

What Western anti-imperialists prescribe for their Arab counterparts

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As we have already shown, the purpose of the teenage anti-imperialist isn't to oppose Western policy, its support of dictatorships, its complicity in war crimes. The point of the teenage anti-imperialist is to take a precise position at a certain moment in time for a mostly-domestic, aesthetic purpose. Take this (very real) hypothetical. The US supports a dictatorship for decades. A 21st century mass-communicated uprising takes place, and the US abandons diplomatic support of the dictatorship. The dictatorship no longer has diplomatic US support, but still has US arms. The dictatorship starts killing protesters with the US arms. The defenceless protesters demand international protection from the dictatorship. The US condemns the dictatorship's crackdown and threatens sanctions. The dictatorship rediscovers its long-lost sense of 'sovereignty' and now warns against foreign interference and plots. Pause.

At this point in time, for the teenage anti-imperialist - in fact representing much, though not all, of the Western anti-war movement during the Arab Spring era - the moment the call was made by the protesters for international protection, they have become immediately transformed into agents of foreign, imperialist powers - even while they are being killed by US-supplied bullets. Conversely, the moment the dictatorship suddenly adopts strong "anti-imperialist language" and cites foreign conspiracies, tampering, and agendas ("don't you know about what the CIA did in Iran in 1953, man?"), the dictatorship has suddenly acquired for itself a new image of respect. The teenage anti-imperialist's equivocation starts at this point, first measuredly: "what do we in the West *really* know? Perhaps there is something going on behind these scenes of these protests. Perhaps there's something that our media isn't showing us". As we know, that is only the beginning of a road that ends with something much different, and far more unabashed.

As many have undoubtedly gathered, this is no caricature - this is precisely the experience of the Arab Spring. Egypt's Mubarak, decades-long supporter of US interests in the region and persecutor of Palestinians on behalf of Israel, called the Arab Spring a US conspiracy after his removal. Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh, the man who allowed US drones for years to kill his country's civilians on his territory (and later ally of, guess who, the "anti-imperialist" Houthis), described the protests against

him as a 'US-Zionist conspiracy'. Does this mean that the US supported 'regime change' in Egypt and Yemen? In the former, Mubarak passed on power to his generals, who following a brief one-year interlude, have remained in power ever since. In the latter, US officials condemned Saleh's crackdown (being far more prolonged than that of Mubarak, lasting almost a year compared to a month) in no uncertain terms. Over the next few months, Saleh's forces would kill thousands of protesters. But once he eventually agreed to resign in favour of his deputy, Saleh was granted a visa to receive medical treatment in none other than the United States. Theatre.

Far more importantly, as part of the US- and Gulf-backed "compromise" that secured Saleh's eventual resignation, Saleh was granted immunity from prosecution, was able to remain head of his party, and his loyalists continued to control key junctures within state institutions. Within a year, Saleh's loyalists launched a coup (with most of the Yemeni military and Republican Guard joining the coup against the transitional president) - mainly fronted but not in the main actually manned by the 'anti-imperialist' Houthis. What matters however is the theatre. The US condemned Saleh and Saleh condemned the US. The fact that the US pushed for immunity for Saleh, and then ensured alongside the Saudis that his loyalists continued to control much of Yemen's transition, doesn't matter. The fact that the Houthis got to power by relying on the loyalists of a former Western-backed dictator doesn't matter. It doesn't make the director's cut. It is also precisely the same reason why there is hardly any acknowledgement or calls for accountability from the US - ironically aside from derided 'liberals' in human rights organisations - for the human rights abuses caused by the Iraqi militias say directly under US aircover. Because there was a necessary public 'distancing' between both sides.

