2016

Syria: The Name of our Shame

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The Name of our Shame

Lama Abu Odeh

“Freedom...All we want” a chant by the Syrian revolutionaries

“Thousands, nay tens of thousands, lived in the prisons of our country. They lived the prison life because they had no other choice, and because the only thing they knew what to do in prison is keep their bodies alive. They lived the best they could, until this life was taken either because their jailors chose to take it or because their bodies failed them. They are the bodies on which tyranny wrote the carnage of its triumph”
Yassin El Haj Saleh, Syrian writer describing his experience as a political prisoner for 16 years in Syria

“The Syrian revolution needs outside assistance to overthrow the regime. There is nothing strange about this. All popular movements of resistance have had friends assisting them. This is the experience of the twentieth century. This may or may not happen, hard to predict...” Interview with Sadeq Jalal El Azm, A prominent Syrian writer

Part 1
We are at a watershed moment; a Syria-watershed-moment.

Voyeurs of Human Tragedy
The genocide in Syria has caught us with nary a word to say, nary a word. And by us, I mean us “progressives”- liberal to left liberal to radical. It has caught us, all of us, digging deep inside familiar lines of thought, scrambling for things to say; rummaging inside old political bags, grappling for positions long held to hold again; milking political affiliations and precious theoretical hometowns for whatever they’re worth, but only to find us lacking in things to say; only to find us tongue-tied, stone-faced, and dumbstruck. But most importantly quiet, as quiet as the tomb made of rubble that came from a building that fell from the weight of a barrel bomb that smashed the head of a Syrian man, too poor to make his escape when he should have, that came from the city of Homs!

Do you hear that sound? It is the sound of our silence over the genocide in Syria!

It’s odd when you think about it, this speechlessness of ours- how could we, “progressives”, manage to be so spectacularly and so loudly mute in the face of a

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1 Bi al-Khalas ya Shabab, 16 years in Syrian Jail, (2012), in Arabic
2 http://www.orient-news.net/ar/news_show/8179
tragedy that is one of the biggest the world has witnessed since World War Two, claiming half a million dead, seven million displaced, and four million made refugees, and one that unfolded following a most “glorious revolution”, against the rule of one of the most brutal dictators in the Arab world??? Why has it proven so hard for us to pronounce genocide bad, to gather our forces to decry it and to demand an immediate stop to it? Why? Why is the Syrian genocide the rock at which our “progressivism” seems to break so mercilessly?

It is, isn’t it, as if the genocide in Syria has caught us with our conceptual pants down, as if it has revealed something about us at this historical moment, about what we say and what we think, about what we’ve been up to until now; about causes we had and still deem precious and others not so much so; about truths we hold to be self-evident and have long held to be so; about theoretical frameworks, we had for long lay allegiance to, mediating between facts and our positions, and analyses we had boasted about, even flaunted, with certitude and flair; about alliances and coalitions, about critiques and condemnations, ones that we thought left no doubt as to who we were and who they were, and the irreducible, irrefutable, and irreversible difference between us.

It is, isn’t it, as if with the genocide in Syria, history took an unfamiliar turn, and with lightening speed we could barely catch our breath, threw a bunch of facts at us, ones that overwhelmed our discourses and showed their poverty but mostly showing the lie: if a discourse, then a fact!

But most importantly, it is, isn’t it, as if the genocide in Syria, uncovered something about us, about our subjectivity, about what we’ve become, perhaps long time in the coming, about our gumption for human tragedy, our capacity to stare misery down every time it confronted us with its horrors, about our momentary outrage, no sooner had than lost, but more disturbingly, about our capacity to feel rage, barely concealed, at genocide’s victims, for it was their misery that put all our theories to the test, and it
was their rebellions that rankled our comfortable lives turning our heroes into villains, and our insights into empty platitudes.

And while the turn in history nudged us, nay pushed us, to go back to the drawing board, all we managed to do was hold our ground, lay claim to all positions familiar and, consequently, stand witness to tragedy, over and over again.

Deaf, dumb, mute.

The Making of US Neoliberal Imperialism

*Syria is now the Obama administration’s shame, a debacle of such dimensions that it may overshadow the president’s domestic achievements.*

*Obama’s decision in 2013, at a time when ISIS scarcely existed, not to uphold the American “red line” on Assad’s use of chemical weapons was a pivotal moment in which he undermined America’s word, incurred the lasting fury of Sunni Persian Gulf allies, shored up Assad by not subjecting him to serious one-off punitive strikes and opened the way for Putin to determine Syria’s fate.*

*Putin policy is American policy because the United States has offered no serious alternative. As T.S. Eliot wrote after Munich in 1938, "We could not match conviction with conviction, we had no ideas with which we could either meet or oppose the ideas opposed to us." Syria has been the bloody graveyard of American conviction.*

*(Roger Cohen, America’s Syrian Shame, NYTimes Op-ed, Feb 18, 2016)*

A familiar pattern has set in on the pages of the *New York Times*: on the odd and unique occasion that a writer attempts to argue for US military intervention in Syria to put a halt to the extermination of the Syrian people by their president Bashar Al-Assad³, and to criticize Obama’s weak, ambivalent and dithering policy on Syria in the midst of an unfolding genocide⁴, this writer is showered with abuse by the newspaper’s readers under the comments section.

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⁴ The international legal definition of the crime of genocide is found in Articles II and III of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. Article II describes two elements of the crime of genocide: 1) the mental element, meaning the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such"; and 2) the physical element which includes five acts described in sections a, b, c, d and e. A crime must include both elements to be called "genocide."

Article III described five punishable forms of the crime of genocide: genocide; conspiracy, incitement, attempt and complicity.
And it can get nasty!

These comments, listed by the *Times* editor under the heading “Readers’ Picks” indicating their wide popularity, sometimes accuse the writer of being a “hawk” for calling for humanitarian intervention, other times “a die-hard idealist”. Most such commentator critics accompany their comments with strong approval of Obama’s non-interventionist policy which they typically support with progressive short hands like “we need the money to rebuild our infrastructure” or “we have no business invading other countries”, and often such progressive short hands, attach themselves to cultural statements that go in opposite directions at once deriding the hopelessness of “us”, as in, “We would make a mess of it as we did in Iraq”, and the hopelessness of “them”, as in “They are divided into a million faction, we wouldn’t be able to tell the rebel from the terrorist”. Sometimes the liberal commentator drops all “soft” pretenses and goes for the realist jugular asserting his own interests as an American in keeping the *terrorists* away from US shores, and therefore admiration for Assad, and now for Russia for shoring up Assad, who according to this commentator was, with all his ills as a dictator (Assad that is), is in fact a *secularist* who like the US was simply battling terrorists that threatened his rule and weakened his state. For all the above, these commentators insisted Obama’s bystander policies were in the right.

