

سوريا

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Syria: The Name of Our Shame (2 of 2)

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I argued in [Part 1 of this intervention](#) 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 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.

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 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>).. 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 <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. 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 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) 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.. 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 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. 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 economic left ceases to be only "economistic" and becomes also "identitarian" by advocating production subsidies for the non-Westerner. Echoing the agenda of the domestic anti-racist left which advocates race-targeted subsidies to overcome the economic impact of historic racism.. 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 economic left, an example of a country that has created so much wealth for its citizens by catching up with “capitalist production” 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 economic left: import substitution industrialization, export led growth, value chain, etc, etc..

Even though this economic 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 economic 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” economic 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 economic 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 economic 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 economic 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. 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 revolution metamorphosed into civil war, then Assad’s genocide could too, metamorphose that is. While its facts are incontrovertible, overwhelming, dumbfounding, the meaning of those facts can perhaps be “open to interpretation”. For it can’t possibly be, that if revolution had slid into a civil war, that Assad’s badness 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 that bad. It is 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 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? 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.. 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 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! 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”.

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 principle that the anti-imperialist holds dear and shares with the neo liberal anti imperialist: individual sovereignty (non intervention)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..

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 economic 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 US Holocaust Memorial Museum warns the world of **the predicament of the Syrians**. 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 Tikkun syria.. 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 <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/198060/what-the-us-is-doing-in-syria>.

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 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.