This is, in short, the prescription of the exhibitionist, teenage anti-imperialists. Their prescription is for us to protest our Western-backed governments, and then get killed by them when they more often than not are embarrassedly dissociated from by their Western sponsors. Those defenseless do *not* have the right to ask for any form of international action to help them defend themselves. And while it is a legitimate, somewhat philosophical and ethics-based argument to oppose Western intervention as a lesser evil, because it is still an 'evil' (indeed, these debates have often taken place within Arab Spring movements), it is certainly not legitimate to condemn those being killed who are asking for any sort of external saviour, be it the devil himself, as proxies and as agents. Do not equate our revolutions with the externally-imposed and unsanctioned 'regime change' that took place in Iraq, when it was precisely that experience and that crime that was one of the reasons that moved so many of us to the streets. It was precisely this sense of utter helplessness and denial of sovereignty that our states had been reduced to, most apparent during the invasion of Iraq, most apparent during the massacres of our brethren in Gaza, which all our leaders - all of them - sat and watched - when Arab unity and solidarity became a sad joke. And no, Assad - the false lion and pied piper of far-right and far-left alike - was no exception.

The backdrop to Obama's "hesitance"

For years, mainstream analyses on Syria have often described US policy as confused, convoluted or unclear. Often, this proclaimed US incoherence was attributed to Obama's personally-hesitant and excessively 'diplomatic' character - namely an unwillingness to upset adversaries who he wished to improve relations with, such as Iran and Russia. Such analyses have been dominant in Western analytical spheres yet seem to ignore much of the history of relations between the US and the Syrian regime. To start with, during the first years of the Obama Administration, the US and Syria were in the midst of a major rapprochement. Secret negotiations with Israel had restarted, and extensive US and Syrian cooperation against insurgents was taking place in Iraq and Lebanon. In a display of the purely-pragmatic - not ideological - nature of the Syrian regime, the regime started putting in prison hundreds of the same fighters (both Islamist and non-Islamist, with regions such as Deir Ezzor largely sending its youth out of clan solidarity with Sunni Arab tribes across the border) that had

gone to fight in Iraq with its tacit permission a few years prior. The regime had previously facilitated the transfer of these fighters at a time when soundings from more hardline neoconservatives linked to the Bush administration threatened that Ba'athist Syria would follow Ba'athist Iraq; nonetheless, although pressure on Syria was increased and the US forced its withdrawal from Lebanon, such an invasion was never seriously planned, and the Bush Administration was undoubtedly pacified by such examples as the Syrian regime agreeing to torture War on Terror prisoners on its behalf, surrendering Saddam's relatives to the US, in addition to other areas of intelligence coordination (with one then-US official declaring "The Syrian government has provided some very useful assistance on al Qaeda in the past").

The multifaceted regime has proven far more skilled at circumventing the hazards of regional democratisation than less diversified regimes such as those of Egypt and Yemen had (at least initially). The regime skillfully exploited its middle positions - between the Western and Russian camp, between the 'radical' (anti-Israel) and 'moderate' (pro-normalization) camp. This enabled it not only to play off actors against one another, but also offered the added advantage of being able to infiltrate insurgent movements during its *radical* orientation - before opening up its extensive trove of intelligence to parties willing to barter with it in exchange for concessions during its *moderating* one. The Syrian regime proved far more flexible than both the radical poles of the region (such as Saddam's more intransigent Iraqi regime, which condemned the Syrian regime's public negotiations with Israel during the 1990s as treacherous) and the moderate ones, which had not diversified their sources of political support enough and remained at the mercy of Western sponsors who often had no choice but to distance themselves (this was not however akin to 'regime change', and I describe this process elsewhere as 'Distancting to Protect'). In many cases, the Syrian regime proved to be weaker militarily than other authoritarian regimes in the region, but far more politically skilled. This is precisely why the same Benjamin Netanyahu who enthusiastically lobbied for the Iraq war, repeatedly expressed his fears of the dangers of the Assad regime being overthrown in Syria according to leaked Wikileaks cables.