There is something odd about the internal organization of this pro-Obama liberalism, which is clearly taking shape against the background of the recent experience of the US invasion of Iraq following the events of September 11. One’s first clue to its oddity is the dual charge levied against the person requesting humanitarian intervention in Syria, as being at once a “hawk” *and* an “idealist’!!! And then there is the bad-faith reading of Assad’s extermination of his people (as the UN report described it) could very well fit into this definition as “an intent to destroy a religious group” since most of his victims are “sunni”, nevertheless, I am using it here as a popular term not a legal one. It would seem to me that the legal one should be amended to follow more closely the popular one.
humanitarian intervention as “we have no business invading other countries”, in effect reading (humanitarian) intervention as (malevolent) invasion. Then there is the “dual” cultural generalization: we are culturally (perhaps even ontologically) incapable of intervening for the right reasons and they are culturally (perhaps even ontologically) hopeless anyway. And then there is the quick and easy flip from “liberal” to “realist” in which Assad’s genocide against his people is no longer judged according to either the principled position of “non invasion” or the practicalities or efficiencies of the matter “let’s spend the money at home” but is declared to be not so bad tout court, because he is, like us, fighting terrorists, and he (that is Assad) may not be a very pleasant fellow (a dictator) but those terrorists pushed him to move from being bad (merely a dictator) to being really nasty (a genocidal man)!

Or as a “progressive” colleague of mine said, “Syrians should not have rebelled against Assad.”

What is significant about this pro Obama liberalism is the way in which it recalls principles of classical liberalism: principled aversion to a “good” role for the US imperial state to play on the international scene articulated in a fatalist manner (“we are hopeless at it”), respect for the sovereignty of the other (non-intervention), indifference to human tragedy seen as “self-inflicted” (they are hopelessly divided into tribes and sects), a “market” view that the strong will win and the weak has to be sacrificed (the principle of self-help) along with strong approval of “the war on terror” seen as a global policing operation (terrorists have to be eliminated) 5.

From Domestic to International

5 On the domestic scene these principles appear as the familiar Hobbesian principles of “minimum social contract”: Individual sovereignty guaranteed by the state, limited role for the state with the exception of policing those who encroach on individuals’ rights (of life and property), and a competing market place in which the individuals pursue self-help.
The ideas expressed in the comments are familiar to us from the domestic context; in fact they appear to be genealogical descendants of something that has become very familiar to us: minimalist state, respect for individual sovereignty, and policing criminality. They are ideas that have taken hold of the global sensibility as normative approaches to the relationship between the state and the economy since the Washington consensus was consolidated in the nineties and globalized via multilateral institutions. There is not a state I know that didn’t launch into a program of what has famously become called “neo-liberalism” expressed in the now very familiar triple whammy of deregulating the market (let the fittest survive), privatizing the public sector (non intervention to subsidize the poor) and liberalizing trade (the “invisible hand” of comparative advantage). The implementation of these policies has created new social classes and caused the demise of old ones, triggered new and devastating forms of class dynamics, spun new rationalizing discourses, produced new subjectivities, and reshaped the functions of state towards increased policing and “securitization” as the gap between the rich and the poor increased.

It would appear then that this lexicon with its organized elements, these globalized ideas, have traveled from the domestic scene making pronouncements on the normative relationship between state and market to the international scene as the formula for the normative relationship between empire (the US as a Supra State) and other states in the imperial “marketplace”.

We were already getting a clue as to the shaping of this brand of (neo) liberalism as US liberals, as soon as the conservative-led invasion of Iraq took place, began to develop their critique of the invasion as a “war of choice not necessity” and to insist on recasting the “war on terror” as a question requiring US imperial “policing” in the name of “national security”- seen as decidedly the efficient way to go- in opposition to the conservative understanding of “military invasion with the aim of national reconstruction” seen as a form of imperial excess. With the advance in drone
technology and the increased use of drones targeting terrorists under the Obama administration, this “international” (neo) liberalism took a bureaucratic legalist turn: as long as “targeted assassinations” were rationalized as having a legal basis, then so be it.

The neo liberal attitude then was consolidating- bit by bit- around the core idea of national security of the US (minimalist supra state), the neo liberal version of empire’s role versus the national reconstruction of the other (interventionist supra state), the conservative version of empire’s role.

**Neo Liberalizing Empire**

The question is: what allows for this seemingly facile transportation of neo liberal ideas (about the economy) to describe the workings of empire? Can empire be neo liberalized? I don’t mean by posing this question to suggest the conventional Marxist thesis that empire is necessary to protect a global market that has acquired the qualities of “neoliberalism”, i.e., that military adventures and military bases are driven and determined by the economic interests of empire. I certainly think there is a relationship between the two though perhaps it is not as clear-cut as many leftists like to think. Once imperial powers get into the role of exercising imperial hegemony –making the rise of competing imperial powers difficult, I think this role acquires its own autonomous dynamic that may or may not be expressive of direct economic interests.

Rather what I mean is: is it possible for us to draw a parallel between empire and the market and use the same terminology to describe the shifts in market policies as shifts in imperial policies? Can neo liberal logic be extended to the workings of empire per empire?
Let us imagine empire working as a supra state who in order to preserve its hegemony acts in a paternalist way in relation to all the states it considers “allies”⁶. This state’s paternalism includes, among other things, acting as their default military force ready to protect them when forces outside the imperial sphere threaten them. This “military” paternalism is costly for it requires a heavy investment in the supra state’s defense budget. What is offered the other states in the imperial orbit is in effect a form of imperial subsidy that keeps them “safe” and preserves their national interests. We can think of them as publicly owned companies or ones that get a special subsidy from the state. The Supra state spends money to keep them “afloat”, those who could stand on their own feet and those who couldn’t. This supra state is heavily interventionist in the sense that it does what is necessary –targeted imperial subsidies- to keep its “public companies” operative.⁷

Sometimes its subsidies hit the mark and sometimes they miss it. Sometimes, they look like pumping a public company with money that perpetuates its dysfunction. Sometimes decisions on subsidies appear heavy-handed (with disastrous effects)⁸, other times they appear to signal some sort of internal corruption (no rational basis established whatsoever for the subsidy)⁹, or that something other than subsidy would have worked just as well: an attitude of laissez faire, a change in the personnel, an

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⁶ I have developed the notion of neo liberal post imperialism by reading *A New Grand Strategy*, a paper published by the authors Benjamin Shwartz and Christopher Lane published in *The Atlantic* (January 2002 Issue). The summary of the paper goes like this:

“For more than fifty years American foreign policy has sought to prevent the emergence of other great powers—a strategy that has proved burdensome, futile and increasingly risky. The United States will be more secure, and the world more stable, if America now chooses to pass the buck and allow other countries to take care of themselves”

In the Arpil 2006 issue, Geffrey Goldberg of *The Atlantic* conducted an interview with Obama under the title “The Obama Doctrine” that appear to me to be a working out, in Obama’s words, of the ideas included in *A New Grand Strategy*

⁷ Imperial subsidies involve joint defense agreements, financial subsidies to the defense and military establishment of the “colony”, military and security equipment sales, joint training agreements, share of intelligence agreements, etc

⁸ The invasion of Iraq

⁹ Imperial subsidies to Israel due to undue influence of the Jewish lobby AIPAC
internal reorganization, etc\textsuperscript{10}. And sometimes, they create \textit{resentment} about the subsidized company exposing it to vicious attacks and criticisms “this company would collapse if it weren’t for the subsidy”\textsuperscript{11}.

