

OIL EMPIRES AND RESISTANCE IN AFGHANISTAN, IRAQ AND SYRIA

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This article is about three intersecting wars in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.¹ The bombings in Paris occurred just as we were finishing the piece, and give our arguments here further tragic relevance.

It will help the reader to know from the outset where we stand. We want the mass resistance to the Assad regime in Syria to win, and the Russian armed forces and their allies to leave. We want the Americans and their allies to leave Afghanistan, now, completely. We want Assad and the American, British, French and Russian military to stop bombing the Syrian resistance and the Islamic State.²

The most contentious part of this proposition concerns the Taliban and Islamic State fighters. We are not interested in dodging these concerns. But our argument is not slick or simple. A useful starting point is the media spin. Since 9/11, many people in the Middle East and Euro-America have been persuaded of the utter

¹ Many thanks for very useful comments on drafts of this article by Ruard Absaroka, Mark Boothroyd, Pete Cannell, Bill Crane, Nick Evans, Teresa Hayter, Eliza Hilton and Pablo Mukherjee, Tabitha Spence and Richard Tapper.

² ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, is now more often simply known as IS, or the Islamic State. For a detailed account of the rise of this Islamist organization, see Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, Saqi, 2015.

cruelty and sectarianism of the Taliban, and, more recently, of Islamic State.

This spin has truth in it, but what we are less likely to see is how it works to distract attention away from the near identical methods and brutality – on an incomparably greater scale and over many decades - employed by states allied with the oil empires of America, Europe and Russia, like Saudi Arabia, Saddam’s Iraq and Assad’s Syria. The spin also distracts from the massive violence by the America military in the air, and in the prisons of Baghram, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

And the spin justifies, by analogy, the bombing or killing of other Islamists, and indeed of other Muslims.

Moreover, the media spin conceals what is actually happening, the complex relationships between disparate events on the ground. In the week that we write, a Russian civilian airliner has been brought down by an explosion over Sinai, President Obama, after sustained resistance by climate activists, has vetoed the massive Keystone pipeline project from the Canadian tar sands to Texas, a UN negotiator in Libya has been accused of corruption after taking a lucrative job in the United Arab Emirates and Angela Merkel has led the EU in offering President Erdoğan in Turkey three billion Euros to keep Syrian refugees out of Europe.³

³ <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/06/politics/keystone-xl-pipeline-decision-rejection-kerry/index.html>;
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34732213>;
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/04/un-libya-envoy-accepts-1000-a-day-job-from-backer-of-one-side-in-civil-war>;
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/12/eu-leaders-race-to-secure-3bn-migrant-deal-with-turkey-president>

So our aim here must be first to establish how the media spin and these apparently disparate events are part of the stories of the Taliban, the Islamic State and the Syrian resistance. We aim also to establish something of the class dynamics of the imperial invasions, the ruthlessness of the Islamic State, and the popular support for the Syrian resistance, the Taliban, and the Islamic State – why people are willing to fight and die for them. In the end, we outline a morality and socialist politics that can make some sense of the tragic wars in the Middle East.

Inequality and Class

To understand the scale of carnage and spirals of revenge put in train by these wars, we start from a more general perspective on the Middle East, and begin with our choices as people. We both worked as social anthropologists in Afghanistan forty years ago and have followed Afghan and Middle Eastern politics closely ever since. Our training, research and sympathy has always been with ordinary people, and our analyses have always begun with social class and popular resistance to exploitation and oppression.⁴ Because anthropologists pay attention to the

⁴ See for instance Nancy Tapper (Lindisfarne), 1991, *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society*, Cambridge UP and four papers by Jonathan Neale - 'The Afghan Tragedy', *International Socialism*, 1981, <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj2/1981/isj2-012/neale.htm>; 'Afghanistan: The Horse Changes Riders', 1988, *Capital and Class* 35: 34-48; 'The Long Torment of Afghanistan', 2002, *International Socialism* 93: 31-59; and 'Afghanistan: the Case Against 'the Good War'', *International Socialism*, 120; 31-60, 2008. See also Nancy's 'Starting from Below: Fieldwork, Gender and Imperialism Now', and Jonathan's 'Ranting and Silence: The Contradictions of Writing for Activists and

lives of ordinary people, they see society from below. From there, power and privilege stand out in sharp relief. This encourages a focus on resistance and a disciplinary disposition to dissent. But anthropology from below only works if it also includes looking up, and includes explicit, coherent theories about regional and national elites, and their relation to all the other players in the global political economy.

It is also relevant that for the past decade, we have both been climate activists opposed to the immense power of the carbon corporations and oil empires and, unless broken, the catastrophic future their power foreshadows. This is an argument which, as Naomi Klein's magnificent new book, *This Changes Everything, Capitalism vs the Climate* (Penguin, 2015) explains, is widely understood.⁵

We also are concerned to offer a class analysis of what is going on, something too few people writing about the Middle East do. For example, such is the spin from the top that the class basis of the Taliban or the class basis of the Assad regime are rarely mentioned. Yet this is place to begin.

We understand class inequality as a relationship between two classes of people. We can characterize them as the leisure classes and those that work. Or as the rulers and those who are ruled, the haves and have-nots, or in

Academics', in H. Armbruster & A. Laerke, eds., *Taking Sides: Ethics, Politics and Fieldwork in Anthropology*, Berghahn, 2008.

⁵ See Jonathan Neale, *Stop Global Warming, Change the World*, 2008, Bookmarks; Nancy Lindisfarne, 'Cochabamba and Climate Anthropology', Guest Editorial, *Anthropology Today*, 26/4, August 2010, p. 1-3; and the campaign, *One Million Climate Jobs*, <http://www.campaigncc.org/greenjobs>.

the new shorthand, the 1% and the 99%. Our focus then is on how the complex system of inequalities - of income and power between ordinary women and men on the one hand, and members of both local and global elites, on the other hand – works and changes.

It is also important to say that we have no quarrel with religion as such. We do not believe that secularists are better than Islamists. Nor do we believe that atheist Americans or socialist Americans are better human beings than American Baptists. Nor do we believe there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims⁶ or that either Catholics or Protestants are better or worse than the other. Our commitment is neither to religion, nor atheism or secularism. Rather, we are on the side of the oppressed and exploited, against the rich and powerful.

But whatever your take on religion, you have to recognise that Islamophobia is now a new racism and a key ideological tool for the elite. One reason is that Islamophobia plays directly into class prejudice. That is, it is an ideology which encourages educated secularists, people who are progressive and liberal on many social issues, to believe themselves also, and automatically, more in favour of social equality than less privileged people. And it is an ideology which encourages educated secularists to believe that working class people – and of course Muslims - are both socially conservative and hostile to movements for social equality.⁷

⁶ See Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, Pantheon, 2004.

⁷ See James W Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, Touchstone, 1995 for a description of how a comparable

Islamophobia is a calculated and muddling prejudice that confuses American Democrats, British Labour and Green Party members and many others in both Euro-America and the Middle East. Social progressives on race and gender, like Hilary Clinton or Barack Obama, are also leading proponents of an economic system which holds global inequality in place through Islamophobia and enormous violence.

A number of prominent leftists, such as Noam Chomsky and Seamus Milne, are also Islamophobic. It is a disposition which becomes evident in arguments about resistance in the Middle East.⁸ Thus, for instance, there is a common discourse that explains away the growing popular support for the Islamic State as a result of outside funding and tricks that fool stupid Arabs. The left-wing version of this discourse often uses the phrase ‘hijacking the revolution’.

‘Hijacking the revolution’ as a metaphor calls to mind Islamic State fighters who hold up the car of the revolution at an intersection, pull out the driver, jump in the front seat and drive the helpless passengers in the back

class prejudice worked to cloud understanding and analyses about the Vietnam War. See also Jonathan Neale, *The American War in Vietnam- 1960-1975*, Bookmarks, 2001.

⁸ And of course there are others who are academics, including, with respect to Afghanistan particularly, the late Fred Halliday. The early publication of the work of Narzanin Massoumi, David Miller, Tom Mills and Hilary Aked will be important to an understanding of Islamophobia in the UK, as was their talk ‘Contesting racialization: Islamophobic social movements and the battle of ideas’, *12th Annual Historical Materialism Conference*, SOAS, London, 5-8th November, 2015. And see Note 19 below.

seat in the wrong direction. But the millions of people who make actual revolutions are not passengers, but participants whose choices deserve to be understood.

Conversely, working class people may be social progressives or socially conservative, and they may or may not buy into Islamophobia as a new racist ideology, but they are by and large quite clear where they stand on the issue of economic equality. And they are also quite clear about who actually fights imperial wars – they fight and die, not the liberal rich.

It follows, but perhaps needs to be said, that the phrase ‘class struggle’ means a struggle between these two classes – the rulers and ruled, haves and have-nots. It does not mean a struggle between two political positions or parties, or between progressives and backward people.

When planes and drones drop bombs on people who have only guns, this is a form of class struggle. Bombers and drones are great wealth concentrated into great death. No one who has been subjected to military bombardment from the air, or helps to dig out the dead and wounded, has any doubt that they face obscene economic inequality. And we understand that the rich and powerful have to use aerial bombardment because the majority of people on the ground already hate and oppose them.

We are also feminists, democrats and revolutionary socialists. For us, that means people power from below – workers, women and men, controlling their workplaces and their communities, and the 99% controlling the country in which they live. The actual parliamentary democracies on offer today are only a faint shadow of that kind of full democracy. But even a little bit of democracy is

better than living in a full-blown police state. Anyone who has lived under both kinds of state knows this.

These are the choices we face and politics we favour. Our values are not very different from the values of most people in the Middle East over the last 70 years.

General Perspective

Our perspective on the Middle East wars – and the relation between local resources, resistance and imperialism – is of course also relevant historically and elsewhere, certainly throughout the Middle East and North Africa, but also wherever there are resource wars.⁹ In one respect, however, the situation in the Middle East is special because of the oil and gas. Oil, gas and coal have been the life blood of industrial capitalism. The vast expansion of the world economy in the last century would not have been possible without the enormous concentrated energy that provided by these fossil fuels. And modern warfare runs on oil.

So imperialism has been a central part in structuring the Middle East. The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was played out in the Middle East after the Second World War. The American and Soviet empires were competitors in the same

⁹ For a magisterial introduction to the politics of the Middle East, see Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*, Fourth Estate, 2004. For antidotes to top-down discussions of imperial power, see Carolyn Nordstrom's splendid *Shadows of War: Violence, Power and International Profiteering in the Twenty-First Century*, University of California Press, 2004; Catherine Lutz, 'Empire is in the details', *American Ethnologist*, 2006, Vol. 33/4, 593-611; and enjoy Mike Davis, *In Praise of Barbarians: Essays against Empire*, Haymarket, 2007.

economic system. The Soviet Union was a state capitalist country with a ruling class and exploitation like the United States as a private capitalist country. Both empires sought to control oil and gas resources, and both operated through client states in comparable ways: Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Hafez al-Assad in Syria were monsters when they were Soviet clients, and they remained monsters when they later changed sides and became American clients instead.