Indeed, in the immediate years prior to the uprising, Wikileaks cables revealed that the Assad regime was willing to cut ties with Hamas, downgrade ties with Hezbollah and Iran, and recognise Israel fully - something later confirmed in a reminiscing interview on how close the US was on fully integrating the Syrian regime into its sphere by former US Secretary of State John Kerry (famously pictured dining once personally with Assad during this honeymoon period). As part of this process, Syria was to finally follow Sadat's Egypt's footsteps and complete its transfer from the Russian sphere of influence. As well as a more extensive history of collaboration going all the way back to Henry Kissinger - a fan of Assad Senior and a supporter of Syrian's 1976 invasion of Lebanon (then undertaken to put down a Palestinian-leftist uprising) - it is partly this backdrop which explains why the Obama Administration proved so reluctant to allow - never mind facilitate - the overthrow of the Assad regime. The Obama Administration wanted a Syrian-Israeli peace deal to be its foreign policy legacy, the biggest prize of any Arab peace deal (all Arab states would automatically follow, as Syria has been the historical home of Arab nationalism) - long before any Iran 'nuclear deal' appeared on the horizon. Such Arab-Israeli normalisation deals had been the established precedent of Democrat presidents since Jimmy Carter. And as the faintly-heard laments of John Kerry made clear, it was the *Arab Spring* - you know, the same supposedly "Israeli-backed" Arab Spring that teenage anti-imperialists say took place in Syria - that put a halt to the process. This is why these very same Syrian "Western-backed" protesters of 2011 chanted that Bashar was a "US agent".

Indeed, as late as only one month before the outbreak of the uprising, it was reported that Syria and Israel were possibly on the verge of completing a peace deal. One only need imagine what would have happened if the uprising broke out *after* a deal had been agreed. Surely, Bashar would have been toast, and the 'resistance' facade which allowed for the intervention of Iran and Hezbollah

(who of course knew full well of his negotiations with Israel – with the regime telling them he would not help them in any war with it) would have been absent. It is perhaps one of the saddest ironies that the very same Arab Spring uprising that cut the process of Syria's transfer to the Western sphere, would be repaid by the barbaric brutality of the far-right-sponsoring Russian government that was fully aware that it was slowly losing Syria before the onset of the uprising (indeed, some former FSA officers expressed that they were likely to continue their alliance with both Hezbollah and Russia in any post-Assad state). At the eve of the uprising, Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah – the future main backers of the Assad regime – all knew that Syria was heading in the direction of cutting them loose.

Revealing the extent to which the Obama Administration was reluctant to break with the 'Syria normalisation' process in which it had invested, the US took six months to call on Assad to resign, longer than it did for more erstwhile allies such as Mubarak and Saleh. After the outbreak of the uprising, Hilary Clinton famously expressed US hopes that Assad was a 'reformer'. Even after a US break eventually proved inevitable, with Assad's forces being televised killing protesters on a daily basis, the US refused to recognise the opposition's legal sovereign expression and claim to power, the Syrian Interim Government – unlike in Libya, where the US had recognised the Libyan Transitional Council long before the fall of Gaddafi. Instead, in a slight of hand that fooled many, the US conferred *political* recognition onto the Syrian National Coalition as a "legitimate representative of the Syrian people". This was akin to the US recognising the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as a "legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" but refusing to recognise the PLO's claim to sovereignty – namely the State of Palestine. In other words, the US *supported the regime maintaining its seat at such forums as the UN*. 'Regime change', indeed. This was only the start of a long set of policies by which the US facilitated the survival of the (albeit weakened) Assad regime.

Indeed, it should be mentioned here that we aren't revealing secrets. Whether it is US statements consistently opposing regime change in Syria, whether in 2012, 2013, 2014, or afterwards – peppered in amongst the customary and compulsory condemnations of Assad, or whether it is Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly welcoming the Syrian regime's conquest of south Syria in 2018, stating that the Syrian regime had always kept the Golan frontier quiet with Israel for four decades. These were all repeated and well-recorded. The difference is whereas Arab media and audiences integrate these into popular analyses, much of both Western mainstream and alternative media do not. And so when Netanyahu's statement appears – who is proven correct? Those who are aware of the history of the Syrian regime publicly negotiating with Israel since the 1990s and cracking down on Palestinians in Lebanon in 1976 and throughout the 1980s – or those who lazily repeated the lie that Israel was hell-bent on overthrowing the Assad regime "because Iran" – completely unaware of the careful and pragmatic balancing act that the Syrian regime has played with the Palestinian cause and "resistance" for over four decades?