Supposing that this paternalist supra state went through an experience, that proved in hindsight formative, in which heavy subsidies were pumped into one public company for dubious and corrupt reasons, produced disastrous results by way of efficiency, and subjected the supra state to heavy criticism and vicious attacks (invasion and occupation of Iraq)\textsuperscript{12}. And supposing an ideology was consolidated in reaction to this formative experience, in which subsidies were declared inefficient tout court, that there is no good subsidy and a bad one, and that every subsidy produces a litany of effects and consequences that go against their intended purpose. So rather than advocating reform of intervention so that it is deployed for the “right” reasons (like humanitarian reasons), the very notion of supra state intervention in the imperial place was deemed in this new ideology as wrong headed and simply inefficient.

Supposing a new president (Obama) is anointed to this supra state as president who bought this ideology wholesale. It was already running amuck in the world as the blueprint for domestic economies so its transmutation into ideas about the workings of the imperial supra state was not surprising. The new president makes the decision that all imperial subsidies have to be withdrawn and that the supra state was no longer in the business of projecting imperial hegemony. The supra state has other interests in the imperial market place but projecting hegemony was no longer one of them, and that those interests can best be protected if public companies were privatized and left to fend for themselves (imperial subsidies withdrawn). Let new entrants to the imperial market place make their way without being disadvantaged by the imperial subsidies

\textsuperscript{10} Egypt
\textsuperscript{11} Saudi Arabia
\textsuperscript{12} The first invasion of Iraq was a clear imperial subsidy to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and indirectly Israel, while the second one was clearly an imperial subsidy to Israel given the dominance of the Zionist neo cons in the (second) Bush administration
given to the “public companies” of the supra state. Let’s level the playing field for all companies even if the fittest would eat the less fit and expand its share of the imperial marketplace at its expense. And if a public company’s survival is threatened and it is deemed crucial to the national security interests of the supra state, then the supra state can offer it targeted subsidies to keep it afloat. Rather than subsidy, self-reliance is the new motto of the now supra state, or if you like, (post) empire\textsuperscript{13}.

When these ideas were adopted as blueprints for economic reform in the nineties they were imagined as offering a solution – almost a magical one- to problem-ridden economies with highly interventionist states. These states, burdened by an expansive public sector, were characterized by high rates of corruption and inflation, inferior commodities produced by publicly owned companies, public debt, etc. The triple whammy of deregulation/privatization/liberalization were seen as fixes where the new agent for growth – the new agent of economic history- will be the private sector who by thinking of its own interests will act as the “invisible hand” promoting the prosperity of all. The state was deemed not qualified to play this role evidenced by the sad demise of all the states that had tried to do just that. All the state needed to do was to level the playing field by sanctioning property and contract transactions.

When applied to the imperial context, what the interventionist supra state doles out is imperial violence either directly or through its own publicly owned company-satellites- as its most privileged commodity. And imperial violence is devastating: it destroys lives, infrastructures, livelihoods, material and administrative, etc. Withdrawal from the

\textsuperscript{13} As happened in domestic economies this shift operates on two levels: the ideological shift in which “minimalist state” becomes reigning ideology among the national elites who then work to normalize those ideas among the “governed”, and the second is the actual institutional implementation of the triple whammy of deregulation/privatization and liberalization. The institutional implementation can take twists and turns, including some, excluding others, spread over time, “one step forward, two steps back”. What is important is that these institutional shifts are occurring under an ideological cover of “minimalist state” that operates to discredit any talk of a “maximalist” or “interventionist state” as “démodé” (been there, done that, it was terrible). What is prohibited is thinking about an interventionist state that looks different from the defunct one.
imperial place by waiving imperialist interventionism, quite simply means, putting an end to imperialist violence. And that is surely good.

The “liberal” (in neoliberalism) understanding of such a shift would not only register the end of violence in and of itself virtuous- for out of the ashes of violence a free will (a sovereign) is born- but would consider that sufficient to change everything. Non-violence in liberalism restructures the normative field magically – it exculpates the supra state (no longer guilty of violence) and shifts blame to now “freed” sovereigns who may have suffered imperial violence previously for the purposes of protecting subsidized companies (the new sovereign). “Now that you’re free, what’s your excuse??”

The neo in liberalism, already has its scripted response to the distributive fall out from the triple whammy of liberalization/deregulation/privatization which multilaterals doled out to economies undergoing such a transformation: “Terrible things will happen at first, but you will have to “bite the bullet””. Applied to the imperial context, this will turn out to be literal! “What new powers enter the now evacuated imperial place will surely inflict their own type of power violence, but you will need to “bite the bullet” and mobilize your own resources to fight, for after all, you are now free!”

The War on Terror
Having withdrawn its imperialist subsidies, and refrained from inflicting interventionist violence on other countries (invasion), the neoliberal supra state adjusts to its proper “minimalist” role in what has come to be called: the war on terror. It is the only form of “intervention” that is legitimate according to the blueprint of post-empire and mimics

14 In the US domestic context, the condensed moment of “you are free now” and “you have to bite the bullet”, doled out to Syrians, in this pro-Obama (neo) liberalism, occurred in relation to African Americans at two different historical moments, the first, when slavery was ended, slavery being the epitome of anti-liberal violence: “you are now free, your destiny is your own making”, and the second, the post civil rights reordering of the welfare state under Clinton, “you’ll have to bite the bullet, it’s good for you in the long run!” In the first, the distributive element was rejected: no forty acres and a mule were handed out to freed slaves; and in the second, the impossibility of “making it” against the background of an already neo-liberalizing general economy.
the proscribed minimalist role to be played by the state in neo liberal domestic economies. In the former, this role is summed up as protecting the citizens of the supra state from violence inflicted on them by terrorists wherever they might be, and in the latter, as sanctioning property rights and contractual agreements. In the former, the war on terror is seen as the efficient response to messy invasion, and in the latter, the rule of contract and property as the efficient response to messy state regulation. In short, the war on terror in the post-imperial international context is the rule of law state of the neoliberal economic domestic context. In both cases, it is a form of avoiding what is defined as “intervention”- seen as less efficient- as well as policing the distributional fall out resulting from such avoidance. No wonder then that each has adopted some of the features of the other, the war on terror becoming legalized and the rule of law becoming “exceptionalized”.

The drone, the war on terror’s most privileged instrument of “execution”, not only brings home the liberal point about the hyper efficiency of the “war on terror” compared to messy country invasions, but its targeting capacity, the ability to identify the individual culprits and deliver them their desert (with unavoidable collaterals of course), strongly evokes the idea of a “targeted subsidy”, the neo liberal efficient alternative to the “messy” subsidies of the public sector as well as its most privileged instrument, as if a targeted subsidy is nothing but a drone of supplementary income offered to those whom the state deems deserving (with unavoidable collaterals of course). For neo liberalism it is the rule of law (property rights) and targeted subsidies, for neo liberal imperialism, it is the war on terror and drones.