An understanding of imperial competition is basic to our account of the Middle East wars. Our emphasis here, however, is on the United States, because since 1945 it has been the most powerful empire in the region, and the American government and the American ruling class have cared deeply about what happens in the Middle East. It is sometimes said that this is because the US is dependent on Middle Eastern oil, but this has never been true. Today, with the vastly increased production of shale gas, the US now imports only a quarter of its oil consumption and one eighth of its gas. 43 percent of the small amount of American oil imports come from Canada, Mexico and Venezuela, and only 15 percent from the Middle East.

That means that Middle Eastern oil now accounts for about 4 percent of American consumption. Ordinary Americans do not need Middle Eastern oil, and never have. But the American ruling class government has always had deep interests in Middle Eastern oil, for other reasons.

One reason is that Europe, India and China are dependent on Middle Eastern oil. These are the greatest reserves of oil and gas on the planet. If the US controls

these reserves, they have power over Europe, India and China.

The second reason Middle Eastern oil matters to the US is that it matters to American international oil companies.

The third reason is the most important of all. Since 1945, the focus of American policy has been holding the price of oil down. This is counter-intuitive if you think that the oil companies are the key players. But a low price for oil also means, in practice, a low price for gas and coal, because these fuels can replace each other. And American capitalism, and global capitalism, runs on cheap fossil fuels. Keeping the price of fossil fuels down has been essential to the growth of global capitalism. Linda McQuaig in *War, Big Oil and the Fight for the Planet* argues and documents this point extensively and convincingly. It is well worth a read.¹⁰ And of course this also means that as fossil fuel use increases, it drives climate change.

So the US wants cheap oil. But cheap oil is diametrically opposed to the interests of the ordinary people in the countries with oil and gas. If these countries were to combine to restrict the production of oil, as they tried to do in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in the 1970s, they could drive up the price of oil. In the 1970s OPEC's aim was to benefit the local elites, but an increase in the oil price could also be

¹⁰ Linda McQuaig, *War, Big Oil and the Fight for the Planet: It's the Crude, Dude*, Anchor, 2006.

used to improve the life circumstances of ordinary people, reduce the use of fossil fuels, and slow climate change.¹¹

So there is a basic opposition between American governments and corporations on the one hand, and ordinary people in the Middle East on the other. Moreover, everyone in the Middle East knows they are being robbed - by the Americans, the British, the French, the Russians, or by whoever controls the oil. That is why the US, and all the other imperial powers, have been strong supporters of dictatorships in the Middle East. To rob people who know they are being robbed, it is necessary to keep them very afraid.

The dictatorships of the Middle East also encourage grossly unequal societies – the contrasts of rich and poor are dizzying. Paradoxically, these gross disparities of wealth are the reward to the national elites in the oil states of the Middle East for working against both the interests of local people and also their own personal and class interests by keeping the price of oil down. Though in truth, the local ruling classes lose very little by keeping the price

11 On the politics of oil in the Middle East, good books to start with are Linda McQuaig, *War, Big Oil and the Fight for the Planet: It's the Crude, Dude*, Anchor, 2006; Antonia Juhasz, *The Tyranny of Oil: The World's Most Powerful Industry and What We Must Do To Stop It*, Harper, 2008; Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, Verso, 2011; and Christopher Davidson *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies*, Hurst, 2012. See also Brian Parkin and Jonny Jones, 'Petrocide: Oil in the Context of Imperialism, Resource Conflicts and Environmental Crisis', presented at 12th Annual Historical Materialism Conference, SOAS, London, 5-8th November, 2015, and Forthcoming, RS21 Website, <http://rs21.org.uk/>.

down, because workers, small farmers and the poor lose so much.

This great inequality is why the dictatorships are so brutal, and why the secret police and the torture chambers have such a crucial role in the Middle Eastern states. There are variations, of course, between states, and circumstances also change over time. Over the past decade, for instance, Lebanon and Turkey have held democratic elections, while people in Iran and Kuwait have limited but real freedoms, but Algeria and Saudi Arabia are still the most cruel of regimes.

Moreover, when and where fear is crucial to the dictators and the elites who surround them, corruption is endemic. This is partly because the trade-off between the oil imperialists and the wealth of the local ruling class is so clear. When everyone understands that the system is deeply corrupt from the top down and sponsored by the carbon corporations, arms industries and other multinationals and the governments behind them, that knowledge penetrates all economic and social relations.

Over the last 70 years these basic global and local inequalities have produced one wave after another of mass resistance. Because the possibility of resistance is always in people's minds in the Middle East, and because resistance is contagious, the states in the region without oil must also be kept in the grip of fear and class inequality. Indeed, there are good reasons for the rich in the region, and the imperial powers, to fight their worst and most destructive proxy wars in places where those wars do not threaten the oil fields. In part, this is why Afghanistan, with no oil and very little gas or coal, and Syria, with limited oil and gas, have been made to suffer so deeply.

Most fundamentally, we need to understand that the very things that disfigure the region – dictatorship, corruption, great inequality – are the responses of tyrants to the strong desire of most ordinary Middle Easterners for democracy, fairness and inequality, and to their courage over decades of resistance.

We also need to be clear that ‘imperialism’ is not just American imperialism. It is a global system of both elite competition and global repression. The major imperial powers in the world are now the US, China, Russia, and Europe led by Germany. Of these, the ruling class of the US are still the most important imperial power, but they no longer dominate global power in the way they did for a period after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Imperial elites are always trying to manage the relations between two quite different pressures.

On the one hand, imperial power depends on a concentration of national capital, economic and military power. Successfully competing with other imperial centres is an explicit goal of imperial capitalists and the heads of any capitalist enterprise. And to survive, let alone succeed, means continuous investment which in turn means maximizing their profits in order to raise money to invest. The race for profits, and the dynamic nature of the system, drive changes in capitalism.

Though almost never admitted publicly, the second pressure on capitalists is that, because gross profits in any industry come from the work workers do, the capitalists are always looking for ways to exploit workers and force them to work harder for less. And squeezing workers in this way works best when the workers are afraid for themselves and their families, and vulnerable, and

desperate. So each imperial elite works to oppress and police the ordinary people, the workers and small farmers, in each country in their sphere of control.

In this way each imperial ruling class is always both competing with the others globally, and also repressing the people locked into the economies and the places over which it holds sway. These two related pressures on capitalists are basic to the system.

Of course, this global system is not static. Thus, over the past forty years a wide range of neoliberal policies have been imposed from the top. These have been deliberate strategies to increase the share of profit going to capitalists and corporations. These strategies – from keeping wages down to reducing social programmes, welfare support, and the power of trades unions – have altered the lives of ordinary people in both the imperial heartlands of Euro-America and across the Middle East.¹² And since the 2008 financial crisis made the capitalists pursuit of profits more acute, and the top-down imposition of ‘austerity’, things have become much worse as the global economy has stalled and inequality has increased. And as the global economy has imploded, sales of gas and oil have also tanked, though the oil corporations, BP, Shell, Exxon Mobile and others, remain

¹² See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine - the Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Penguin, 2008. Jonathan Neale, *What's Wrong with America?* Vision, 2004; Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, Verso, 2014; and Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale, ‘Masculinities and the lived experience of neoliberalism’, in Andrea Cornwall, Frank Karioris and Nancy Lindisfarne, eds., *Masculinities under Neoliberalism*, Zed, Forthcoming May 2016.

the largest economic entities on the planet and are still vastly rich.

Nor is technology static. For example, American fracking and Canadian tar sands are having far-reaching effects on imperial strategies. A discussion of the changing oil economy requires more space than we have. Here it is enough to suggest the magnitude of the changes.¹³

To take only two examples: since 2014 the Saudi oil elite have worked to keep the price of oil so low that it would force the more expensive US shale gas from fracking out of the market.¹⁴ The second example is even more disturbing. A considerable proportion of oil produced in the Middle East goes on domestic consumption. To cover these energy requirements and leave more oil for export, a number of Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Algeria, are now investing in nuclear rather than sustainable wind or solar power.¹⁵

Which brings us to a key point - that the wars in the Middle East are, in part, climate wars. Since the 1970s climate change droughts have already caused great suffering that has helped to fuel wars in Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Darfur and across the Sahel. It is not irrelevant that the Arab Spring started in a food market in a Tunisian town on the edge of the desert. More fundamentally, the Middle East wars for the control of gas

¹³ See Note 11 above.

¹⁴ <http://money.cnn.com/2015/10/25/investing/oil-prices-saudi-arabia-cash-opec-middle-east/>

¹⁵ See Parkin and Jones, Note 11 above.

and oil - and the project of keeping the price of fossil fuels down - are literally fuelling further climate change.

In a low carbon world, the arid parts of every country in the Middle East could produce limitless reserves of solar power to create rich industrialised economies. In a high carbon world, the Middle East will be the hottest place on Earth. The corporate and imperial powers preventing the world from doing anything about climate change are the same corporate and imperial powers fighting in the Middle East, and for the same reason.

Klein spells out the link in capitalist logic between ruthless competition and the unchecked extraction of natural resources and disposable people in failed states and 'sacrifice zones'. In these respects, there is a tragic continuity between the policies of earlier colonial empires and the new oil imperialists.¹⁶

And a further aspect of the oil wars is that, during the period of the Middle East wars, the total amount of oil produced and exported to Rotterdam and other centres

¹⁶ See Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything. Capitalism vs the Climate*, Penguin, 2015. A good introduction to the connections between climate change and Middle Eastern politics is Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos. Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, Nation Books, 2011. Jonathan Neale, *Stop Global Warming: Change the World*, Bookmarks, 2008, has a chapter on climate, drought and the war in Darfur. There is much to read on Middle Eastern water wars, but for water wars in general the place to start is Mike Gonzalez and Marianella Yanes, *The Last Drop- The Politics of Water*, Pluto, 2015.

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/26/extreme-heatwaves-could-push-gulf-climate-beyond-human-endurance-study-show>. 'Catching the sun – 'Moroccans build big in bold attempt to become solar superpower', *The Guardian*, 26 October 2015, p. 17.

has hardly slowed. And resistances groups, however much they are contesting imperial and state power, are still utterly concerned to control the oil. Pipelines and refineries which are supremely vulnerable to attack are left unharmed. And oil from Iraqi Kurdistan, or from areas controlled by Islamic State, makes its way through smuggling rings straight onto the world market. Oil, as the most terrible of resource curses, is likely to corrupt any group that manages to control it. This means that effective resistance in the oil heartlands of Iraq and to a lesser extent Syria becomes a very different project from resistance in, for instance, resource poor Afghanistan

Waves of Resistance

Over the last 70 years, there have been three main waves of resistance by people in the Middle East. These are confusing, because from the start, while the ideal of democracy was important to many people, 'democracy' as experienced as a colonial practice was utterly contaminated by the violent character of French and British rule. So the first wave of resistance spoke the language of anti-colonialism, socialism, Arab nationalism, Iranian nationalism, secularism, and anti-Zionism. Examples include Nasser in Egypt, the Ba'ath party in Syria and Iraq, Mosaddegh in Iran, the FLN in Algeria, the PLO in Palestine, the Kurdish resistance in Iraq, Iran and Turkey.