But it is not the role of the hobbyist and teenage anti-imperialist to read up on our modern history before understanding our present reality. Nor do we ask that of them at this point, frankly. All we ask, is that before they condemn Muslims they've never met and who they know very little about as 'terrorists' even while they no demanded basic freedom, as imperialist proxies even as they refused imperialist occupation (be it from the East or the West), as lackeys simply because they demanded some form of protection, any international or regional protection (it is not as if they picked out the West as an ideological preference from a long list of viable actors), from the rape and torture squads of their regime, that they look at – ah, what's that word they love again? – their 'privilege' first. We do not ask them to support our demands for help. We do not even ask them for solidarity. We have learnt better now.

However, we only ask them, for the sake of consistency, to bear one thing: before condemning others for having the gall to issue a call for protection – give up yours. After all, do you not live

under the yoke of the Western imperialist government? Do you not benefit from its riches, much of which has been taken from precisely the same regions of those whose people you've condemned for desiring change? Can you not far better afford *not* to depend on your imperialist government at home? For instance - in the sake of purist ideological consistency - can you not far better afford not to campaign for greater welfare spending, greater health spending, greater social spending from the imperialist state whilst that imperialist edifice still exists? For why should it be any other way when you condemn - not disagree with, but viciously condemn - those who are in far less of a position to forsake the same protective privileges that you enjoy? Perhaps give up your pocket money first, 'comrade', before you choose to lecture others.

Cats and empty bags (you're not that different from me, son)

Teenage anti-imperialists often implicitly recognise - without admitting - that their positions are shared by those within their establishment parent. This often takes the form of "even their supporters let the cat slip out of the bag" - as with the case in particular of one former statement by (then-Vice) President Biden that Gulf Arab states were so obsessed with getting rid of Assad, that they funded extremists leading to ISIS. But in the case of Syria, there are so many cats running around the place that perhaps a more logical conclusion to draw is that the cats were never in the bag to begin with. US concerns about the so-called 'moderatism' of the armed rebellion are not new: in fact, those who've closely followed the conflict know full well that the *entire* US dealings with the armed rebellion, since its first emergence in 2012, was viewed through the prism of concerns about '*jihadists*' within the opposition. Long before any teenage anti-imperialist, it was none other than 'imperialist hawk' and then-Secretary of State Hilary Clinton who *publicly* stated that arming rebels could help Al-Qaeda, when Al-Qaeda was barely reported to have a presence in Syria at the time. Any basic Google search going back to 2012 will reveal a plethora of other such statements clearly. It was for that very declared reason that the US refused to provide lethal assistance until 2013 - because of the constantly-repeated "concern that weapons will fall into the wrong hands" that followers of the Syrian conflict have memorised (a policy that ironically left the opposition severely under-resourced when ISIS captured entire stocks of US weapons from the the presumably 'right hands' of the Iraqi Army in Mosul in 2014).

It was within these contexts that the much-derided "moderate" label began, and crucially, *it began with the US*. It was not introduced to state that the entire opposition was moderate, but to imply the *precise opposite*. Nor was it a reaction to some teenage anti-imperialist challenge or one by Russia and the regime (whose later hugely-effective disinformation campaign on Syria had not yet properly kicked in at the time) - it reflected the *US's own outlook*. It is why the label was greeted with such anger at the time by the Syrian opposition itself. It is why the FSA mocked the label when the US bombed a rebel group that was supposedly considered moderate. It is why John Kerry *falsely* declared groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, both bitter opponents of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra alike, as "subgroups" of ISIS and Nusra. It is why then-US Secretary of State John Kerry - a man who perhaps psychologically tortured Syrians more than any other official - even floated the suggestion that Assad would be 'officially' allowed by the US (more than he was, presumably) in an agreed political transition to bomb such groups. It is why Kerry said that the opposition should fight alongside the regime against ISIS *even while Assad was still there*.