As happened with welfare reforms under the Clintons (liberals again), the shift from welfare to targeted subsidies was accompanied with busy culture talk about how the poor were lazy and didn’t like to work and how the point of reform, by creating an incentive structure so that the poor recovered from their structural laziness and rushed to work, was to filter the worthy (the genuinely poor) from the unworthy (the lazy). In
fact, the intensity of cultural representations was necessary for the reform to happen—
for it to be accepted and to have wide support. If you’re going to pull the (security) rug
from underneath the feet of the poor, might as well blame it on them. And if you’re
going to rationalize the ensuing background distributive gap between those who can
make it and those who can’t, and the economic engine that reproduces this gap over
time, better blame it on the incapacitation of those who can’t by their own culture.

Likewise, the shift from intervention (invasion) to war on terror (drone) was
accompanied with a lot of culture talk about Muslims and Islam. This is not to deny that
terrorism exists nor that Islamic terrorism is leading the way in our contemporary times
and so cultural understandings—how Muslims intervene in their culture and transform it
continuously and how they do so in response to social, economic and political
circumstances they confront in their daily lives, including relentless foreign imperial
assaults that have defined their entry into the modern age, are not only inevitable but
also necessary. Rather the shift to cultural talk, about “Muslims and Islam”, in the static
manner of “Muslims are “handicapped” by their pre-modern culture”— has become
fodder for neo liberal imperialist pronouncements. “It’s a mess out there— they are all
divided into tribes and sects”; or, “Sunni Muslims are handicapped by their brutal
legalistic Islamic culture and they are victimizing ethnic and sectarian minorities who
need our sympathy”; or, “the clue to understanding this region is the sectarian divide
which has been going on for thousands of years”; or, “the thing the people of this region
need to work on is to recover from their handicapping culture” etc.

What is interesting about this “culture talk” is that liberals, who are spearheading this
neo liberal transformation in the course of empire, veer very closely towards essentialist
cultural representations when it comes to Muslim societies even though they insist on
discriminating talk when it comes to describing Muslims inside the US. For the latter,
they make an effort to talk about the tolerant religion of Islam and insist that violence
by some Muslims is attributed to “radicalization” in order to distinguish themselves from conservative representation of Islam and Muslims as inherently violent.

**Redistribution Upwards**

As happened in neo liberalizing economies, the privatized assets of the public sector moved into the hands of the political and administrative elites who controlled the administration of those assets in the original system and who quite swiftly shifted to the praise of the market and efficiency as handily as they had praised the virtue of the “socialist” economy in the preceding era. So in the shift to neo liberalizing empire as a reaction to the invasion of Iraq by conservatives, the neo liberal imperialists recouped the benefits of the invasion of Iraq even as they declared US withdrawal as supreme virtue.

The redistribution of virtue to the neo liberal was dual: not only did the neo liberal acquire self-righteousness by calling for withdrawal, but the state collapse in Iraq with all the ensuing sectarian fall out that was triggered by the various acts of US occupying administration was turned by the neo liberal into a set of positivist facts about Iraq, an original feature of the country accidentally discovered by the American occupier rather than caused by its occupation. The collapse of the state in Iraq had serious ramification for adjacent Syria, and the cascading events of sectarian and territorial feuds that spun as a reaction to the brutal force Assad used to crush the Syrian revolution and which were partly determined by the collapse of the state in Iraq, were also treated as “positive facts” about Syria that the neo liberal American imperialist simply happened upon. Such facts would have to now be left to Syrians to tackle through “self-help” on the one hand, and police through “war on terror” when it threatened American lives (or ethnic or religious minorities such as the Kurds and the Yazidis) on the other, as of course, neo liberal imperialist ideology would have it.
So the second thing, and the most important one, I might add, that was redistributed “upward” to the liberal as a result of the withdrawal from Iraq was the assumption of an objective and neutral posture towards the events of the region so crucial to the assumption of the liberal position. “Sunnis and Shites are fighting each other over there and they have been doing it for hundreds of years”. After all, objectivity and neutrality are incredibly important if the neo liberal were to shift the role of empire from “invasion” to “policing” of criminal behavior in the region in the name of the “war on terror”. In “policing” empire cannot be biased to any of the feuding parties in their own internal conflicts, it can only solicit help in suppressing criminal behavior as it chooses to define it. And criminal behavior is defined in the neo liberalizing of empire scheme as the one that violates the rules on “terror” (equivalent to breaking rules on contract and property). Criminal behavior that results from sectarian conflict is not so defined because it is part of the cultural fabric of the privatized entities (self help) and criminal behavior (genocide) that results from suppressing revolutions doesn’t count either because it is part of the policing behavior inside those “privatized” entities. What is criminal is behavior that threatens the peace of empire’s withdrawal and that disrupts empire’s remoteness and newfound virtue. It does so when it reaches out and punishes empire’s citizens either in empire’s land or on their own. In other words, what is criminalized is behavior that breaks the rules of the neo liberal imperial distancing arrangement. (I do not mean here to romanticize terror attacks as forms of anti imperial resistance I would subscribe to as a leftist. I think they are forms of resistance that are coming in classically right wing way – destructive, useless, stupid, and dark. Neoliberal empire needs to be resisted in my view but in productive, useful, and collectivist ways, and through appeal to universal principles not particularistic supremacist ideologies).

“From Revolution to Civil War”

It is this objective and neutral posture that is reflected in the all too common narrative about Syria – “from revolution to civil war” which has developed early on (perhaps earlier than events warranted). Revolution against a brutal dictator whose rule not only
severely impoverished Syrians, economically, politically, and culturally, but imposed on them a Stalinist reign of terror and over many decades, may have tempted the neo liberal to side with the revolution (for after all the neo liberal is a liberal whose faith in freedom is unshakable), but the “descent into civil war”, like the predetermined return to one’s cultural self (the Syrian’s that is), inevitable and quick, was swiftly declared by empire’s “commentators” exempting the neo liberal imperialist from revisiting his hard-won “withdrawal from the region”\textsuperscript{15}.

What Obama has secured for US liberals after the tragic conservative invasion of Iraq is precious indeed: A posture of objectivity and neutrality towards the region secured by the act of withdrawal from Iraq (non intervention), an acculturating judgment of the travails and struggles of the people of the region in the aftermath of withdrawal secured by the neo liberal principle of “self-help” and the imperial task of policing excess of criminality defined as one that challenges imperial remoteness by killing empire’s citizens.

A man to adore.