The second wave began in 1979 with the revolution which created the Islamic Republic in Iran. This wave also included many who adhered to communist and socialist ideologies, in Iran, Afghanistan, Yemen and elsewhere, but was eventually dominated by people who spoke the

language of Islam, social justice, anti-imperialism, charity, and equality. There are many, widely different examples, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Syria, the Mujahedin and then the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the FIS in Algeria, and Erdoğan's AKP in Turkey.

The spin from the top now says that these two waves of resistance were utterly different, and that the main chasm in the Middle East is between 'secularism' and 'Islamism'. This ignores class, imperialism and ordinary people's values. Both the socialist wave and the Islamist wave were largely led by educated people but they were based mainly in the working class and poorer areas of cities, and among small farmers and sharecroppers. The vast majority of voters, demonstrators, and fighters were from the working poor. Both waves of resistance, with all the variety of secular and religious hopes that fuelled them, were class struggles. The enemies of both movements were the same too – imperial power, particularly the American and Soviet ruling classes, and the local elites who represented these imperial powers in the Middle East.

The shift from secular movements to Islamist movements can be confusing, and that confusion is increased now by Islamophobic spin from the top. But the explanation for the shift is not hard to understand. The secular and socialist left of the 50s and 60s had, by 1980, largely turned into ruling elites enmeshed in the world system, and to varying degrees became client states dependent on the US or Soviet empires. Those new 'socialist' and 'secular' elites now ran the secret police, enforced continuing inequality, and did the bidding of

America or Soviet imperialism. Nasser's Egypt became Sadat's Egypt, Arafat's Fatah became Israel's policemen, the FLN in Algeria became a gas dictatorship, and the socialist Ba'ath parties produced Saddam in Iraq and Assad in Syria.

In other cases, the parties of the left did not take power, but supported the new 'secular' dictatorships, as the Communist parties did in Egypt and Iraq. Crucially, these dictatorships of 'the left' were also class dictatorships. Usually, as in Syria and Iraq, these class dictatorships united some of the old rich, newer capitalists, and the newer leaders of the armed forces and the deep state against anyone – whether communist, socialist or Islamist – who sought equality and stood against the new tyrannies of the state.

So by the 1980s people who had lived under the terrible dictatorships of the secular left turned to various 'Islamist' parties and movements in the hope of finding social justice.¹⁷ However, these Islamist parties in turn

17 For an excellent study of people seeking social justice, see Jenny B. White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey*, University of Washington Press, 2002. For more on religion, class and politics in Turkey, see Nancy Lindisfarne, *Thank God We're Secular: Gender, Islam and Turkish Republicanism*, an English translation of Part One of *Elhamdülillah Laikiz, Cinsiyet, Islâm ve Türk Cumhuriyetçiliği*, İletişim, 2001, at https://www.academia.edu/11351702/Thank_God_We're_Secular_Gender_Islam_and_Turkish_Republicanism; and Nancy Lindisfarne, *Thinking About Feminism and Islamophobia (2): 'Traditional' and 'Modern' in Turkey*, on the Sexism Class Violence website, 2015, at <https://sexismclassviolence.wordpress.com/2015/03/10/thinking-about-feminism-and-islamophobia-2-traditional-and-modern-in-turkey/> .

usually created their own dictatorships when they came to power. In effect they too were taking power in countries that were part of a world system built on oil, and thus they too became, willy-nilly, part of that system too. The importance of oil also meant that the imperial ruling classes would do their utmost to penetrate and control each new party and regime as it emerged. So even when the Islamists did not become dictators, they were still led by people who wanted to be a new ruling class, and found themselves operating in the world market in the new era of neoliberalism and austerity.

From the point of view of ordinary people who wanted equality, the secularists and the Islamists had different weak points. The Achilles heel of the secularists was the model of dictatorship and inequality they took from the Stalinist and Maoist examples in Russia and China. The Achilles heel of the Islamists was their understanding that property should be protected, and was sanctioned by Islamic law. So, for example, unlike the communist and socialists when they came to power in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, Islamists have not promoted the idea of land reform.¹⁸ However, dispossessing imperialists and nationalizing state resources has been a part of most resistance programmes. Nonetheless, a commitment to private property has meant that class inequality is an integral part of an Islamist social system. There are of course other traditions within Islam concerning tithing and charity which work towards

¹⁸ Sometimes there were other reasons. In Iran, for example, the Islamists in power rejected the 'innovations' of the regime they replaced and therefore rejected Pahlavi land reform and family law reform.

equality. And some Muslim and Sufi groups do not insist on property as a central value.

There is now a third wave of resistance for equality, for independence, and against dictatorships. The transforming moment was the Arab Spring in 2011. The contradictions of the earlier movements have produced the new messy reality which we now explore. But the class basis of the struggles and the imperial insistence on cheap oil remain basically the same.

One final point, however, about divide and rule. Class elites use violence to enforce their privilege. But to sustain inequality and their privilege over time they must also make inequality ideologically compelling. Racialized and sectarian differences sometimes do this job. Sexual imagery and gendered stereotypes which divide women and men, straight and gay, always work this way.¹⁹

How elites manage to create and sustain such ideologies of privilege is complex. In part, it comes from learned, taken-for-granted habits of culture. In the UK elite cultural styles and language are learned at home, and through social networks formed at Eton and Oxbridge, City lunches and country-house parties. But it is also important to remember that elites deliberately shape ideologies of privilege.²⁰ The meat of political biographies are about exactly this process, and members of elites, of

¹⁹ For more on these ideas, see Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale, 'Sexual Violence and Class Inequality', *Sexism Class Violence*, 2015, at <https://sexismclassviolence.wordpress.com/2015/01/31/sexual-violence-and-class-inequality/>.

²⁰ See particularly G. William Domhoff's classic studies: *Who Rules America?* Prentice-Hall, 1967 and *Who Rules America Now? A View for the 1980s*. Prentice-Hall, 1983.

course, also write about this process themselves. See, for example, the book, published by an elite press, by Ashraf Ghani, the current president of Afghanistan, which suggests his early ambition, and his commitment to neoliberalism.²¹

Moreover, elite spin is always done with these ideological purposes in mind. The sequence of official lies (described in Note 37 below) about the deliberate US bombing of a hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan at the beginning of October 2015 is a good example of how this process is meant to work, but also how it can fail.

In short, elites need the have-nots to believe – to some degree – in the legitimacy of the privilege of the haves. But it also means that elites are also always looking for every possible fault line that will weaken have-not class unity against them. This is a practical project to divide and rule the working class and to use racial and sectarian prejudice to distract ordinary people from attending to their shared class interests. And national ruling classes and local elites too are always engaged in the same projects for the same reasons – to conceal class inequality and to control dissent among ordinary people.

It is also the case that the possible divisions the elites look to are not necessarily trivial, and they are always available for use and manipulation. For ordinary

²¹ Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, Oxford University Press, 2008. For an excellent example of an elite creating a racist ideology, see Tom Griffin, Hilary Aked, David Miller and Sarah Marusek, *The Henry Jackson Society and the Degeneration of British Neoconservatism: Liberal Interventionism, Islamophobia and the 'War on Terror'*, Spinwatch, London, June, 2015. And see Note 7 above.

people, therefore, the project of equality and emancipation is always also a project of finding unity across these various sectarian, ethnic, and gender divisions – unity between Sunni and Shia, Muslim and Christian, Arab and Kurd, Pushtun and Tajik, secular and Muslim, ‘middle class’ and working class, men and women.

In reality, many resistance movements accept some of these divisions. This acceptance means that arguing for unity in practice in these situations is essential, possible and difficult. But we have to keep arguing. A revolution for greater equality and change from below will depend on having the majority of ordinary people on side.

The point about uniting working class secularists and working class Islamists is particularly important for the left. Secularism is now a ruling class ideology in most of the Middle East. To side with secularists against Islamists is usually to side with generals, industrial capitalists and the occupying imperial armies against the majority of ordinary people, small farmers and the working poor.

Three Case Studies

The Middle East is a big and complex region. Here we limit ourselves to three case studies, explaining the nature and origins of the current wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

The case study of Afghanistan offers a class analysis of the Afghan tragedy and makes three arguments. First, we describe the terrible consequences for socialism and feminism when socialists and feminists support imperial invasions. Second, we offer an explanation of how and why popular resistance in Afghanistan turned to Islam, and for

the second time in the last two decades, to the Taliban. Third, we make an argument against American bombing of Taliban-controlled areas.

The case study of Iraq also makes several different points. First, we describe the class relations behind the secular dictatorship of Saddam, and the terrible consequences for Iraqis of imperial interventions. Second, we describe how an effective divide and rule policy created a sectarian civil war. Third, we argue against American, British and Russian bombing of Islamic State organization in Syria and Iraq.

In our third case study of Syria we describe, first, how the resistance to the Assad regime grew from the Arab Spring. Second, we consider the contradictions in American policy towards Syria and explain why Russia has now invaded the country to put down that resistance. Finally, we explain why we want the defeat of the Russian invasion and the Assad regime, and why we categorically oppose Assad and his or any American or Russian bombing of Syria.

In selecting these case studies we have had to ignore vast areas of the Middle East which are also key parts of the story, most notably Palestine, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Yemen, and Central Asia, but also the Gulf States, Libya, Kurdistan, the Yazidis, the Hazaras, and the Pushtun and Baluchi areas of Pakistan. The history of each of these other areas is of course different. But as we hope to show through our three case studies, there is an enormous amount to be gained by starting from a class analysis. Such an approach cuts through a great deal of the spin coming from top of our global system. And it offers a way of understanding the tensions and tragedies and

produced by the ebb and flow of imperial power and popular resistance. Starting with class, and starting from below, we also come closer to the hopes and fears of ordinary people in the Middle East. Like them, we find useful the simple instruction Chris Harman offered after the First Gulf War: ‘With the Islamists sometimes, with the state never’.²² With such a perspective, information and empathy, it becomes easy to see what we have in common, and invites us to unite in seeking a more decent, equal world.

