Solidarity, Inc. Part III: The absence of protest

written by Omar Sabbour | August 25, 2021

See Parts I and II.

Perhaps the most fatal of the teenage anti-imperialist's distractions was their argument Western governments were actually supporting the dangerous Islamists in Syria they 'pretended' to be bombing. This was a denial which meant, amongst other things, that the thousands of civilians killed in that illusory war didn't actually exist, and that the destruction leveled on towns and cities controlled by ISIS did not take place. If the propagated notion was that the West wasn't *really* fighting ISIS – but was more concerned, say, with 'undermining Iran' – how could there be protests against such an imaginary (or at least suspect) war?

And indeed, this is precisely why there were almost no such protests against some of the major events of the US-led intervention in Syria. To take the example of the Stop the War Coalition, following the 2015 vote on UK airstrikes, the group only came out of the street on a Syria matter on four occasions: twice to protest against symbolic (and often pre-coordinated) strikes on empty Syrian regime facilities following one of hundreds out of hundreds of chemical attacks, and twice to oppose Turkish and rebel military offensives against the Western-backed Kurdish-led SDF. To take the first of such protests, almost 50 Muslim worshippers killed in a US airstrike on a mosque in a rebel-held village weeks before the strike on an evacuated regime airfield, and 33 civilians that were killed in a US strike on a school in Raqqa, did not warrant the same headlines – or protests – that the damaged airfield tarmac provoked shortly after Trump's "first strike on Syria" – i.e. in the aftermath of the Khan Shaikhoun chemical attack. Far more extensive bombings of Raqqa, Mosul, and Manbij failed to elicit a single protest by the teenage anti-imperialist leadership of Stop the War Coalition. Much to the contrary, the group in fact continued to host supporters of the SDF on its platforms, even while it denied reports of civilians killed by the Coalition as 'exaggerated' and 'ISIS propaganda', and refused opposition requests to suspend cooperation with the US-led Coalition. When criticised precisely on these points, its leaders accused its opponents (somehow) of "supporting war".

In total, the teenage anti-imperialist and their organisations protested against less than 0.1% of Western airstrikes in Syria. They have meanwhile ensured that Western audiences heard far more about the US crime of striking empty airfields and 'supporting the opposition' than of the thousands of civilians directly killed by US airstrikes – or even for that matter, of the fact that the US has bases in a third of Syria happened to be in the areas under the control of the teenage anti-imperialist's "only progressive friends" – and has its own oil companies in the region (the traditional obsession of anti-imperialists) – in those areas under the control of the left-wing SDF.

Indeed, as will be seen in the following section – the Syrian opposition became more hated for the teenage anti-imperialist *even when it clashed* with the US, and even when the opposition explicitly claimed that the US was supporting Assad. Perhaps unwilling to be seen as sympathetic to ISIS by organising protests against Western airstrikes, the teenage anti-imperialist settled for the compromise of continuing to bully the Syrian opposition. Such a focus continued even after the (much-misunderstood and net-*restricting*) CIA program of coordinating the supply of regional arms to the rebels was ended by Donald Trump in early 2017, and there was a severe underreporting in the teenage anti-imperialist's media of the humanitarian realities in areas under the bombardment of of the US-led Coalition, most reports of which came from pro-opposition networks in addition to human rights groups and conflict monitors.

Hold on, did they just support… their imperialist parents?

Beyond failing to adequately cover the realities of areas under US-led bombardment or protest against such bombardment, the manifestation of the teenage anti-imperialist's often-surreal contradictions meant that on occasion, they actually ended up *mobilising against* rebel operations which aimed to expel US forces from the region. This took place for instance in protests organised in defence of the SDF when it came under attack by the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA). US Special Forces were in fact embedded with the SDF, and came under attack by the FSA prior to the major offensive. One stated target of the Turkish-backed FSA offensive was for the evacuation of the city of Manbij from both the SDF and US Special Forces. Indeed, from a narrow so-called "anti-imperialist" view, it ironically remains the case that to this day, the only withdrawal of US Special Forces in Syria has been as a result of a Turkish and rebel military operation – namely the 2019 'Operation Peace Spring', which was in fact opposed by Western anti-war groups. Meanwhile, US Special Forces continue to cohabit the Syrian regime in the province of Hasakeh, with few if any attacks launched on US forces.

