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Syria: The Name of our Shame (1 of 2)

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“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 *Bi al-Khalas ya Shabab*, 16 years in Syrian Jail, (2012), in Arabic.)

“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)

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 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-Assad**, and to criticize Obama’s weak, ambivalent and dithering policy on Syria in the midst of an unfolding genocide 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. 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., this writer is showered with abuse by the newspaper’s readers under the comments section.

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 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). On the domestic scene these principles appear as the familiar Hobbesbian 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.

From Domestic to International

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” I have developed the notion of neo liberal post imperialism by reading A New Grand Strategy, a paper published by the authors Benjamin Schwartz 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 tat 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.. 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. 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.

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)The invasion of Iraq., other times they appear to signal some sort of internal corruption (no rational basis established whatsoever for the subsidy)Imperial subsidies to Israel due to undue influence of the Jewish lobby AIPAC., or that something other than subsidy would have worked just as well: an attitude of laissez faire, a change in the personnel, an internal reorganization, etcEgypt. And sometimes, they create resentment about the subsidized company exposing it to vicious attacks and criticisms "this company would collapse

if it weren't for the subsidy".Saudi Arabia

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)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.. 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 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 market place 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. 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.

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 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!”. 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 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 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”. 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.

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.