ONE: AFGHANISTAN

In September, 2015, Taliban fighters took the city of Kunduz and held most of it for four weeks. After sustained American bombing, they finally withdrew. Their withdrawal shows us the current limits of Taliban power. But the battle of Kunduz also showed everyone that the balance of power is tipping in favour of the Taliban.

Kunduz is the fifth largest city in Afghanistan, with a population of 300,000. As we write, the Taliban are advancing across much of the country, and now hold large areas of the countryside, and have surrounded many of the district and provincial capitals. In September the United Nations evacuated four of their fifteen regional offices, in Maimana, Kunduz, Pul-i-Khumri and in the province of Badakshan. All are in the north of the country. In

²² Chris Harman, ‘The Prophet and the Proletariat’, *International Socialism*, 1994, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1994/xx/islam.htm>. See also ‘The MOD Sit-in: Sometimes with the Islamists, Never with the State’, *3Arabawy*, 2012, http://arabawy.org/37926/The_MOD_sit-in%3A_Sometimes_with_the_Islamists%2C_Never_with_the_State%u2026.

Helmand and Uruzgan in the south, and Baghlan in the north, the insurgents are close to taking the provincial capitals.

According to the New York Times, the Taliban now control almost all of Uruzgan:

‘We do not have any way to escape,’ said Wali Dad, the police chief in Charchino, where 400 police officers have been surrounded and pinned down for months. ‘If we get any means of escaping, I will not stay for a second in the district. The government is failing in their governing, and it’s better to let the Taliban rule.’²³

The geographical spread is important. Until recently the Taliban were almost all Pushtu speakers, and usually Pushtun chauvinists. So the strongest base of the Taliban was in the south and east, where most Pushtuns lived. The population of Kunduz is a third Pushtun, a third Persian-speaking Tajiks, and a third Uzbeks, who speak a Turkish language. Across the north, predominantly Uzbek and Tajik areas are now going over to the Taliban. Taking Kunduz may mark the moment when the networks of convenient alliances between the Taliban and local commanders are consolidated into a fully national movement.

²³ Rod Norland and Joseph Goldstein, ‘Afghan Taliban’s reach is widest since 2001, says UN’, *New York*

Times, 11 Oct 2015; and see <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/12/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-united-nations.html? r=0>.

Predictions in Afghan politics are tricky, but what is happening now is beginning to look like a turning point. All over Afghanistan, politicians and war lords are looking at Kunduz and thinking that the days of the Kabul regime may be numbered. They will be thinking seriously of changing their alliances and allegiances. Ordinary people must be thinking the same.

This is an extraordinary reversal. When the Americans invaded in 2001, the Taliban had held Kabul for four years. A lot of people had some good things to say about the Taliban. Unlike all previous governments, they were reasonably honest. Justice was fair. The roads and streets were safe. The Taliban had ended the custom of *bache bazi*, child prostitution at weddings – indeed, opposition to the sexual abuse of children was central to Taliban politics.²⁴ All those things many people respected. But the Taliban hard-line imitation of puritanical Saudi Islam, their dictatorship, and their sexual politics did not sit well with most Afghans. In 2001 almost no one in

24 This is the opposite of the story about child abuse told in Khaled Hussein's novel, *The Kite Runner*, which has become an important part of imperial spin. See also Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, 'The Dancing Boys of Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 12 September 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/12/dancing-boys-afghanistan>; Pierre Centlivres, 'Le jeu de garçons', in Jacques Hainard and Roland Kaehr, eds., *Les femmes*, Neuchâtel Musée d'ethnographie, 1992, 55-80; and Nancy Lindisfarne, 'Questions of gender and the ethnography of Afghanistan', in Jacques Hainard and Roland Kaehr, *Dire les autres: Réflexions et pratiques ethnologiques*, Lausanne, Editions Payot Lausanne, 61-73. And see Nivi Manchanda, 'Afghan Masculinities: The Construction of the Taliban as Sexually Deviant', *The Disorder of Things*, 2013: <http://thedisorderofthings.com/2013/04/19/what-we-talked-about-at-isa-afghan-masculinities-the-construction-of-the-taliban-as-sexually-deviant/>

Afghanistan was ready to fight for the Taliban against American invasion.

By 2015 the Taliban were leading a growing national resistance that controlled much of the country. How did this come about?

Some Afghan History

In 1970, by UN reckoning, Afghanistan was known to be the poorest country in the world.²⁵ The people who most wanted to change that were the communists, men and women, some of the bravest and best of that generation. They were mostly high school and university educated people from modest backgrounds.²⁶

In 1978 the communists staged a coup with the support of army and air force officers, people like themselves. Their first two acts were laws whose effect was largely symbolic. One decree took land from the big landlords and gave it to poor peasants and sharecroppers. The other decree abolished brideprice and contained other guarantees of women's rights.²⁷

25 And already deeply affected by climate change, see Chapter 4 of Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence*, Nation Books, 2011.

26 On Afghan communism, start with Raja Anwar, *The Tragedy of Afghanistan*, Verso, 1990; and Jonathan Neale, 'Afghanistan: The Horse Changes Riders', *Capital and Class*, 1988, also at <http://www.marxists.de/middleeast/neale/horse.htm>

27 Nancy Tapper (Lindisfarne), 'Causes and Consequences of the Abolition of Brideprice in Afghanistan', in M. Nazif Shahrani and Robert L. Canfield, eds., *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1984, 291-305.

The communists were prepared to die for economic equality and for feminism. They had strong support in some cities, especially Kabul, but they did not win the support of the villagers. And soon village Mullahs and university educated Islamists led rural uprisings that spread across the country. In the face of resistance the idealism of the communists proved a sorry veneer, and they responded with arrests, torture, and then bombing, and then the communist factions began to imprison and kill each other. The rural revolt spread, and the communists were about to fall.

At that point the communist Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. For seven years the communists fought and governed alongside the Soviets against a fierce resistance sustained and supported by the majority of Afghans, with funds and arms from the Saudi and American governments.

The Soviets and communists killed between half a million and a million people in a population of 25 million. They maimed another million for life, and drove at least six million people into foreign exile, mostly in Pakistan and Iran. Finally, the Islamic resistance – the Mujahedin, that is, the jihadis – drove out the Soviet Red Army and the communist government fell. Afghanistan had a population of less than half of Britain. Imagine what British politics would be like now if feminists and socialists had supported a foreign invader who killed two million British people in the 1980s.

The Russians lost. Then the Islamist parties took over. Like the Communists, the Islamists were led by university educated men, and like the Communists they despised the old feudal ruling class of big rural landlords.

Unlike the Communists, they were influenced mainly by the modern Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Their various parties proceeded to tear the country apart in ugly, complex little civil wars. When Afghans saw what the Islamists were like in power, they turned away from them too. But, understandably, this did not mean there was a revival of support for the ideas of socialists and feminists.

Then the Taliban came from Pakistan. They were like nothing before in Afghan history. They were led by village mullahs, poor men of little learning, and every member of their central committee was missing an eye, a hand, or a limb from Soviet bombing and land mines. The core of their soldiers were students – ‘taliban’ means students - from the Koranic schools in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan.

This class dimension is important. Other Islamist movements in the Middle East in the last forty years have been led by university-educated people, merchants and scholars. The Taliban are not like that. They are mostly village people, most of their fighters are sharecroppers and poor peasants, and until recently most of their leaders were poor men without secondary school education. These leaders were mullahs, and mullahs rank very low in Afghan society.²⁸

28 On the class basis of the Taliban, see Nancy Lindisfarne '“Exceptional Pashtuns?” Class Politics, Imperialism and Historiography', and many chapters by other authors in Magnus Marsden and Benjamin Hopkins, eds., *Beyond Swat: History and Power along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier*, Hurst, 2012. And see Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War and the Future of the Region*, Palgrave, 2002; Aijaz Ahmed, *Iraq*,

The Taliban were products of two quintessentially twentieth century innovations, aerial bombing and the refugee camp. Education in mosque schools in the camps followed the anti-colonial Deobandi tradition from India. And they had a good deal of funding from Saudi Arabia that encouraged a strongly puritanical Wahhabi version of Islam.

At first the Taliban also enjoyed the support of the Americans, the Saudis and the Pakistani military. Washington wanted a peaceful country that could house oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia. The Taliban were also, however, a Pushtun chauvinist organisation. This weakened them considerably, and their sectarian war on the Shia Hazaras was vicious and deadly.

About half of Afghans are Pushtuns, most but not all in the south and east of the country. And as in Iraq and Syria, and elsewhere in the Middle East, people lived, not in ethnic enclaves, but all jumbled up. However, people from the other groups, particularly the poorest group, the Hazaras, resisted Pushtun domination. In the end the Taliban could not control the north, and they were not compliant with their American minders. The American government withdrew support.

Afghanistan and the Imperialism of Our Time, Left Word, 2004; Giles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan 1979 to the Present*, Hurst, 2005; Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan, 2002-2007*, Hurst, 2008; Antonio Giustozzi (ed.), *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, Hurst, 2009; Magnus Marsden, 'Talking the Talk: Debating Debate in Northern Afghanistan', *Anthropology Today*, 25/2, 2009; Abdul Salam Zareef, *My Life with the Taliban*, Hurst, 2010; and Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud- Wars and Warlords in Afghanistan*, Hurst, 2012.

Then, after 9/11, there was a strong, and genuine, revulsion among many ordinary Americans against the attack on the Twin Towers, and a desire for revenge. The American ruling class, too, had to have their revenge on someone. American power in the Middle East rested on fear, and a feeling that the Americans were all powerful. The 9/11 bombings shattered that. George W. Bush first used the term 'War on Terror' on 20th September 2001 at the beginning of the military campaign against Afghanistan. His aim was explicitly to destroy the Taliban and Al-Qaeda's grip on Afghanistan.

Most of the 9/11 bombers, and most of their funding, had come from Saudi Arabia. But Saudi Arabia was the key regional ally of the United States, and could not be touched. Cheney and Bush had longer term plans to invade Iraq and Iran. But for the moment, the obvious target was Afghanistan for a number of reasons: first, because Osama bin Laden lived there, and as one of the poorest countries on the planet, it was an easy target. But the country also had strategic importance as a buffer between the Central Asia states, China and South Asia, and because of the planned pipeline across Afghanistan to the Indian Ocean. Finally, it was a war which would serve to end the 'Vietnam syndrome' which had prevented the US government from starting foreign wars for more than twenty years. In October 2001, Bush, Cheney and the American military began bombing Afghanistan.

The Taliban were vulnerable. By this point even most Pushtuns had mixed feelings towards them. They were honest, unlike all previous Afghan governments. They had curbed the power of the warlords. They enforced the law fairly, and people were no longer at the mercy of

any strong man with a gun who wanted to take their property or their daughter. But their puritanism and sexual politics did not sit well with most Afghans. Almost no one came forward to fight to defend the Taliban government against the American onslaught.