It should be again reemphasised at this juncture that the point of this is not to claim that one side is 'good' or otherwise – this author has condemned the Turkish/FSA offensive and the extensive human rights abuses that have followed in Afrin, for instance. Nor is it to deny that the Syrian opposition made crucial mistakes in handling the Kurdish cause, which was poignant in such decisions as refusing to change the name of the new state from Syrian Arab Republic to Syrian Republic. Rather, it is to state that using purely the supposed metric of "opposing Western intervention", groups such as the Stop the War Coalition have ended up in fact *de facto* siding with US Special Forces remaining in the region to protect them against a Turkish and rebel offensive. The reasons here, of course, have much to do with the general identity politics of the teenage anti-imperialist: as leftists, the Kurdish-led SDF enjoyed exceptions to the teenage anti-imperialist's supposed "non-intervention" rules (indeed, this author has attended events where Syrian opposition speakers who have expressed *opposition* to Western intervention, had their invitation to speak at a anti-war party branch later rescinded on instruction from the organisation's central leadership. At the same event, a Kurdish supporter of the SDF was allowed to speak).

Indeed, there are even those who are wary of these contradictions and yet who prioritise the War on Terror over opposition to 'Western imperialism'. Readers may be surprised to hear that one such example was none other than the former stalwart of the anti-War on Terror movement during the Bush era, the former ally of the Muslim community in Britain against its narratives, the former resolute defender and supporter of the Iraqi resistance to the US occupation, and the former condemner of the narratives of the Hitchens' and the Dershowitzs' of that resistance being purely "extremist" as racist and Islamophobic – none other than former UK MP George Galloway. In 2015, Galloway declared his support of Western airstrikes in Iraq, and advocated for the UK to launch airstrikes in support of the Assad regime. In other words, Galloway advocated for 'Western imperialism' to offer support to the Assad regime, which Galloway supports due to its resistance to

Western imperialism. As could perhaps be expected with the underlying racialist Islamophobia that categorised much of the far-right—far-left convergence on Syria, Galloway has since increasingly and overtly embraced right-wing figures and rhetoric – including sharing platforms with (and allegedly hugging) Steve Bannon, hosting Nigel Farage on his television show and declaring support for his "Brexit Party", and most recently, describing a Muslim Scottish MP as "not a Celt like me".

Ultimately, as with the establishment parent, the teenage anti-imperialist is orientalist – just in an upside down sense. This is precisely why the teenage anti-imperialist is *terrified* of debating a native voice. Because it is that native voice behind which his own interests masquerade and take justification. What if it contradicts their own? What if the native voice says "well, your parent is not the main issue I am facing in this particular case"? Or what if the native voice says "you have no idea what your government's policy actually is"? Or what if it says both? And this is precisely the point that has not been made enough by those in solidarity with the Arab Spring and genuine anti-imperialists: the teenage anti-imperialist is not an anti-imperialist – not in opposing or even understanding what imperialism constitutes, nor even in genuinely opposing its Western variant.

Anecdotes: When the angry Arab meets the Western teenage anti-imperialist

When the teenage anti-imperialist reaches a position of relative visibility and influence, they often come under criticism. The teenage anti-imperialist does not, however, always adopt one form in response. Some are unabashed of their affiliation with the West's perceived adversaries, others are not. In the latter, take the aforementioned UK Stop the War Coalition, perhaps a more "mature" form of the teenage anti-imperialist. The group has always said that it does not support the Assad regime, Iran, or Russia. And indeed, from long experience attending the group's events, it is clear that there are differences amongst the organisation's leadership (and of course, the general membership) on the nature of their affiliations and held narratives on the conflict. But there is absolutely no doubt that such a group has promoted narratives that lean heavily towards the Syrian regime and Iran. Its website was (and is) full of them. Its talks were full of them. The conflict was an attempt by Western-backed Sunni jihadists to enforce "regime change" in Syria to undermine Iran. (Incidentally, what exactly does opposition to "regime change" in a proclaimed revolutionary war entail? Is it not by definition "regime survival"?). The talks, of which this writer attended many, were a consistent, one-sided attack on the Syrian opposition – even during periods when the Syrian opposition actually claimed that the US position was one of regime-preservation (in other words, ironically the same position advocated by groups such as Stop the War).