\textbf{Conclusion}

I have argued in Part 1 above that Obama has overseen the transition by the US supra state from an “thick” exercise of imperial hegemony to a neo liberal imperialist regime in which the exercise of imperial hegemony is at once “privatized” to other states in the imperial orbit and “minimized” through the “war on terror”. I have also argued that this transition restructures the imperial epistemological field significantly whereby Assad’s genocide in one town becomes a matter of “self-help” while the crimes of “ISIS” next

\textsuperscript{15} What is happening in Syria today bears no easy characterization. It combines an ongoing and brave revolt against the regime of Assad with a civilian well as a military wing, a Kurdish struggle for independence, a counter revolution by Assad, a fundamentalist Islamist colonial settlement project carried out by foreign fighters (ISIS) and US war against ISIS! Representing all this as either “civil war” or alternatively “revolution” is reductionist and bears the imprint of either a dark cynical ideology in the case of the former or an idealizing naive one in the case of the latter.
door (literally) an affair of imperial policing worthy of empire’s expenditure and reprimand. To demand that the US intervene to put a stop to the massacre in Syria according to this epistemological lens is equivalent to demanding from a state in the process of privatizing its pharmaceutical industry to offer free medication to the citizens of a neighboring country.

In the second part of the paper, I will explore the reasons why no left or progressive response to the transition to neo liberal imperialism has come forward, specifically, no outcry against Assad’s genocide has come out of the self-described progressive camp.

Part 2
The Left of Neo Liberal Imperialism

THE story is simple. Here in Syria, there is a regime that has been killing its subjects with impunity for the last 30 months. The notion that there is a mysterious civil war that is inextricably linked to the nature of the Middle East and its complicated sectarian divisions is far from the truth. The primary perpetrator of violence is the government of Bashar al-Assad, which controls public resources, the media, the army and the intelligence services. The civilians who rose up against that regime, first peacefully and then through armed resistance, constitute a broad spectrum of Syrian society. When a government murders its own citizens and they resist, this can hardly be called a civil war. It is a barbaric campaign of the first degree.

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Justice and humanity demand that the Assad regime be punished for its crimes. Even though the Russians and the Chinese have managed to impair the Security Council, it is still possible for an international and regional coalition to carry out this task.
A half-hearted intervention will not be enough. The United States and those who join it must not simply “discipline” the regime for its use of chemical weapons alone, without making a decisive impact on events in Syria. To do so would be a waste of effort and send the wrong message.
We Syrians are human beings of this world, and the world must stop the Assad regime from killing us. Now.

(Yassin Al Haj Saleh, A Syrian’s Cry for Help, New York Times, Sept 9, 2013)

When “A Syrian’s Cry for Help” was published in the NY Times in 2013, barely any one I am aware of any recognizable progressive pedigree stepped forward and supported the plea for international help by made its author Yassin Al Haj Saleh. This despite the fact
that Al Haj Saleh is a prominent Syrian writer, who had been imprisoned by the regime of Hafez Assad for 15 years for being a communist, who, a decade after his release from prison, joined the Syrian revolution as soon as it broke out on the scene without hesitation, accompanied by his wife, also a well known prisoner dissident, and who, the wife that is, was kidnapped by one of the militias fighting the Assad regime (along with others) two years ago and remains captive to this day. In other words, no one knows Syria, Assad regime, the revolution, ISIS, as much as Saleh and few sacrificed in political action the way he did. A man of incomparable intellectual, revolutionary and street cred, and yet no support from the so-called left of empire for his plea for help! Ok, so the neo liberal imperialist has little appetite to offer assistance to the dying Syrians for all the reasons I stated above, but why won’t leftists push for such assistance? Why won’t the left mobilize, in whichever way the left does these days, even if in circulating a petition online, to support El Haj Saleh’s plea for help? Why has his plea fallen on deaf ears, and why is this silence among the progressive forces a persistent fact about the unrelenting genocide in Syria? A fact that puzzles Syrians (”aren’t we humans too?”) and makes them feel terribly alone in this world.

Let me try to answer that. I think El Haj Saleh’s plea for help fell on “leftist” deaf ears because he was speaking a language that had become foreign to the ears of that left, because he was literally, in so far as they were concerned, speaking “nonsense”. El Haj Saleh’s small excerpt above provides the arguments, and obvious ones I might add, that you would think any progressive would line up to debunk the neo liberal imperialist position on Syria: it is not a “civil war” to which the region is fatally bound because of its culture (reject the objectivity and neutrality the acculturating narrative secures); quite

16 Al Haj Saleh lives in Turkey now in exile and uses his exile productively by setting up an intellectual scene in Istanbul designed to theorize, analyze, and launch public discussions of the ongoings of the Syrian revolution (see http://aljumhuriya.net)
17 http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2015/12/policy-research-us-failure-syria-hamid. In this piece Shadi Hamid tries to explore the reason Washington policy establishment is silent about the genocide unfolding in Syria. He attributes to the establishment’s responsiveness to the “White House” and the signal it keeps sending that establishment, namely, that Obama just doesn’t want to talk about Syria.
the contrary, it is an uprising and global values of justice and humanity demand siding with it; it is not a “war on terror” (reject imperialist policing logics); it is the story of a dictator, Assad, literally burying his people under the rubble, and should therefore “be disciplined” by the international for after all “Syrians are human beings” (reject national sovereigntist anti-interventionist arguments and demand humanitarian internationalism identified with universal values).

The reason those arguments fall on deaf leftist ears and induce them to silence is that they appear to violate one or the other of major tenets of US leftism today: be it the specter of “revolution” (“uprising” in El Haj Saleh’s words), “universalist values”, or “humanitarian international intervention”. All these ideas the left in the US has spent three or four decades debunking, adopting a paranoid and skeptical posture towards, dismissing mockingly, and dissociating from. Rather than prompting this left into solidarity action, El Haj Saleh quite literally risked being laughed at.

So who is this left and why has it dismissed El Haj Saleh as speaking nonsense? I propose that this left is divided into three (intersecting) factions: the economistic left with its post-modernist right wing flank (mostly led by white men), and the anti-imperialist left with its multi-culturalist, religiofile right wing flank (mostly led by members of the ethnic, racial and migrant intelligentsia)\(^\text{18}\). And all have, as it turns out, little to nothing to say about Syria. Not only because they have in fact a lot in common, but also because they do not offer in the oppositionist stance they habitually adopt a

\(^{18}\) I will not discuss the third faction of the left, namely, the identitarian left (feminism and anti-racism) with its libertarian right wing flank (mostly led by women and people of color), partly because the anti-racism faction of this left is represented in the anti-imperialist section and partly because it is my intention to write a paper on this topic. Briefly, for feminism, its most radical faction, subordination feminism advocating universalist values on the question of women has been historically crushed under the weight of the “anti racism/imperialism” critique and the post-modern pro sex critique. The first leads to cultural relativism and the second to anti-regulatory libertarianism. Neither the sex slaves of ISIS nor Syrian women raped in Assad’s jails or sex trafficked in refugee camps have been privy to feminist declarations of solidarity among the ranks of the identitarian left. Feminism as an international effective discourse seems to appear only within ruling mainstream liberalism (Hillary Clinton) or strangely, enough, in the discourse of the forces of the right as expressions of Islamophobia.
radical critique of neo liberal imperialism which is why I am dubbing them as the “left of neo liberal imperialism”.