However, Afghans had also lived through 23 years of war. And while the various allies of the Americans controlled most of the north of the country, none of the fighters of the Northern Alliance were willing to take on the Taliban for the sake of the Americans either. Ordinary Afghans, fighters and soldiers on both sides, looked across the lines as the British and Americans bombed from the air.

Then the Pakistani government brokered a deal between the Taliban and the Americans. The Americans and their allies took control of Kabul, and the American candidate, Karzai, became president. The Taliban, and Osama bin Laden, were allowed to return to their villages or go to Pakistan.

The great majority of Afghans, even in the Taliban heartland in the south, did not welcome the Americans, but they did accept them. People hoped that the Americans would bring peace, and assumed that their fabulous wealth would develop the country. Neither happened.

For years, the Americans pursued imagined 'bad guys' through the villages of the south and east. They kicked down doors, beat people, shot a few, and when someone took a shot at them, they replied with artillery and bombing.²⁹ There was no peace.

²⁹ See Johnny Rico, *Blood Makes the Grass Grow Green: A year in the desert with Team America*, Presidio, 2007;

Moreover, the Americans and their allies paid enormous salaries to 'internationals' working for the NGOs, and refused to pay even the puny salaries of the teachers, the police or the soldiers. What hurt most, and was least expected, was that the foreign charities were also corrupt. Foreign humanitarian workers arrived, making fifty times the average Afghan income or more.³⁰ People watched as collaborators, drug lords and urban landlords made fortunes. Great inequality followed. Development, which Afghans had assumed would come, did not.

People wanted peace, but slowly, valley by valley, year by year, they turned to resistance. And the Taliban were the one group that had always been root and branch opposed to the Americans. Far smarter and more sophisticated now, far more careful to rein in Pushtun chauvinism, they began to take more and more of the countryside. Even in Kabul, the civilian 'Internationals' were safe in only a few guarded enclaves.

Through all the years of American occupation, there were still some feminists in Afghanistan. Some had returned from exile abroad, some were former communists or their children, and some had come to the ideas themselves. But almost all now collaborated with the

and Anand Gopal, *No Good Men among the Living: America, The Taliban and the War through Afghan Eyes*, Metropolitan Books, 2014.

30 On the hollowing out of national governments by foreign aid, see Teresa Hayter and Catherine Watson's early account: *Aid: Rhetoric and Reality*, Pluto, 1985; Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine – The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Penguin, 2007; and the chapter on Afghanistan in M Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*, Polity, 2007.

Americans, and relied on the armed forces of the occupation to protect them. Almost all contributed to the imperial spin that demonized the Taliban and Afghan resistance, and legitimized the racist discourse which, as Franz Fanon observed, and Spivak and others have often repeated, allowed white men to kill brown men in the name of protecting brown women. The mistake of the Soviet years was repeated.³¹

The Taliban stepped in to lead the resistance to imperial occupation. For the next twelve years, they were the only organised group fighting back. That's why they now have such wide support. The Taliban were changing too, influenced partly by experience and partly by Islamist fighters from other countries.

Over this period, taxes on drought-resistant opium for the global opiate trade generated much of Taliban funding.³² The Taliban use video now, and Taliban

31 This was true even of RAWA (the Revolutionary Organisation of Women of Afghanistan). RAWA has its roots in Maoism, and are intransigent in their opposition to the American occupation. But RAWA is also fiercely Islamophobic and the appearance of one of RAWA's leaders on Oprah and at V-day in Madison Square Garden was taken by the entire audience as justifying the American invasion. See http://www.rawa.org/oprah_feb9.htm; <http://www.rawa.org/vday.htm>; <http://www.thenation.com/article/vaginal-politics/>.

32 See particularly Neamatollah Nojumi, *The Rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan: Mass Mobilization, Civil War and the Future of the Region*, Palgrave, 2002 and the sources mentioned in Note 26. The Taliban push into the Helmand now is 'as much an economic prize as a strategic one because the province accounts for nearly half the opium poppy cultivation in the country, according to United Nations surveys.' For insights into how this drug economy works on the local level, see Asad's excellent ethnography on poppy production in the Khyber region of

songs.³³ They no longer speak about closing schools for girls. Crucially, they have steadily explained to everyone that they are for all Muslims, not just Pushtuns, and not just Sunnis.³⁴ And their impartiality has become clear to everyone living in the Taliban-controlled areas of the country. In these areas the Taliban have established a fair and disinterested judicial system, with trained circuit judges who systematically move around the country. Difficult decisions are reviewed by more senior judges and there is a system of judicial appeal, while the circuit judges themselves are precluded from sitting in any local area. In the chaos and corruption that has come with the American occupation, many appreciate and have recourse to the Taliban judiciary.³⁵

When the Taliban took Kunduz, they made a point of not raping and looting, and said they wanted to show friendship for the local population. There is a photo of two Taliban fighters, one of them on a motorcycle, armed and smiling. Their beards are trimmed, and they do not wear turbans.³⁶

Pakistan in the 1990s: Amirzada Asad and Robert Harris, *The Politics and Economics of Drug Production on the Pakistan Afghanistan Border: implications for a Globalized World*, Ashgate, 2003.

³³ See Mikhail Pelevin and Matthias Weinreich, 'The Songs of the Taliban: Continuity and Form and Thought in an Ever-Changing Environment', *Iran and the Caucasus*, 2012, Vol 16, 79-109.

³⁴ For more on the 'neo-Taliban', see Note 14 above.

³⁵ See Adam Baczkowski, 'Les cours de justice talibanes en Afghanistan (2001-2015)', in *Afghanistan Info*, 77, October 2015, pp.11-13.

³⁶

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afgha>

In the north, the Taliban have been joined by fighters from the underground opposition movements in the ex-Soviet dictatorships of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. These dictatorships are secular and cruel, and the opposition movements in these countries are Islamist. A few thousand fighters at most have crossed the border to join with the Taliban. But their example has led many more Afghan Uzbeks, Turkmen and Tajiks to feel comfortable supporting and joining the Taliban.³⁷

There are other reasons people are turning to the Taliban. At first the US sent only a few troops into Afghanistan: 10,000 at the end of 2002. By 2007 there were 25,000 American troops, and in 2010 there were 100,000 Americans and 40,000 from NATO allies. These were all supported by tremendous power in the air. In the years before the US occupation began to wind down, the American army relied for control on local 'militias'. These were basically warlord gangs. In many areas, these gangs turned to extortion. This has meant a return to the chaotic unpredictability, the chronic fear, and the cruelty that characterised the rule of the Islamist warlords of the 1990s.

Now the government in Kabul has less American subsidy. The politicians, divided among themselves, have less to offer any followers, and that matters a lot, because so few people support the politicians out of principle.

[nistan/11900770/Afghan-forces-battle-Taliban-insurgents-to-retake-key-northern-city-of-Kunduz.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/afghanistan/11900770/Afghan-forces-battle-Taliban-insurgents-to-retake-key-northern-city-of-Kunduz.html)

35 Joseph Goldstein, 'A Taliban Prize, Won in a few Hours, After Years of Strategy', *New York Times*, 30 September 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/a-taliban-prize-won-in-a-few-hours-after-years-of-strategy.html>

There are many people now who do not necessarily support the Taliban, but think they are no worse than the present lot. And many others who may not even think that, but will not die for the government, who are widely regarded as thieves, collaborators – and people who are going to lose.

However, the class background of the Taliban leadership may be changing. The new leader of the Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, is a businessman who owns a mobile phone company in Pakistan.³⁸ There are reports of sustained support among the poor – for instance, Pashtun pastoralists seem to have been settling since 2003 in crucial valleys along the Pakistan border and creating corridors for Taliban fighters. Initially, at least, when the Taliban take power in a region, the big landlords usually flee. The Taliban do not practice land reform – that would violate their Islamic understanding of property - but for a period, certainly, the sharecroppers may avoid giving the absent landowner two thirds or four fifths of the crop, and can keep it all. But there are also reports of large Pashtun landowners increasingly dominating the countryside in the north and elsewhere.

On the other side, the politicians in the Kabul are mostly educated men and women – some returning exiles, more often big landowners or urban merchants, capitalists and drug lords.

38 Joseph Goldstein, 'Taliban's New Leader Strengthens his Hold with Intrigue and Battlefield Victory', *New York Times*, 4 October 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/05/world/asia/kunduz-fall-validates-mullah-akhtar-muhammad-mansour-talibans-new-leader.html>

And there are further twists. As the Americans withdraw, the Pakistani military have grown closer to the Afghan Taliban leaders. The situation is complicated. Pakistani military intelligence have always had links with the Taliban. But the 'Pakistani Taliban', allied to and inspired by the Afghan Taliban, have risen up against the Pakistani state in several border areas in the last few years. The Pakistani military have retaliated with death squads, bombs, and mass killings. However, the Pakistani generals also see a political vacuum opening up over the border. And they are concerned about possible Indian control of Afghanistan. So the Pakistani generals have increasingly been tempted to support an actual Taliban bid for power in Kabul.

The Future

In the wake of the battle of Kunduz, the American government has now made two key decisions. For now, they have stopped any further withdrawals of the 17,000 American troops, and at least as many 'civilian contractors', still in the country. They now plan to maintain at least four permanent American army and air force bases around the country, and the ability to bomb anywhere they want, with American forward air controllers to direct the bombs. They are also switching from support for the Afghan Army to support for an expansion of the 'Afghan National Police' – the same brutal gangs that people have come to hate and fear.

Taken together, these two measures will produce a particular kind of war. There will be sustained bombing of Taliban forces and civilians in Taliban-controlled areas. The Afghan government will have little or no power or

legitimacy outside Kabul. Armed gangs will control most non-Taliban areas with unpredictable brutality and extortion. This is a recipe for killing fields and horror – and for deep hatred of the Americans and all who collaborate with them.

At the beginning of the American war in Afghanistan, foreign NGOs and UN were seen as supporting the occupation – an alignment NGOs may not have actively chosen. When Doctors without Borders left Afghanistan in 2004, after their personnel had been targeted by the Taliban, they accused the US of co-opting humanitarian relief for its own ends. And when the people of Kabul rioted in 2005, they attacked NGO offices all over the city. Part of the problem was that no agency had called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

Now the situation is even more ugly. The American bombing of the Doctors Without Borders hospital in Kunduz on the 3 October 2015 was done in five different bombing runs, all carefully directed only at the centre of the hospital, and ordered by American Special Forces on the spot who knew exactly where and what the hospital was.

All the NGOs were being taught what would happen to any ‘humanitarian’ who did not follow American orders. The sequence of official lies about the deliberate hospital bombing make clear how elite spin is meant to work, and how the elite may turn to further violence when such spin fails – Obama responded to the profound and shaming exposure of the hospital bombing with a decision to delay further American troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.³⁹

³⁹ Nancy Lindisfarne, ‘Culture Wars’, *Anthropology Today*, 2008, Vol 24/3, pp. 3-4; Rod Nordland, ‘Toll in

It is possible there will be a negotiated peace, an American withdrawal, and a coalition government that includes some of the Taliban. The signs are that most Afghans, and most of the Taliban, would accept this.

