served in Ghadaffi's army, because he supported their national rights, were -- in the mayhem of foreign intervention in Libya -- returning to Mali to fight for their independence.

As for the jihadist forces now in Mali, there is a connection with the recent history of Algeria. In 1990, in a "spring" before the 2011 "Arab Spring", Algeria was in the process of democratizing, with honest local and national elections. The Islamic Salvation Front, FIS, which supported peaceful and fair elections won the local elections and the first round of the national elections. At which point there was a military coup, leading to a massive and still on-going blood-letting, in which an estimated nearly 200,000 people have been killed. The Western governments' unconcern for those dead is the same unconcern for the million killed Iraqis, the ones we said we had a "responsibility to protect".

That jihadists have spread from Algeria into Mali should not be a surprise.

With the monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Qatar arming and sending jihadists into Syria, along with the intransigence of the dictatorial Assad regime, Syria too is moving closer to fragmentation, with still more unpredictable consequences. The effort of Russia and China to push instead for a political resolution of the conflict, which would allow the Syrian people to take control over the political dynamic of their society, seems the only possibility to forestall a region-wide war.

In short the Middle East is in a dynamic state, where multiple crises interlock with signs of a growing new cold war -- with China the target of the US. These crises seem beyond the control of any one country or even any alliance of countries.

While wars of foreign intervention can only lead to disasters of still unknown dimensions, the back and forth tugs of popular democratic struggles are the only initiatives that can lead to positive results.

So what should be our focus? What can be our contribution?

Our contribution is to explain to Canadians that the democracy we want for ourselves is the also the democracy that people in the Middle East want for themselves. Our contribution is to explain to Canadians that the neo-liberalism which is destroying our lives here is the neo-liberalism that has been destroying the lives of people in the Middle East. Our contribution must be focused on ending the Canadian government's involvement in war-making in this and all other regions.

Our contribution is to explain to Canadians that the effort of our government to make us fear and hate the people of the Middle East – denouncing them as Moslems, Arabs, terrorists – only divides us from our allies. It is the 1%, the advocates of unbridled greed and the upholders of colonialism who are the global enemy.

These responsibilities are challenging, no doubt. But as the student movement of an earlier era wrote in the Port Huron statement of 1962:

“If we appear to seek the unattainable.... we do so to avoid the unimaginable.”