A Primer on the Left of Neoliberal Imperialism
What is interesting about this left is that while it typically aims its critical arrow at “liberalism” being the reigning ideology of the state in Western societies, including the “universalism” and “humanism” it promotes through international institutions, strongly invoked above by El Haj Saleh’s text, it doesn’t critique this liberalism’ proclaimed universalism and humanism with the aim of deepening these principles’ meaning and expanding their reach so that international powers become truly universalist, truly humanitarian, rather it dismisses them as suspect discourse tout court, adopting a very skeptical attitude towards their very evocation lest the speaker becomes complicit through their evocation in all the bad things these concepts have been up to historically (legalism, Eurocentricism, imperialism, racism, etc). Rather than treating them as principles whose meaning is unsettled to be determined by various social struggles, they are typically treated as ideological front operations for something sinister; best to abandon them altogether and turn to something less suspect (sometimes called “the political”, other times “difference” etc).

So the best way to describe this left, in terms of its intellectual formation and from which it takes guidance for its political positions on things like the genocide in Syria, is as the left of “ideology” (discourse). This left is to be contrasted with its genealogical predecessor the left of “class” (society). For the left of ideology there is no “society” prior to ideology, the latter being the originator of the former and acts as its social cement. A way to see the left of ideology is as a flip on Marxism- for the latter’s economic determinism it counters ideological determinism.
So, for this left, be careful what you say, what institutions you invoke, what concepts you promote, for you might slip into an ideological quicksand that might swallow you and implicate you in bad projects before, now and in the hereafter.\footnote{So we can see how the concepts of universal values and humanitarianism evoked by El Haj Saleh might rub this left the wrong way since it amounts to evoking all the bad projects of imperialism and eurocentrism and legalism that it has attached to them.}

This was not always true of this left. It did go through a stage, in the aftermath of the sixties when it tried to radicalize liberal humanism through developing Marxist-like notions of “subordination” largely inspired by the anti-racism and feminist movements of the seventies and eighties, in an attempt to deepen the various universalist claims of reigning mainstream liberalism, but these attempts have been crushed. On their debris, arose the “left of ideology”.

If the subordination left tried to theorize social relations (society), had a leg in the social struggles of its time whose demands functioned as the constitutive components of its social theorizing, advocated a more inclusive notion of universalism, declared solidarity across international borders with others in similar struggles, the left of ideology, contemporaneous as it was with the rise of the right and its onslaught on the legacy of the social movements, denied there was a “society”, declared its loss of faith in all universalisms, decried international solidarity as racist/imperialist, and went instead for the deconstructive jugular, where “radicalness” came to be defined by adopting the posture of radical skepticism of all liberal humanist categories. Rights were declared “indeterminate”, principles open to interpretation, sex, gender and race “constructed”, humanism imperialist, etc

While the left of ideology has always assumed that “clearing the fog” of ideology is in itself a progressive act, it has in fact struggled to line up this insight with progressive causes. “Indeterminacy” and “constructedness” are neutral insights and could be used by both the left and the right for opposite political purposes. Moreover, the left of
ideology seems often befuddled with little to say when the persecuted and the oppressed adopt the language this left sees as “ideological” in its social struggles against the oppressor and far from this language lurching the oppressed into the arms of the ideology spin maker oppressor, it seems to deliver them to his torture chamber.

Today, this left seems to me to function like an elite class of those who have “lost faith” in “liberalism, rights, and the rule of law” confronting the plebs and their representatives who still do, at times aiming its critical arrow at those activists for their faith (in the name of “critique”) and at others declaring solidarity with them in their causes (in the name of progressivism). A split, a dualism, and an ambivalence that is caused by this left’s fundamental insight that ideology makes society which can only lead to adopting libertarian positions that go against the grain of what it wants or claims to want as a progressive left.

When adopted by graduate students from the Arab world as a “radical creed”, it produces the phenomenon of “crits-in-waiting” since liberalism is not a reigning ideology rather a very marginal one whose discursive deployment by Arab activists has produced radical effects. Its elitism seems to fit nicely the elite origins of those graduate students who use it to assert their intellectual superiority over their activist contemporaries especially as most of those graduate students themselves don’t come from an activist background and have never been part of a developing argument among the local left but more like interlopers on the scene having encountered leftism for the first time in the guise of the left of ideology so prominent in US academia.

I call it the left of neoliberal imperialism because it occupies the position of an internal reformist left within neoliberal economy rather than a radical opponent to it. Many of its beliefs, especially when its right wing flank takes over, correspond with neo liberal managerial tenets of faith: localism, difference, libertarianism, etc. Transposed unto the neoliberal imperialist context, as I will try to show below, these ideas produce silence
over Syria as its genocide becomes an affair that’s best settled “locally” (the localism), non-interventionism is respect for Syria’s sovereignty (libertarianism), and neoliberal imperialist acculturation of Syria is respect for Syria’s “culture” (difference).

The Economistic Left

Let us start with what I am calling the “economistic” left. It is economistic because its pet cause is “economic distribution” which it forefronts as the “mother of all causes”. For this left, democracy, civil liberties, the rule of law, are all “liberal causes” which it “sees right through”: these causes are nothing but ideological front operations that disguise the real issue: distribution of wealth and power. While this is a familiar position within Marxism, this is far from being a (revolutionary) Marxist left. For it has coupled the familiar Marxist aversion to “rights” – as liberal ideological fronts- with a reformist economic agenda (it dubs itself “left of liberalism” or “post-Marxism”) which it aspires to push for through stealthily pushing its forces through the ranks of institutions to become “leftist adviser to power”.

Sometimes rights appear for this left “alienating” (they reify social interactions between individuals) and sometimes “indeterminate” (competing sides can use rights so rights can’t settle a dispute). This is the left of “bargaining power” and “tinkering with rules” closely associated with left liberal labor unionism in the US. This left has historically had a difficult time accounting for the African American experience with “civil rights” which was as an experience of social struggle transformative. It has also historically played “catch up” with rights-believing liberals who have been very successful at making serious social gains through the deployment of the language of rights on questions of race, gender, and sexuality. While in the seventies and the eighties this economistic left considered itself an ally of the social movements of the time, especially the women’s movement and the anti-racism movement, since the early nineties, it has become allied with the critique of these social movements legal reform legacy (these movements were
dead by then) from a libertarian perspective and has since had trouble distinguishing its critique from right wing assaults on that legacy.

So let’s be clear: this is no revolutionary left we are talking about. No Fourth or Fifth International here, no “workers’ of the world unite”, no universal values of solidarity. This is a left that combines its contempt for “liberal causes” with economic reformism and post-modern localism.

If you pushed this left to go “international” and with globalization over the past three decades, its intelligentsia dutifully if not happily did, it suddenly shifts its “economic redistribution” agenda, which seems to be confined to Western domestic contexts, to an “economic growth” agenda which seems to be what the non-Westerners need. While it abhors the excesses of “capitalism” in the West, its advice to “developing countries” is “capitalist transformation”. In other words, when it comes to the developing world this economistic left ceases to be only “economistic” and becomes also “identitarian” by advocating production subsidies for the non-Westerner\(^\text{20}\). What is wrong with the world is not that the international economy keeps producing domestic and international inequities, that it is riven with revolts, uprisings and protests against those inequities, and should therefore be radically transformed especially from its center, rather, the problem is that “Egyptians are not manufacturing enough cars”. That is the West should concede so many number of cars for Egypt to produce so that it can catch up on capitalism, so that its economy can grow. Brazil is a pet cause for this economistic left, an example of a country that has created so much wealth for its citizens by catching up with “capitalist production”\(^\text{21}\).