However, the Islamic State are trying to split Taliban support on the ground, and that Islamic State fighters are now driving out the Taliban in Ningrahar province in eastern Afghanistan.⁴⁰ There are two main political differences. The Islamic State fighters are against any negotiated settlement with a coalition government, but the Taliban are negotiating. Second, the Islamic State are in favour of attacking Shias, and most Taliban are not.

The fact that a mass movement of resistance to imperial occupation is winning in Afghanistan is a triumph of the human spirit. The fact that the autocratic, puritanical Taliban are leading this mass movement of

Hospital Airstrike is Expected to Rise Sharply, Aid Group Says', *International New York Times*, 9 October, 2015, p. A4, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/06/doctors-without-borders-airstrike-afghanistan-us-account-changes-again>

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2015/oct/06/airstrike-afghan-hospital-us-army-video>

<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/06/doctors-without-borders-airstrike-afghanistan-us-account-changes-again>

<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/06/doctors-without-borders-airstrike-afghanistan-us-account-changes-again>

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/15/obama-delay-withdrawal-us-troops-afghanistan>

⁴⁰ Mujib Mashal, 'ISIS Inroads Compound Misery for Afghans', *International New York Times*, 14 October, 2015, pp. 2, 6; 'Truth and Spin in Afghanistan', Editorial, *INNYT*, 14 October 2015, p. 8.

resistance is a tragedy. But all the other groups – Karzai, Dostum, Ghani, the Northern Alliance, the other Islamists, the liberals, the secularists, the feminists, and ‘civil society’ organisations have collaborated with the Americans, and reap the consequences.

But even a clear Taliban victory is unlikely to bring lasting peace. In spite of being a country with little water and few natural resources, for reasons of its strategic geopolitical location alone, the impetus for imperial war is likely to continue through aerial bombing and proxy soldiers on the ground. This war may extend, at any time, to include resistance movements to the dictatorships of Central Asia, and the deeply corrupt government of Pakistan. Because of the oil imperatives, the global ruling class will certainly continue to meddle, corrupt and co-opt any national elite that emerges. The governments of the US, Russia, Uzbekistan, Iran, Pakistan, China and India will continue to arm and fund their clients.

The ordinary people who hope to live in a fairer, more just and more equal world may well be betrayed by Islamists in power. Certainly they will pay the greatest price. As if their abject poverty is not enough, the prospect of years of continuing war is heart-breaking. But just as certainly, their allegiance will not be won by drone assassins and the American bombing of their homes and children.

TWO: IRAQ

This section explains who the Islamic State are, why the Americans are bombing Islamic State held areas in Iraq and Syria, and why foreign fighters have flocked to join Islamic State.

We start with a contradiction. First, there is the matter of class. The Palestinian Abdel Bari Atwan, a wise and honest print and digital journalist, puts it this way:

With most of the world's media carrying an agenda with regard to IS – whether the conservative Arab nations' campaign against it or Islamic State's increasingly slick proselytising – it is difficult to get any sort of true picture of public opinion. I have therefore tried to find out for myself. In recent travels throughout the Middle East, I have talked to hundreds of people, from 'ordinary' men on the street to government officials and top politicians. I have also engaged in online conversations with everyone from key players to 'ordinary' residents within Islamic State. Arab governments are, without exception, entirely opposed to Islamic State, from whom they have much to fear. Among the people, however, my impression is that opinion is polarised. The liberal middle classes are violently opposed to a fundamentalist group that seeks to restrict their freedoms and impose the burqa on their women; for the first time there is widespread support among this class for a Western military intervention to prevent the further expansion, and

ultimately destroy, Islamic State (many I spoke to had previously demonstrated against Western actions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya). Where there is sympathy, on the other hand, it is characterised by vigorous enthusiasm and appears to be more widespread than support for Al Qa-ida, even in its heyday... Members of a third group are more guarded about their opinions but, one surmises, secretly celebrate the 'achievements' of Islamic State. If it were to come to a town near them, I deduce they would not oppose it.⁴¹

In short, all the governments of the Middle East and the global empires see the Islamic State as the enemy. So too do many people who think of themselves as progressive or liberal members of the middle class. Typically, these people are educated, affluent and close to the ruling class because of their connection with the state and state bureaucracies. In Iraq opinion is split among ordinary people like workers and small farmers. But a proportion of them support Islamic State fervently, and another large proportion passively. This is a class polarisation, across the region in general.

Second, however, many 'ordinary' people in particular places have found themselves in bitter opposition to Islamic State. The Afghan Taliban, for instance, now find themselves at odds with the Islamic State and fighting them in the eastern part of that country. Large parts of the Syrian resistance have found themselves

⁴¹ Abdel Bari Atwan, *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate*, Saqi, 2015, 13-14.

at war with Islamic State, and so have Kurds, Yazidis and Shias in Syria and Iraq.

The Islamic State is a dictatorship whose leaders rule with a cruelty similar to the methods and massacres of other regimes in the region. Islamic State also have a great deal of support. Large numbers of people, mostly Syrians and Iraqis, but also from many other countries, are prepared to die, and to kill, for them.

In what follows we try to explain all three of these things: the class nature of support and opposition to the Islamic State, the fervour of many of its supporters, and the way Islamic State divides and weakens resistance in many places. Our aim is also to explain why we are against the American bombing of the Islamic State.

Iraqi History

The American bombing of Islamic State is usually discussed in terms of Syrian politics. But Islamic State is basically a group of Iraqis, and the American war against Islamic State is about control of Iraq. Moreover, many of the more brutal features of Islamic State do not make sense without understanding the long suffering of the Iraqi people over the last thirty-five years and the utterly disproportionate force deployed in the US occupation.

Iraq, like Syria, was a country created by European colonialists out of the Ottoman Empire after World War One. Iraq was formally independent, under the rule of a king installed and in practice dominated by the British.⁴²

⁴² For background on Iraq, the place to begin is with Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq – a Study of Iraq's Old*

Unlike Syria, however, Iraq had vast reserves of oil. By 1945, the Iraq Petroleum Company was owned by a consortium of British, French, Dutch and American oil companies. In 1958 there was a revolution against the monarchy and foreign control. A million people, led by the Communist party, demonstrated in the capital, Baghdad. A military coup, with mass popular support, overthrew the king and established the Republic of Iraq.

Then officers aligned to the Ba'ath party staged coups in 1963, and again in 1968. The Ba'ath was an international Arab socialist party that also produced Assad Senior in Syria. In 1972 the Iraqi government took full control of Iraqi oil, including the oil wells and the refineries. From the mid-1970s on the Ba'athist head of the secret police, Saddam Hussein, worked at concentrating power in his own hands. In 1978 he took power formally.

The American, British and French oil companies were furious over the nationalisation of Iraqi oil, so the Ba'athists and Saddam Hussein allied themselves with the Soviet Union. At this time, the USSR, despite its communist rhetoric, ran a state capitalist empire. That empire depended in part on oil imperialism, and it competed with the American empire in the Cold War. With the support and approval of the Soviet Union, the Ba'athists and Saddam then imprisoned and tortured the Communists who had led the popular revolution in 1958, and thus destroyed completely the faith of those communists who survived.

Landed and Commercial Classes, Saqi, New edition, 2004.

The class nature of Saddam's Ba'ath regime was not unlike that of Assad's Ba'ath regime in Syria. Some of the new elite were upwardly mobile people from modest backgrounds, and some came from the old bourgeoisie. But what was different from Syria was that the Iraqi economy was so dependent on great wealth in oil, now controlled by the state. That meant the central force in the ruling class were the people at the head of the regime and in control of the oil.

Compared to Afghanistan, or even neighbouring Syria, the Iraqi regime was able to rely on a well-educated population, with affluent professionals, relative equality of women and men, and many women professionals. But above them, Saddam and the leading figures in the regime and their cronies became fabulously wealthy. For a generation, Iraq was ruled by fear and torture.

Saddam Changes Sides

Then, in 1980 Saddam deserted the Russians and switched sides in the Cold War. This had to do with what was happening in neighbouring Iran.

Iran too was an oil rich country. In 1951, a popularly elected government had tried to nationalise Iranian oil. Two years later a MI6 and CIA-backed coup brought Mohammad Reza Shah back to power. The Shah was a right-wing, capitalist dictator. In the end, it was not possible for the Shah to reprivatize completely Iranian oil. Instead, the oil was controlled by a compromise consortium of Western oil companies and the Iranian state oil corporation. For the next twenty-five years, the Shah, with American backing, ruled at the head of a brutal,

secular regime. By the 1970s, the great majority of Iranians hated him, hated his secret police and hated the wealthy, modernized, secular elite associated with the dictatorship.

In 1978 there was a popular revolution in Iran, and the Shah was deposed in early 1979. The Shia clergy, other Islamists, Iranian communists, Kurds, and an enormous proportion of the population joined in massive demonstrations. The decisive turning point was a strike by the oil field workers.

It was not a foregone conclusion that the Islamists would win, but they did. At the end of the revolution, the Shia clergy came out on top, and with great brutality they put down the secular and religious opposition, the socialists and new workers movement for free unions.

The Iranian revolution did not just depose America's client, the Shah. The success of the Islamic revolution in Iran meant that the Iranian state oil company took control of the oil wells and refineries away from the Western oil companies. That in itself was enough to enrage the American ruling class. But as the clergy consolidated their power, Iranian students occupied the American embassy in Tehran and held it for 444 days, more than a year. The embassy occupation humiliated the American ruling class, ended the Presidential career of Jimmy Carter and turned the Americans into a global laughing-stock. Even more important, across the Middle East people looked to the example of Iran, and support for Islamist parties began to build. The US ruling class wanted to punish the Iranians and bury their example. However, in the wake of Vietnam War, no one in America could

contemplate a war against Iran. So the Americans launched a proxy war. They encouraged Saddam Hussein in Iraq to open a land war with neighbouring Iran.

Saddam had his own reasons for going to war. The Islamist revolution in Iran was deeply threatening to his own rule, still branded as socialist and secular. Moreover, the vast majority of Iranians, like most Iraqis, were Shias. Right-wing Arab monarchies, in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Gulf were also terrified of their own people following the Iranian example. So they agreed to lend Saddam vast sums of money to bankroll his war on Iran.

Saddam invaded Iran, and with this war the suffering of the Iraqi people really began. The war lasted eight years, the longest conventional war of the twentieth century. Between 200,000 and 500,000 Iraqis died, out of a population of 14 million. A million Iranians died, out of a population of 50 million. It was a bloodbath – trench warfare reminiscent of the First World War. And in all those eight years, the front lines hardly moved.