Take the example of a Syrian from the northern city of Manbij, who stood up to speak at a at a Q&A at a Stop the War conference. The activist in question led a pro-opposition organisation in London, which was opposed to both Western and Russian intervention – even emailing his Member of Parliament, a certain Jeremy Corbyn, to ask him to relay his opposition to Western airstrikes in parliament. Corbyn would indeed do so, directly referencing the activist's concerns in parliament *and* in the very same statement declare that the activists's relatives and friends in the FSA were not moderate. At the conference, the activist asked the panel – which would include Corbyn's future Director of Communications Seamus Milne, as well as the convenor of Stop the War Coalition, Lindsey German – why the group failed to cover incidents of the US and Syrian airforces bombing the same cities and towns of northern Syria in tandem – a mockery of those US policymakers who claimed that there was no coordination between the two sides, in contrast to the regime's own admissions and brags. "You know what's going on now in Manbij city?" he asked. "Assad's bombing us in the daytime, and the Coalition – the Americans – are bombing us in the night-time. There is cooperation between Assad and the West". Such claims were not singular – they were at the time repeatedly reported by Syrians on the ground areas outside the control of the Syrian government.

This writer was also present at the event, and had his own intervention: the Stop the War leadership

were not actually covering any US airstrikes on anti-ISIS mainstream rebels (that is, even excluding groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra) that were taking place, because such events were a contradiction "inconvenient to their narrative" (i.e. of what the leadership had always said was a US-obsessed "regime change" plot). I added that the correct and nuanced analysis, that the US was not interested in regime change and in fact, wanted the regime to survive – "whether with Assad personally at the top or not" (at this point German scoffed: "because it doesn't") – was not bombastic enough for their liking despite being the correct analysis.

Responding to the Syrian activist, German declared: "I simply do not agree that the US is supporting Assad in any way. I just don't see it, there is nothing in their [US] actions that shows that they are in any way supporting the Assad regime… whether you like it or not that is the truth". "Nothing" in their actions. Not even, it appeared, the quite straightforward observation of two airforces simultaneously bombing different enemies of the regime. What was the pertinent evidence by which German so easily swatted the testimony of this Syrian – whose city was being bombed and whose neighbours were reporting the same thing? It of course, started and ended, with the Western parent: a 'recent interview' she had watched in which a "US official was blaming Assad for everything".

Such anecdotes of clashes between Arab Spring activists and Western teenage anti-imperialists also extended to other Arab Spring arenas. At an event hosted by the UK 'Stop the War Coalition' circa 2015, a Houthi supporter who was given a platform by the Stop the War organisers would proclaim that the Houthi takeover that had taken place in coordination with Saleh loyalists within the Yemeni military was a 'revolution' – prompting this author, no supporter of the Saudi bombing (not because it opposed the coup, but because of its destructive and indiscriminate nature) – to respond "what kind of revolutionaries ally with the man the revolution overthrew". After the event, and after confronting the speaker in question, he responded with the following words that I remember to this day: "Ali Abdullah Saleh is a man and a hundred men". In other words, the Stop the War Coalition had hosted an avid admirer of a US "puppet", in every sense of the word. Interestingly, another Stop the War-organised event was crashed and shut down by pro-Arab Spring Yemeni supporters, who called the organisers supporters of the Houthi-Saleh coup.

The notion that the group has "*only* opposed Western intervention" is, of course, nonsense – it was possible to oppose Western intervention without recycling narratives heavily laden with dangerous Islamophobic implications regarding millions of Syrians who opposed the Assad regime (a congruence between the far-right and far-left that has been covered extensively elsewhere). It was possible to stay truly neutral on the civil war, if that was the wish of the organisation, and oppose Western intervention in the conflict. But what would they fill their websites and talks with and create outrage amongst the crowd of foreign policy hobbyists?

Don't take to heart the comforting denials by such groups that "we do not support any side in these conflicts". I was personally witness to the platform given to the Houthi-Saleh supporters, applauded by the entire audience of teenage anti-imperialists. This author personally had police with machine guns summoned to talk to him (very cordially though, to be fair) for being a bit rowdy at a Stop the War event, after only one Syrian speaker out of a dozen was allowed to speak despite promises that others would be heard (Western members in the audience were afforded the rest of the promised time). Unbeknownst to the author, a BBC journalist in the crowd caught the whole exchange – including my response to a steward who said that they would call the police. Subsequently, the Stop the War Coalition released a statement describing the claim of police being called (my claim, not the BBC's – an organisation that has also produced some awful pieces on Syria as on Iraq before it) as a BBC invention.

But this is where it got very interesting: perhaps wary that there was an entire audience that was witness to the arrival of police at the event, the teenage anti-imperialist who wrote the response

carefully specified that “the constabulary” was never called. Indeed. It wasn’t the constabulary, it was parliamentary security – who, unlike the constabulary as it happens, happen to be armed with machine guns. It was that day that I realised that the problem with the teenage anti-imperialist was not limited solely to analytical superficiality, exhibitionism, and self-centeredness – it included outright dishonesty to protect what had become a brand.