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\(^{20}\) Echoing the agenda of the domestic anti-racist left which advocates race-targeted subsidies to overcome the economic impact of historic racism.

\(^{21}\) Too bad Brazil is mired with corruption, demonstrations, high gini coefficient, and a slowing economy right now. The point though is that enough dark people need to get to produce what white people do so that the international economic picture “becomes equal” for this American economistic left: import substitution industrialization, export led growth, value chain, etc, etc.
Even though this economistic left has gone international and has noticed along the way that in most developing countries democracy, civil liberties and the rule of law are objects of fierce political struggle where persecution including imprisonment, torture, even death begets those who engage in it, this economistic left sticks to its discursive universe of “it’s the economy stupid”. You may even sometimes catch people in this left expressing admiration for a Nasser or an Assad for their “socialist” economies, their authoritarianism being an insignificant fact and barely worthy of mention, and at others, and if you press the authoritarianism point strongly enough, they may treat those countries mired in “liberal” struggles as existing “outside history” because outside their own theories of what matters.

So this is truly the left of neo liberalism and its most pacified dissident: It subscribes to no universalist values: neither “rights” associated with being human (anti humanist) nor solidarity for workers everywhere (no internationalism). It is redistributive “nationally” – so in that sense it is a “nationalist” economistic left. Its discourse is directed to nationalist elites as advice. On the other hand, and paradoxically, its lack of interest in rule of law and rights reflects its very Western location in which democracy and rule of law are settled facts. All of which explains the affinity this left has to nationalist leaders in the third world. They too could care less about “rule of law and rights”.

You can see how the deadly struggle Syrians are waging against a dictator, demanding freedom and democracy, their appeal to universalist values of justice and humanity, and for international solidarity would make no sense to this economistic left. El Haj Saleh’s words find no register whatsoever in this scheme of the world. If he were to find sympathy among this left it would be “off script” - off the script of their ideological universe that is. As for Assad’s genocide, well, that’s something to consider in its radical particularity, taking everything about the situation into account, and Kerry’s diplomacy might just be the thing to do.
And because Syria is “off script” for this economistic left, it acquires a voyeuristic position by default.

The Anti-Imperialists
Unlike the pro Obama liberals who think of US imperialism in terms of “intervention” or “invasion” that can be reversed through “withdrawal”, an imperialism that is on the “thin” side, for the anti-imperialists of the progressive camp, imperialism is thick, very thick indeed. Imperialism is thought of in “meta” terms, as a dominant cause for the domestic ills of the “colony”, a determinant of its fate even if in the last instance. But interestingly with all its “thickness”, it is “thin” in one respect: it is confined to the description of Western powers (the US today is at the forefront, and of course its regional ally Israel).

So if for the economistic left, economy is all and struggle for rights and rule of law matters little, for the anti imperialist left, Western imperialism is all and the internal struggle for rights and rule of law matters little. In other words, both factions of the left have in fact little interest in the Syrian Revolution as an internal struggle for rights and the rule of law. It is off script for both.

In many ways this anti-imperialist camp mirrors in its discourse the structure of the domestic anti-racism identity politics, in fact it seems to me to be nothing but an offshoot of it. The life of the “black” is determined according to this politics by racism as the supra dominant cause. Ending racism frees the black. There is no interest in this type of identity politics in how the economic dynamics of the country as a whole propelled by the processes of neo liberalism might imprison some blacks while “offloading” others from the bandwagon of racism, creating internal class conflict within the black community, and how racially targeted subsidies, advocated by anti-racists, might end up being constrained by the background conditions of the economy if implemented leading
to a parallel distributive picture within that community to the one that prevails in the general one.

Likewise, the anti-imperialist identitarians think of internal dynamics of the colony to be subordinate to imperialist ones. There is little recognition of internal economic, political and cultural dynamics and how they shape social struggles inside Syria. Sure many anti imperialists embraced the Syrian revolution as soon as it imposed itself on history in the early days but it was interesting how quickly these sympathizers fled to the “civil war” narrative as soon as it appeared in the commentators’ press\textsuperscript{22,23}. You couldn’t hold their attention for longer than two seconds on the internal dynamics in Syria dominated by Assad’s brutality. The minute they sniffed “US intervention” either in the form of arming the Syrian army or in the form of Gulf countries giving military support to the forming militia than they all fled to the “it’s a civil war” narrative. “America is in the

\textsuperscript{22} From Revolution to Civil War
With the exception of the Syrian revolutionaries themselves a consensus narrative has consolidated- and from early on in the US media especially- that allows one to talk about the genocide in Syria in a detached disinterested manner. This detached disinterested manner can shift to being “objective and neutral” quite seamlessly. The consolidated narrative has it that the Syrian revolution has moved from “revolution” (legitimate, admirable, worthy of one’s interest and curiosity) to civil war (really bad, one can’t make heads or tails of the happenings in Syria, better not even try). In this “from-to” seemingly accurate reading of what had actually happened, Assad’s genocide becomes something else altogether. If \textit{revolution} metamorphosed into \textit{civil war}, then Assad’s genocide could too, metamorphose that is. While its facts are incontrovertible, overwhelming, dumbfounding, the \textit{meaning} of those facts can perhaps be “open to interpretation”. For it can’t possibly be, that \textit{if revolution} had slid into a civil war, that Assad’s badness \textit{would be} seen as the same. What he does is bad, real bad, but maybe it’s all those terrorists fighting him, all those so-called revolutionaries with foreign sponsors that have incited his badness. He was always bad, yea, after all there was a revolution against his rule, but never \textit{that} bad. It is \textit{civil war} that pushed him into Godawful badness. But then who wouldn’t be? So when he kills hundreds of thousands of people, when he tortures people by the thousands, he’s not committing genocide \textit{exactly}, he’s doing something else: he’s trying to keep the country together, he’s trying to keep the country secular, he’s trying to force foreign fighters out of Syria, he’s fighting terrorists, and these things can get ugly! Have you ever heard of civil war????

\textsuperscript{23} Bassam Haddad, Jadaliyya’s editor in chief and Syria specialist adopted the “civil war” narrative of the Syrian revolution pretty early and his analysis of the events in Syria has been influenced by this framework ever since.
neighborhood, this can’t be good!” The idealist revolution’s’ well has been poisoned by American footprint.