It is why a US State Department official - in what the teenage anti-imperialist would have been secretly proud of if they ever read it - *falsely* declared that Aleppo was under the control of Jabhat al-Nusra, when the group perhaps had 200 out of 8,000 fighters in the city (with the rest mainly belonging to some twenty Free Syrian Army factions). It is why Kerry balanced US criticisms of the regime's and Russia's bombardment of Aleppo with the statement that "...there's a Russian impatience and a regime impatience with the terrorists who are behaving like terrorists and laying siege to places on their side and killing people". Kerry was presumably referring here to the

supposedly US-backed FSA which controlled the city. With friends like these, who needs enemies? (And there was no love lost from the other side). Indeed it wasn't only statements: in what has not been reported in Western media, Syrian and Arab media at the time reported that the US repeatedly bombed rebel positions in Aleppo *at the same time as the regime and Russia*, including assassinating a rebel commander tasked with lifting the regime's siege on the city, provoking anti-US protests in the city. Meanwhile, the US-backed and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) supported the regime's capture of the city. On other occasions, the SDF has also voluntarily returned areas to the regime rather than risk losing them to the FSA. Meanwhile, Iraqi PMU groups that were supported by the US-led Coalition across the border constituted half of the regime's forces during the battle for Aleppo.

And indeed, long before Biden's aforementioned statement, the US was publicly telling Arab states not to "support ISIS". Considering that there is no proof whatsoever that has ever emerged of Gulf Arab state support for ISIS (notwithstanding the often-Islamophobia-tinged and reality-ignorant theories that "of course" Saudi would support extremists - a complete failure to understand Saudi Arabia's preference for secular authoritarianism over even moderate Islamism over the past two decades - while studies have consistently shown that private funding by wealthy Gulf donors amounted to a very small portion of ISIS's revenues), this was in fact the establishment parent again choosing to propagate the same falsehood of the teenage anti-imperialist. In other words, in order to undermine Saudi and Qatari support for an opposition that the United States did not like (because as in the words of a US military chief, they were not ready to support US interests - moderate or not), the US simply took the easier pragmatic route of associating such support with empowering ISIS.

In the end, these aren't "cats being let out of the bag". Consistent public statements do not "let cats out of the bag". If you want a real cat being let out of the bag, you can find it in the following. By the end of the Obama Administration's tenure, Kerry finally - and as so predictably expected by those of us who closely followed the trajectory of his statements, which evolved almost according to a linear US timeline of "rehabilitative procrastination" - took on his anti-imperialist teenager's suggestion, declaring that the 'precondition' for Assad to step down should be dropped, and that Assad should be able to run for elections (as revealed in a recording of a meeting he held with Syrian activists). For those who know these events, the fantasy, upside-down reality that the teenage anti-imperialist has spun for Western audiences possibly represents one of the biggest disinformation operations in history. It has hidden the teenage anti-imperialist's utter continuity with the establishment parent that it portrays itself as a rebel against.

"Moderates"

Indeed, it is these US statements and policies which were why Syrian activists have for years organised anti-US protests (as the example of one campaign which had the straightforward description: "America Supports Assad: USA statements and actions serve Assad's criminality") - unknown to the teenage anti-imperialist. It is similarly why, as more familiar Arab audiences are aware, "moderate" rebel groups described as 'US-backed' wrote dozens of statements over the years condemning US policy, and refused to align with the US request for them to grant legitimacy onto its renewed War on Terror (indeed, the FSA's own founder presciently warned in 2014 that the US would ultimately support Assad's survival under the guise its 'anti-terror' intervention).

On many an occasion, anti-regime Syrians understood that what US statements and actions often revealed was that the US tacitly viewed them as extremists until proven (or 'vetted') otherwise - and that this was *not* mainly to do with genuine concerns pertaining to whether they were "moderate", hated minorities, or were going to threaten the West (though Sunni majoritarian mindsets was often a problem within rebel ranks). It was, to their mind, mainly to do with the fact that they had now become Muslim insurgents *with guns*, who had aspirations for a change to a US-protected regional

order, and who crucially operated outside of the confines of a state structure with which the US could depend on for some form of understandings (as is the case for instance with say certain hostile Iraqi Shia militias who are alternately activated and curtailed by Iran).