To make this even more of a scandal (one undoubtedly long-since covered up by the group’s leadership), one of the speakers on that event’s platform, Conservative MP Crispin Blunt, invited by the “anti-war organisers” – would vote for UK airstrikes in Syria a month later. Indeed, even at the ‘anti-war’ event in question, Blunt made the case that there should be UK airstrikes in Syria; his original reservation was not in fact, an anti-war one at all: rather, he believed that the West should include Assad in the plan against ISIS, and he was not convinced that there was enough of a ‘moderate’ opposition that should be relied on for the effort. In other words, to put it in the sort of bombastic terms perhaps more familiar to the teenage anti-imperialist: the Stop the War Coalition invited a UK parliamentarian who would vote to bomb the country of the same people they refused to allow to speak at that very event. Again, this was another example where the Stop the War actually accepted a ‘pro-war’ speaker as long as he condemned not the principle of Western intervention, but simply the Syrian opposition. And while the Syrian regime actually repeatedly welcomed the airstrikes itself, the Stop the War Coalition warned that it was a backdoor attempt at ‘regime change’ – in other words, being more defensive, not to mention proven wildly incorrect, of the regime than the regime itself. The regime of course understood well that the West had adopted a War on Terror that would leave him in place (it had actually solicited such an intervention before it took place), and boasted of intelligence coordination with Western governments that criticised him in public.

One man’s terrorist (circa 2011) is another man’s freedom fighter (circa 2010) – discarding former friends

The Stop the War Coalition’s position on the Syrian conflict is estimated to have cost it the support of large numbers of British Muslim activists who had previously been active alongside the Coalition during the Iraq war. Former Guantanamo prisoner and Stop the War ally, Moazzam Begg*, is perhaps the most prominent example. “In my case, I think that I’ve seen evidently that not only have they [Stop the War Coalition] stopped asking me to speak at more and more events, I have found myself naturally not wanting to go to such events and speak more and more”, Begg said in an interview conducted in 2019. He proceeded to cite examples of prominent figures from within the Muslim community who in the past had “fought alongside the left on their platforms” but had come to feel squeezed by a new right-left convergence: “Of course, people have felt that you naturally can’t turn towards the right because they hate us anyway, and the left who are historically our allies on this use the same language to define us” he declared.

Begg was ultimately unimpressed by the Stop the War Coalition’s record on Syria. “When I’ve seen the [Stop the War Coalition] signs of ‘don’t bomb Syria’, it’s always been about don’t bomb the Syrian government. But let’s talk about the places that are being bombed – not even by the Russians, because they [Stop the War Coalition] say that they could only talk about what our government is doing. America has not only bombed ISIS but in the early days they bombed Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, they even hit the Free Syrian Army. There were no protests against that either, and clearly that shows that there is a great double-speak. When Syria has been bombed in non-regime areas there have been no protests – not when it’s done by the British or the Americans or the Russians.”

Indeed, one traditional feature offered by anti-war and leftist movements in the aftermath of extremist attacks in the West has been to cite Western foreign policy towards Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine as a motivating factor. This however was notably absent in the case of Syria; here, various

examples of radicalised Muslims who carried out atrocities cited motivations that the West had in fact *ignored* Assad, before deciding to selectively intervene to turn an Arab Spring conflict into a renewed War on Terror. Such examples included testimonies by Amedy Coulibali, one of the perpetrators of the 2015 France Kosher Supermarket killings ("I think of those who had to put up with Bashar al-Assad in Syria. He tortured people. Nobody did anything for years. Then bombers, coalition of 50,000 countries and all that"); Basam Ayachi, a mosque Imam and the father of one of the 2016 Paris attackers (who attributed the travelling of Belgian Muslims to Syria to a "lack of action against the Assad regime on the one hand, and domestic factors on the other"), and Amer Deghayes, one of the remaining British fighters fighting for al-Nusra in Syria. Indeed, it is interesting to note that far fewer British Muslims joined the fight against the US-led occupation in Iraq than was the case in the conflict in Syria. This poses an interesting question as to what extent this could be attributed to the lack of the same active anti-war mobilisation that served as outlet which absorbed the energies of British Muslim youths during the Iraq war, being available in the Syrian context. Indeed, the degree to which Muslims who closely followed the events of Syria were mobilised by the daily televised nature of the Syrian regime's war is one that has been largely marginalised in anti-war and leftist analyses on the phenomenon. Instead, and in a complete reversal of the 'contextual' and grievance-based explanations offered for extremist attacks that previously predominated, groups such as Stop the War Coalition in fact attributed atrocities such as the 2015 Paris attacks to the West supporting 'jihadists' in Syria.