By 1988 it was clear that the Iranians were winning. At this point the American ruling class intervened decisively. The US Sixth Fleet moved towards Iran, and the USS *Vincennes* shot down an Iranian civilian airliner, killing all 290 people on board. The US did not apologise, and it was clear that an overwhelming Iranian victory over Iraq would mean war with the United States.

Iran negotiated. A peace agreement produced almost the same border as at the start of the war. This agreement put Saddam Hussein in an extremely difficult position. The moment of losing a war is dangerous for any dictator. About one in fourteen adult Iraqis had died in the

war. Everyone was mourning someone who had died for nothing. And Saddam was deeply in debt to the Saudi, Kuwaiti and Gulf regimes which had loaned him money for the war.

All this was happening at a time when an enormous reordering of imperial relations was taking place. The game-changers were the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 which left the United States unopposed as the single global super-power.

Saddam's hold on Iraq was precarious and he needed money. With regional and global alliances in flux, in 1990 Saddam dared to invade the oil rich kingdom of Kuwait to the south of Iraq. Iraq had a long standing territorial claim to Kuwait, the rights and wrongs of which are of no importance now. The American ruling class was outraged at what they took to be his rogue aggression, and so were all the oil kingdoms of the Middle East. This outrage could not stand, or no oil power would be safe.

President Bush the elder organised a grand American-led military coalition to drive the Iraqi army out of Kuwait. And in early 1991, Saddam's army was swiftly dispatched. About 200,000 Iraqi soldiers died, a large proportion of them killed from the air while in desperate retreat.

At the same time, American backed-radio and TV stations had been encouraging Iraqis to rise against Saddam. Many people in Iraq, and in the wider region, expected US troops to push on into Iraq. Expecting American military support, the mostly Shia Iraqis around Basra in the south of the country rose against Saddam's regime, as did people in the Kurdish areas in the north.

The US troops stopped at the border. The American government did nothing to support the rising in the south, which Saddam's elite Republican Guard put down with great cruelty. However an American 'no fly' zone ensured the effective independence of Iraqi Kurdistan in the north from then on

There was an argument in Washington about whether to push on into Iraq and help the uprising. This argument is now hard to understand because it was not held in public, and all the participants have since restated their positions in the light of the American invasion of Iraq twelve years later.

But the 1991 Gulf War is not really comparable to what happened in 2003. In 2003, the Americans invaded Iraq, dominating the country within days. In 1991 the legacy of the Vietnam War was still too fresh. The American military did not dare ask their soldiers to fight a war that could last for years and kill large numbers of Americans. So in 1991 they decided others would have to do the fighting on the ground. In the north, the Kurdish leaders could be trusted to do that without turning on the Americans. But in the south there was a mass popular uprising against Saddam.

American air support would certainly have meant that the uprising would overthrow Saddam. But most people in the south were Shias, and the potential leaders were Shia Islamists allied to Iran. So the possibility of a successful uprising frightened the Americans. On the one hand, it would be similar to the Iranian Revolution twelve years before, while on the other, it would be a repeat of the way American support had brought the Mujahedin to

power in Afghanistan two years before. And most important, a victorious uprising in southern Iraq might well light a fire across the Middle East. On balance, the American military and government decided it was not worth the risk to try and take back control of Iraqi oil. Indeed, in any case, a successful uprising would be unlikely to end with the Americans gaining control of the oil.

In the six months between Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and beginning of the American air war in January 1991, there was little opposition to the possibility of war in the West. The history of US collusion with Saddam had been buried, and his monstrous character was linked with his utterly outrageous attempt to annex the territory of a US ally. And when the televised war started, the spin was smart bombs and on surgical strikes, which dominated even the horrific images of the massacres of Iraqi soldiers fleeing down the Basra Road to Iraq.

Sanctions

The Iraqi people had now lived through two major wars and a defeated insurrection. Worse was to follow. Saddam remained in power in Iraq, and that exposed the limits of American power in the region. To reassert their authority, the Americans organized for international sanctions to be imposed on Iraq in 1992 and were maintain until 2003.

The sanctions devastated exports, led to deep cuts in the cost of living, and widespread malnutrition, and

made it very hard to get hold of medicines.⁴³ The United Nations Children Fund estimated that child mortality was higher in the sanctions years by 4,000 a month, leaving more than 500,000 dead children over the whole of the period of the sanctions. More than a million adults also died as a result of sanctions. All of those deaths were horrible, but we also need to consider the effect on families who were unable to find or afford medicines, or did not or could not feed their children properly, or had to make decisions about who to feed properly, or went to relatives for help who then refused aid.

In the midst of all this want, the upper ranks of Saddam's regime enriched themselves. The sanctions opened up large possibilities for complex smuggling operations, and these were dominated by people linked to the regime. The lost wars, the defeated insurrection, the dead children and the endemic corruption also meant that the regime was very weak, and they knew it. They doubled down on the arrests, the torture and the fear.

We must pause for a moment, now, and think what all this meant for the daily lived experience of ordinary Iraqis. By 2003 the population of Iraq had grown to 20 million. But between half a million and a million people, mostly adults, had died in wars and defeated insurrections. About another half a million children and one million adults had died because of the sanctions. All those died for nothing. Moreover, Iraqis had lived through forty years of an increasingly cruel, and increasingly

43 H. C. von Sponeck, *A Different Kind of War: The UN Sanctions Regime in Iraq*, Berghahn, 2006; and Geoff Simons, *The Scourging of Iraq*, Palgrave, 1998.

corrupt, police state. To live in such a state is not just to be oppressed. It is to be afraid, and not to know who to trust among your family, friends and workmates. It is also, for very large numbers of people, to collaborate in ways small and large, in order to survive and in order to hold a job. Forty years of that produced people who felt fearful, watchful, untrusting, dirty, guilty and enraged. And then the Americans and their allies invaded Iraq in the spring of 2003.

The American Occupation

Vice-President Dick Cheney was the oil industry's representative in George Bush's administration, and spoke for a resurgent neo-conservative movement in the Republican Party. From the moment of the 9/11 bombings of the Twin Towers in 2001, Cheney knew what he wanted to do. First invade Afghanistan, the easy target. Hopefully that would be an easy victory, and working class Americans would forget about Vietnam and grow accustomed to sending troops abroad again. Next Cheney planned to invade Iraq and take back the control of Iraqi oil. And once that was done with shock and awe, his intension was to invade Iran, avenge the humiliation of the Iranian Revolution, and take back control of the Iranian oil as well.

But this was not just about oil. This was the age of neoliberalism. The nationalisation of oil all over the Middle East from the late 1960s to the early 1980s had been a last great move to public ownership. With America the sole super-power, this could be the final great privatisation. Arguably, however, America had

considerably less hegemonic power than previously. In particular, the economic power of China and Europe was growing to rival that of the American empire. But America was still a far greater military power, and a victorious war would confirm American dominance in the new century.

It did not work out quite that way. The invasion of Afghanistan went ahead in 2001. But many people in America, and across the world, balked at the prospect of an Iraqi war. The great anti-war demonstrations of Feb 2003 – the largest global demonstrations the world has ever seen – did not stop the US or Britain from invading Iraq. But they meant a subsequent invasion of Iran was off the cards.

After the 2003 Iraq invasion, the Americans only trusted returning exiles to assume the main government positions. And among the exiles only those who were prepared to collaborate with the invaders, and follow their orders – only those men and women were allowed to become the new rulers of Iraq.

From the first days of the invasion, there was resistance in Iraq, and it grew rapidly in the next few months.⁴⁴ There were three wings to the Iraqi resistance. There was a Shia resistance led by Muktada Al-Sadr, a

44 For the experience of the American occupation, start with Greg Muttit, *Fuel on the Fire: Oil and Politics in Occupied Iraq*, Bodley Head, 2011; Zaid Al-Ali, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism have Undermined Democracy*, Yale University Press, 2014; Dahr Jamail, *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Reporter in Iraq*, Haymarket, 2007; William Rivers Pitt and Dahr Jamail, *The Destruction of Iraq*, Truthout, 2014; and Atwan, *Islamic State- The Digital Caliphate*, Saqi, 2015.

radical Shia cleric. His strongest base was in a working class and mostly Shia part of Baghdad called Sadr City. It was named for Muktada's father, and three million people lived there. Muktada had a political party, and also an armed militia – the Mahdi army.

There was also a secular resistance in Sunni regions outside Baghdad. This was largely led by former Baathists, and former soldiers and officers were particularly important in this group. The American occupiers had disbanded the army and thrown them all out of work, and they were armed and furious. Their politics were largely secular and nationalist, although they were of course also Muslims.

Both the Shia resistance and the secular Sunni resistance fighters led urban insurrections. Most of the fighters were working class people, but any unity between them was fractured by growing sectarian lines of division between Shia and Sunni Muslims.

The other main Sunni resistance group were a network of Salafis – Islamists who drew on the traditions of puritan Wahhabi politics in Saudi Arabia. They looked to a caliphate, not a democracy. Crucially, the Salafi Islamists saw both the Shias and the American imperialists as the enemy.

The south of Iraq was the home of predominantly Shia Arabs. Predominantly Sunni Arabs, and some others, mostly Sunni Kurds, lived in the west and parts of the north. Overall, about 60% of Iraqis were Shia Arabs, 20% Sunni Arabs, 15% Kurds, and 5% other minorities and

religions.⁴⁵ But in all areas people lived mixed together, particularly in the cities, and above all in the capital – Baghdad.

The split between Sunnis and Shias began with a dispute about the succession to the Caliphate in Baghdad in 632 AD. There were at times further serious conflicts between Shias and Sunnis in Iraq up until the thirteenth century, after which there was 700 years of reasonable peace. However, the split remained a possible line of division in certain circumstances.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the divisions between Shia and Sunni were not crucial to Iraqi politics. But gradually, things changed. During the Iran-Iraq war, two underground Shia Islamist parties had opposed the war and had gone into exile in Iran, and gained the support of the Iranian government. These parties had had some resonance in Iraq, but not much. After the suppression of the largely Shia uprising in the south in 1991, they had more. Saddam sometimes tried to present himself as more of a Sunni hero, and among many southern Shias there was a resentment of his Ba'ath party as mainly Sunni. But there were also many Shias in the leadership of the regime.

Divide and Rule Works

By March, 2004, the American occupation were embroiled in a bitter war with all three resistance groups. The Americans were fighting a brutal battle for control of the

45 The numbers are estimates. There are no reliable statistics. Moreover, as so often, large numbers of people did not fit into just one of these categories. They were in, or children of, mixed marriages, or they denied the relevance of ethnic and religious labels.

largely Sunni city of Fallujah in the west, ruthlessly dropping white phosphorus on the city in an obvious contravention of UN treaties about chemical weapons. And as the shocking video leaked by Chelsea Manning and Wikileaks revealed, the American military were encouraged, not disciplined, for enjoying the power to kill unarmed men from the air.⁴⁶

Most of the city was destroyed in that battle, and most of the residents fled. Al Sadr, the Mahdi army, and many Iraqi Shias expressed support for the Fallujah resistance, and the American occupation was in serious trouble.