This camp therefore adopts a vigilant and paranoid attitude towards US imperialism (the white man), an incredulous posture towards the fact of withdrawal. So while pro-Obama liberals pat themselves on the shoulders for “troops withdrawal”, the progressives scream foul! There is always evidence that the US hasn’t completely “withdrawn”, that US imperial involvement hasn’t desisted, that it still lurks in forms and shapes undeclared, which explains “this and that bad thing the Iraqi government or the Iraqi army is doing”. For this camp therefore the task is to complete the withdrawal, the “war on terror” being a remainder task still at hand, and a good reason to remain paranoid and vigilant. So if the pro-Obama liberals could be described as “neo liberal imperialists” content with the “minimalist” role for the supra state waging a “war on terror”, the progressive anti-imperialists can best be described as the libertarians who reject any role whatsoever for the supra state in the imperial place.

What they both share is a formalist attitude towards the relationship of the supra state with the other countries in the imperial place; a formalism that speaks to withdrawal of the supra state in almost quantitative terms (more of it, less of it) but is unable to read the way in which powers have filled the vacuum left behind by the supra state, how distributive consequences for the people in the region have shifted and epistemologies of good and evil refashioned with fore fronting of the “war on terror”, in this more or less, much argued-about withdrawal.

Indeed, what is notable about this anti-imperialist left is that while it has been largely silent about the genocide in Syria especially once it adopted the “civil war narrative”, appearing unconcerned about the life of Syrians dying under Assad’s barrel bombs, it suddenly came to life when those self-same Syrians became refugees and hit the white man’s land! At that very moment, this left duly transformed itself into an anti-racist
identity left, the natural extension of its anti-imperialist belief system. Finally the Syrian walked into this left’s “grid” and it can now step up and feel progressive about her cause!24

Interestingly, there is a limit to this left’s anti-racist critique. If the question most pressing on Syrian minds at the moment is the glaring, dumbfounding fact of US planes flying over genocide in Syria, _sang froid_, on their way to do “war on terror” on ISIS, with each round stating loud and clear and in no mistakable terms that the life of a Westerner is worth everything and the Arab nothing, and if those Syrians wonder why it is that those planes cannot simply turn around and immobilize the air force of Assad that is dropping the barrel bombs on their heads, and if therefore the most pressing task for any progressive, given the high stakes of genocide, is to “blow the cover” of the foregrounding of the crimes of ISIS and the backgrounding of those of Assad, to reveal Western bad faith racist myopia, to show that Western arrogance is such that it cannot even recognize that if indeed it wanted to get rid of ISIS, it has to get rid of Assad, not only because of their mutual collaboration but because the conditions that brought ISIS into being, will always be there so long as Assad is in power, that ISIS is nothing but a small “instance” of Assad, albeit much more spectacular in its performances with its public square beheadings, a satellite example of his rule, with far less sophistication and dead bodies to count…..with all _that_ one struggles to find instances of anti-imperialist progressives stepping up to the ideological busting act.

Which is all very strange for Isn’t racialization by empire the very stuff that crowds the anti-imperialist brief against it and the whole point about the failure to stop the Syrian genocide that it is evidence of racialization by empire?? Yes, but…the problem is that if the anti-imperialist were to show the stink of letting Syrians die at the hands of their dictator, then she would be calling forth empire’s help and that runs against the other

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24 In parallel to the neoliberal imperialists who “acculturate” the Islam of Syrians in Syria but fight Islamophobia in the West, the anti imperialists remain quiet over genocide in Syria but come out ferociously in the defense of its victims rights as refugees when they cross over the “Western border”.
principle that the anti-imperialist holds dear and shares with the neo liberal anti imperialist: individual sovereignty (non intervention)\(^{25}\).

So because it subordinates internal dynamics in the colony to empire causing it to swiftly move from “revolution to civil war” narrative very quickly, and because of its formalist attachment to the idea of “intervention” by the US causing it to adopt a libertarian attitude towards any kind of intervention associated with the “white man”, this camp is unable to do the most rudimentary distributional analysis of what has befallen the Syrian, in the way that El Haj Saleh’s short intervention in the *Times* so deftly does. The discursive shift to “war on terror” and “civil war” has shifted the focus from what is the matter here: a revolution against a dictator brutally crushed. Other regional powers, Russia and Iran, are acting as the alternate imperialist forces aiding the dictator and supporting the genocide. A different international needs to intervene to “discipline” the dictator and release the Syrians from death and refugee-hood. Simple, straightforward, realistic, written from the perspective of the revolution and its victims, and pressed by their plight. A task, apparently, the anti-imperialists, are simply incapable of performing.

All of which places the anti-imperialists, along with their allies the economistic left and the neo liberal imperialists all sitting in the one camp watching genocide take place with not a word to say!

**Conclusion**

It would seem that the only faction of the progressive camp that is moved by the genocide in Syria and is agitating for action to end it that I can identify is the faction of the Jewish intelligentsia that has learnt the lesson of the holocaust “never again”. The  

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\(^{25}\) So it appears, we are confronting two counter posed myopias- one of the neo liberal anti imperialist, and one of the progressive anti-imperialist. The former, foregrounds ISIS and backgrounds Assad, and the latter, foregrounds the West and backgrounds Assad. The “principled” position that upholds these two counter posed myopias is interestingly the same one: non intervention to stop genocide.
US Holocaust Memorial Museum warns the world of the predicament of the Syrians\textsuperscript{26}. Progressive Jews writing for Tikkun call for solidarity with the Syrians massacred by Assad and invite a debate among their readers on what actions to take to save them.\textsuperscript{27} The tablet magazine sees right through the consequences of the Obama administration’s “non interventionist” policy:

The White House’s moves cannot be understood apart from Russia’s, with which they formed a coherent military-diplomatic strategy aimed at bringing about a very specific result in Syria. And so, while it may appear that the administration’s policy is one of passivity, accompanied by some more or less sincere hand-wringing, in fact it is actively working hand in glove with Russia in creating a new reality in Syria that ensures the continuity of the Assad regime—one of the region’s worst dictatorships, which at this time last year was in serious trouble.\textsuperscript{28}

These progressive Jews appear to me to be working against the “nationalist” treatment of the holocaust as a thing unique to Jews, an idea that is prevalent within the Jewish community, especially among Zionist Jews, and insist on universalizing its meaning. Never again, they insist, and that applies to Syrians too. Universalizing the meaning of the holocaust is an abandonment of the idea that there is something very “special” about the Jewish experience defined by the holocaust, an abandonment of the narcissism of injury.

Which ironically cannot be said of the Palestinian reaction- and their anti-imperialist supporters in the US- to the plight of the Syrians. With the exception of the Islamist factions within the Palestinian nationalist movement, Palestinians have been deafeningly quiet about the predicament of their Syrian co-Arab nationalists. The reasons are complicated: partly because of the prevalence of “anti imperialist” structures of thinking within their activist ranks, and partly because of a narcissism of injury they have acquired with time, and partly because Syrian and its ally Hizbollah

\textsuperscript{26} https://www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/cases/syria/introduction/syria
\textsuperscript{27} Tikkun syria
\textsuperscript{28} http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/198060/what-the-us-is-doing-in-syria
have been identified as anti Zionist within this nationalist camp. The irony is not lost on me as a Palestinian: progressive Jews see the Syrians and scream “Never again” and the Palestinians sit and watch along with the others.