The anti-war movement failed to oppose the collective *Wars* on Terror that were fought out on Syrian territory. The failure to recognise the overlaps between those Wars on Terror meant that such watersheds as the Russian destruction of Aleppo and the US-led destruction of Raqqa alike failed to provoke much protest or anti-war mobilisations – with a perception that there had overall been a 'mission accomplished' so long as the Syrian regime was not targeted for overthrow.

Shrodinger's "Jihadists"

For the teenage anti-imperialist, the "rebel jihadists" are a mythical creature. Descendent from the sky, moved through time from "when we backed the *mujahedin* against the Soviets" some thirty years ago. They have nothing to do with the protests that broke out in 2011 – even though they happen to be concentrated in the same areas (putting aside the years of reports by conflict monitors that find that most of these fighters were former civilians and protesters – 'experts' carry little currency in this field). They are Shrodinger's "moderate rebel jihadists": so heavily backed by the West, yet somehow simultaneously a fiction losing out to better-funded extremists. So weak and negligible in scale – yet somehow still able to control some third of an entire country's territory (those green areas you used to see on the Syria war maps) – even after ISIS chipped away at the other half, killing thousands of the "so-called moderates" in the process. So divided, localised, and fragmented in nature, yet with such an indisputable and obvious extremist uniformity. After all, who's going to take the time to examine which rebel coalition controls such and such town, village, or city? Leave that to the experts (who we'll then ignore). No, the teenage anti-imperialist can hardly name a handful of the factions – from the 'hundreds of extremist ones' – that exist in Syria.

No, the teenage anti-imperialist cares little for the many years of reporting of conflict monitors that find that most villages, towns, and cities in those 'green' areas are indeed controlled by factions that put themselves under the 'FSA' umbrella (such claims were even on occasion unwittingly confirmed by the likes of Russia). FSA? "Don't make us laugh. They didn't exist. Those green areas were controlled by no-one. Or they were controlled by Nusra – those so-called "conflict monitors" never talk about Nusra." The teenage anti-imperialist then proceeds to cite the latest report from a conflict monitor on how Nusra is controlling Idlib. Besides, *even if* the 'FSA' did exist in the other provinces, that was only to get the Western funding they needed to *not* have the resources to launch a *jihad* against the Western governments who are actually supporting them. To the teenage anti-imperialist,

this is somehow logically coherent. In conclusion, the ‘FSA’ does not exist. Or alternatively, the ‘FSA’ is entirely made up of extremists. Ironically, the latter analysis happened to be shared both by Tony Blair’s think tank and none other than Jeremy Corbyn.

The agency of ‘jihadists’ and insurgents changes depending on the teenage anti-imperialist’s goals. When fighting the tyrannical establishment parent, the US occupation forces in Iraq for instance, the ‘jihadists’ and insurgents were valiantly resisting foreign domination. “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter”, they reminded you. The teenage anti-imperialist raged when a Bush administration official claimed that the insurgents were invariably ‘Al-Qaeda’ – of course a false claim then in Iraq as later in Syria. Yet it was similarly undoubtedly the case that the predecessor of ISIS – founded by Abu Mus’ab Al-Zarqawi, and known then as Al-Qaeda in Iraq and later Islamic State of Iraq – did play a considerable role in the insurgency against the US. When fighting in Syria however, the ‘jihadists’ and insurgents suddenly morphed into agency-less, context-less monsters. Yet was there actually a substantive change in how the imperialist parent approached the likes of Al-Qaeda and ISIS during this transition to justify this?

The reality of the next few years reveal rather the opposite: the anti-ISIS and anti-Al Qaeda campaign of the post-Arab Spring period was, from the Western point of view, far more efficiently conducted when considering the sheer asymmetry between ISIS fighters killed and Western soldiers killed. It also resulted in more than 13,000 civilians killed in Iraq and Syria, overwhelmingly in areas which witnessed Arab Spring protests – not heartlands of Syrian government support, as the teenage anti-imperialist would deceptively have you believe. How many Arab Spring protesters were killed in US airstrikes in these regions? Indeed, this is a question that is never asked.

**The wider views held by interviewees quoted in this article do not necessarily reflect those of the writer or New Politics.*