This is why the opposition balked so hard at the “moderate” categorisation. For one, the majority formerly being ordinary everyday citizens, they chafed at a foreign power coming to ‘vet’ their identity – to add to what they felt was a further procrastination tactic following years in delay in promised Western aid. They also believed it ironic that it was the “moderate” groups that received the least funding, and that the US appeared largely ambivalent when those groups were outcompeted or even attacked by more conservative Islamist rivals. Indeed, it was arguably why the rise of ISIS – which the rebels accused the US of ignoring despite their extensively fighting against it during its foundational period (see part IV of this series) – made the US mission to move away from an opposition it viewed as ideologically distasteful all the more easier.

Ultimately, each side knew what the other was thinking. Syria’s opposition knew that the US did not trust it because they were fighting for independence, not for their future state to later become a patron of US interests. Nor were US policymakers ignorant of who they were – for all claims to the contrary. They knew that these rebels were no “contras” supposedly in love with the US – the ridiculous allegation that the teenage anti-imperialist sometimes offered by way of analogy. Indeed, many who joined rebel ranks – not only Islamist coalitions, but even perhaps thousands (particularly tribal fighters from Deir Ezzor) within the mainstream and “moderate” Free Syrian Army – had fought the US occupation in Iraq. US policymakers knew from monitoring the narratives and rhetoric of the opposition, that such sentiments continued to be widespread and were very much part of the opposition mainstream. Nor did the opposition – perhaps aware that the US already knew such realities and thus even less motivated to censor themselves – feel the need to tone down its rhetoric (to the extent that it could absent a central leadership). It continued to claim that the Assad dynasty protected Israel, provided solidarity to protests movements against US-backed regimes in the region (such as the Egyptian military’s handling of the post-Mubarak transition, and condemning the US-backed Iraqi government and the invasion that brought it to power), and aligned with groups, figures, and causes that the US was uncomfortable with – such as Turkey’s Erdogan, Egypt’s Morsi, Hamas, and the Iraqi opposition. In short, both sides knew where each other stood, and the opposition focused its efforts on attempting to procure aid directly from regional allies.

Nor was the commonly-misstated notion of ‘US inaction’ merely an overhang of Iraq war fatigue – which while a factor, simply complemented and provided a cover for far more extensive reasons. Never mind such theories of Obama’s personal hesitancy, weakness, overly diplomatic nature, or deference to an Iran that would walk away from the table of sanctions-relief due to US policy on Syria. This went far deeper. Realist US policymakers tasked with officially supporting the opposition undoubtedly felt they had to adopt what must have felt like a body dislocation: a largely-humanitarian and romantic mandate to support a force that they viewed as no likely future ally, and indeed in many instances, the same ‘sort’ of force that they had only a few years ago been fighting in Iraq. And while Assad sometimes caused headaches to the West by organising buses to move those fighters across the border, he wasn’t the one actually *doing* that fighting. He facilitated it when neoconservatives started to threaten his regime, and ended it (against much popular opposition) when they stopped doing so.

It is this whole set of oft-unsaid assumptions which came disguised under one term: “moderate”. What a world apart from what the teenage anti-imperialist understood by the term.

The lobbying failure of the Syrian political opposition

In the absence of any political or ideological convergence, US policymakers knew that the rebels

viewed any alignment with the US as a pragmatic one to secure their interests, with not much offered in return. Indeed, the main opposition message to the West was “if you are genuinely supporters of democracy and humanitarianism, allow our mutual friends to give us the weapons we need to level the playing field” - and speaking from personal experience, many opposition supporters truly felt that they were owed support by the international community. This wasn't particularly a good selling point - the US is not a humanitarian organisation, it is a state with state interests. And it is why the opposition's lobbying of the US was so weak: it offered no major concessions on such issues as Israel, nor offered any clear and detailed plans for a post-Assadist future of cooperation that benefited US interests.

On the other hand, the external opposition and various Western-based pro-opposition lobbying networks in general failed to effectively relay complaints by rebels and activists on the ground targeting precise components of US policy. These included the long-term freezing and red-lining of rebel operations by CIA-led operation rooms; US-imposed restrictions on heavy weaponry being provided by regional states; the US-led Coalition's sharing of the country's airspace with the Assad regime and the targeting of one set of his enemies, in the process allowing him to more freely target the other set; the selective targeting of Sunni Islamist groups to the exclusion of foreign Shia Islamist ones; the lack of any conditionality on military and political aid to states such as Lebanon for its failure to police its borders (indeed, the Lebanese Army regularly coordinated security operations with Hezbollah, thus effectively facilitating Hezbollah's operations inside Syria); and the role of Iraqi militias which were still being paid their salaries by the US-backed government (and which, crucially, increasingly proliferated into Syria as a result of the effective US support to Iraq's fight against ISIS - thus lifting the burden from these militias otherwise having to focus all their efforts on the fight against ISIS in their home country).

Yet all of these demands were barely heard by Western audiences. Instead, opposition complaints heard by Western audiences were effectively a monotonous repetition of 'Western inaction', the scale of the humanitarian catastrophe, and attempts to goad the US to act against perceived geopolitical rivals such as Iran and Russia. The latter effectively outsourced responsibility for the catastrophe solely onto Russia and Iran, and reduced the role of the US to one of passive observer against all available evidence. It further found little grounding amongst Western audiences who were already wary of intervention in the aftermath of the Iraq war and were even more so with the rise of ISIS being affiliated with opposition to the Assad regime. Indeed, following the rise of ISIS, opposition spokesmen on Western media outlets could often be found on the defensive - going to extensive lengths to make clear that they're not the same as ISIS or that they oppose fighting it, but that “Assad and ISIS are both sides of the same coin” - and steering clear of outright condemning a policy that ignored Assad's far greater crimes and effectively helped his survival, for fear of being seen as soft on ISIS or out of wariness of provoking a more damaging US policy. Yet as was largely predicted by rebels and activists on the ground at the start of the campaign, despite US promises in 2014, the US-led Coalition's defeat of ISIS had practically no direct benefits for the opposition, and huge indirect losses: with the exception of a small portion of territory in the southeastern Syria desert, the overwhelming bulk of former ISIS-held territory was split between the Kurdish-left SDF and the Assad regime. In other words, the US-led Coalition effectively played a key role in the regime indirectly regaining control over ISIS-held territory, which took place in a lightning 2017 offensive following a rapid collapse of ISIS after a string of losses imposed by the US-backed SDF, and in indirectly being able to regain control over rebel-held territory where the regime had concentrated most of its efforts. Most of these territories were former heartlands of the 2011 protests.

In other words, the political opposition that represented the Syrian rebellion to the world was not flexible and pliant enough to serve US interests, nor radical enough to attempt to obtain concessions

through highlighting contradictions between US rhetoric and policy. It is perhaps ironically the case that groups which were more strongly critical of US policy, such as the Syrian Kurds and Iraqi Shia - whose political representatives accused the US of facilitating the rise of ISIS through supporting the opposition - that received the most extensive US support within the post-Arab Spring era.

Of course, similar lobbying failures also existed vis a vis the opposition's outreach to Kurds and other minority demographics as a whole. For others, the Syrian opposition - because of its extensive divisions, both externally and internally - failed to offer a clear and coherent political platform and vision beyond rebelling against an authoritarian regime. Meanwhile, armed opposition factions committed crucial mistakes, not least in alienating possible supporters by entrenching themselves into debates on the form of Islamic law that should be introduced in rebel territories and after the fall of the regime, as well as their shelling of residential areas - which, while often a practice not unique to Syria in the context of asymmetrical wars - ultimately lost the Syrian opposition its moral authority amongst these demographics and made even likely supporters who remained in regime-held areas feel explicitly targeted by it, and fearful of their fate after any fall of the regime.