Washington sent John Negroponte to Baghdad as ambassador, with a mission to divide and rule. Negroponte had been the chief American strategist of death squads in El Salvador back in the 1980s. By the winter of 2004, death squads were carrying out wide scale assassinations of Sunni resistance leaders in Baghdad. There were also bombings of Shia mosques and neighbourhoods. Some of these death squads and bombings were the work of American special forces teams, but some were also the work of copycat death squads organized by both Sunni and Shia militias.⁴⁷

It is not possible to tell what the balance was between American and Iraqi killers in the beginning. But as time went on, Iraqis dominated the killing. Local units of the Sadr's Shia militia murdered to drive Sunnis out of

⁴⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHslwimdq98>

⁴⁷ See Zaid Al-Ali, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism have Undermined Democracy*, Yale University Press, 2014.

largely Shia neighbourhoods in Baghdad. The Salafi wing of the Sunni resistance did the same to Shias. There was a spiral of revenge.

This sort of spiral is not the result of fanaticism or primordial hatreds. It happens when political entrepreneurs want to create an ethnic or sectarian war. A few men can carry out a sectarian killing – say of Sunnis in a Shia neighbourhood. What is crucial is what happens in the next 24 hours. If a strongly grounded local organisation in that neighbourhood announces their opposition to any revenge, and posts guards on the houses of local Sunni families in the neighbourhood to protect them, decency can be defended. But absent that swift response, someone will strike back, and then the spiral begins.

In Baghdad the spiral was particularly brutal for an odd reason. Saddam Hussein's government had fed the Iraqi people on rations available from their local shops. When the Americans took over, they continued this policy. This was necessary in a time of mass unemployment and chaos. It was not publicised in the US because in the United States itself millions of Americans went to bed hungry. But this increased the brutality needed for sectarian cleansing, because people who left their homes lost all access to their local shop and food for their families.

The increasing killing outraged many Iraqis. It was not just wrong. It is also terrifying to live in that kind of sectarian carnage. By 2008 the killing was largely over. One reason was that neighbourhoods had been cleansed and there was almost no one left to kill. But another was

that as the wings of the Iraqi resistance turned against each other, many Iraqi people turned against them, and the resistance lost moral authority.

Sadr's militia and his party did not go away, but they lost support and stopped fighting the Americans. Among secular Sunnis, the American occupiers began to gather support. First, there was the surge in numbers of American soldiers. More important was that the Americans were now willing to pay small salaries to unemployed former soldiers who came over from the resistance. But the key was that the former soldiers, and the larger urban Sunni communities, were appalled by the sectarian war that the Salafi Sunnis welcomed. So the former Baathists turned in the Salafis to the Americans.

Better the Americans, many people felt, than the horrors of sectarian civil war. This was a reasonable thing to think. By 2008 the Iraqi resistance was defeated, and the Salafis isolated. Some of them fled to Syria, some laid low in Iraq, and some were in American prison camps.

Six years later, these defeated and discredited Salafis returned to Iraq as the Islamic State, with a great deal of popular support. Why?

In 2010 there was an election in Iraq. Maliki, favoured by the Americans, promised to bring the country together, make peace, and treat both Sunnis and Shias fairly. But when he became Prime Minister Maliki then broke those promises and presided over an increasingly sectarian Shia dominated state, closely allied with Iran.

By the end of 2011 American troops left Iraq. Washington had assumed that they would be able to leave some troops in the country, and in effect supervise Maliki

and the Iraqi state. To do that, though, they required a treaty that all American troops in Iraq would be immune to prosecution in Iraqi courts. This was a matter of principle for Washington and the Pentagon – they require such an agreement wherever American troops are stationed. Given the level of anger among Iraqis at previous American atrocities, the Americans could not give way on this. Maliki, encouraged by his Iranian allies and under pressure from Iraqi parliamentarians and people, refused such a request. The American troops left.

The US had invaded Iraq to take back control of oil and the Middle East. They had not been defeated by the resistance. But they left with little remaining influence. In the north of Iraq two Kurdish groups controlled what was for many purposes an independent, oil-rich country. They were in alliance with the US, but also Turkey. Economically, Turkey dominated the Kurdish north.

In the south Iran dominated politically. The Iraqi government retained control of the national oil company. But from 2011 concessions were leased out for different oil fields to, among others, Exxon Mobil, China National Petroleum Corporation, BP, Royal Dutch Shell, Italy's EniSpa, Occidental Petroleum, Korea Gas Corps, and Malaysia's Petronas.⁴⁸

The US had been humiliated. The Maliki government cut off the small cash payments for the men in the Sunni resistance who had deserted the Salafis and come over to the Americans. Those men were furious. They had been betrayed, and now how would they live.

48 Dahr Jamail, 'Western Oil Firms Remain as US Exits Iraq', *Al Jazeera English*, 7 January 2012.

Iraq became more and more of a Shia state. That meant little access to public sector jobs for Sunnis. It meant that Sunnis had been largely driven out of Baghdad, while Bangladeshi immigrants clean the streets. And it meant increasing repression by the police and army to keep Sunni areas in line.

Meanwhile, Maliki and his cronies worked systematically to turn the state inside out. The state infrastructure and bureaucracy have merged with the militias of the Shia and Kurdish parties. These militias have no interest in dissolving the state. Rather the state acts as a funnel for oil and other revenue, and offers a structure round which to divide the spoils. Thus, for the past four years at least, it would seem that the Central Bank in Bagdad is run by four men, Maliki and another Shia, a Sunni from Anbar province and a Kurd, who organize weekly auctions of state revenue in US dollars which are bought by the competing militias operating on the ground.

So when the Arab Spring began, there were large public protests across both Sunni and Shia areas of Iraq. But these were strongest among Sunnis in western Iraq, who staged their own, very large, protests against the government. Maliki's government suppressed this movement with violence. When the United States began to make formal overtures towards Iran in 2013 that further strengthened Maliki's hand.

Throughout 2012 and 2013 the Islamic State resistance began recruiting followers and allies among Iraqi Sunnis. They were able to say: 'We were right. The

Shias, Iran and the US are the enemy. And they will not let you rest in safety, or protest peacefully’.

Now, in spite of the spin which suggests IS are nothing but blood-thirsty savages, it seems clear that the Islamic State organization is actually running a state bureaucracy. They now have a volunteer army of something like 100,000 to 200,000 fighters. They rule over a population of several million people. They are not dependent on external subsidies. They tax the population they control, they take hostages for ransom, and they sell off antiquities. Most important, they control a number of small oil fields, and sell the oil at discounted prices through the already existing oil smuggling networks.⁴⁹

In June 2014, the Islamic State organization launched an offensive from the Syrian border through the Sunni areas toward Kurd-controlled Mosul and Baghdad. The Iraqi army fled. Neither the Shia nor the Sunni soldiers were willing to die in order to control Sunni areas. And many Sunnis rallied immediately to Islamic State. The IS took control of large areas of the west and north, in alliance with local organisations. Many of the secular fighters in Sunni towns, the ex-soldiers and officers who had once been Ba’athists and then gone over to the Americans out of disgust with the Salafis, now made alliances with the Islamic State. They might despise the

⁴⁹ See Atwan, *Islamic State*; and Tamsin Lee-Smith, ‘How does IS fund its reign of terror’, *Channel 4 Fact Check*, 9 November 2015, http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/fact-check-fund-reign-terror/21908?utm_content=buffer3a61d&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

Salafis, but they had also decided the Salafis were right about the sectarian Shia government of Iraq.

So, faced with the Islamic State onslaught, and the collapse of the Iraqi army and police, there were torrents of top-down spin from the Americans about training and incompetence. It is more likely that the reality was that very few soldiers, Sunni or Shia, wanted to die so that Malaki's sectarian government could oppress Sunnis. Even the Pesh Merga, the Kurdish militia who had fought with great bravery over many years, fled from largely Arab cities the Iraqi Kurdish parties had seized. Ordinary Kurds too, seemed unwilling to kill and die for the oil fields of a greater Kurdistan.

Islamic State took Mosul in the north from Kurdish control. The fact that Islamic State have been able to take and hold a city of that size – two million people – is proof of little public opposition and possibly considerable positive public support. Within days Islamic State was close to Baghdad. At that point Maliki's government summoned up Shia militias to protect the capital. The Shia and Kurdish militias who had been unwilling to die to oppress Sunni areas were however willing to die to protect their own homes and neighbourhoods from sectarian Salafis. At this point, the conflict became a civil war between Iraqi Sunnis and Iraqi Shias.

But it was not a simple civil war. The United States and Iran both invaded Iraq, the US for a second time and Iran for the first time. The US and Iranian governments were both appalled by the idea that the capital of Iraq could fall to an Islamic Sunni army with extreme Islamist policies which was also a part of the Syrian resistance (as

we discuss in more detail in the next section on Syria). And the US and global oil companies would lose control of the oil fields.

So together Iran and the US went to war against Islamic State. American planes bombed towns and cities held by Islamic State, and Iranian soldiers and American Special Forces fought together on the ground. A new global alliance was forming in the Middle East.

The American bombs accomplished very little. The US and Iranians spent four months retaking Tikrit. They said it took so long because a few hundred Islamic State fighters were well dug in, and the American bombers had to flatten much of the city. Further advances have stalled partly because the Shia militias are ashamed of using air support – everyone in Iraq understands what American bombing means. Another reason is that the Americans are afraid to rely heavily on Shia militias, because of the looting and massacres they commit when they take Sunni areas. Such massacres would make it impossible for the Americans to win over Sunni allies to replace Islamic State in Sunni areas.

For the moment, the Iranians and Shia Iraqis hold Baghdad. For the moment, Islamic State holds large areas of western Iraq and Eastern Syria. However, most of this land is desert. Driving through it, you can see that there is not much there, and certainly it is not terrain suited to guerrilla war.

The leadership of Islamic State has declared a Caliphate. The Americans, helped by the British, the French and the Russians, have flown thousands of

bombing runs against the people living in Islamic State controlled areas in both Iraq and Syria.

The Destruction

There is considerable cruelty on all sides now – by Shia militias, Shia parties, the Iraqi government, and Islamic State. But there are two things to be said about this cruelty.

First, it is not because Iraqis are like that. The cruelty has to be seen in the context of the American imperial role in the history of the last 35 years lived by ordinary Iraqis – the losses during the Iran-Iraq war, the 1991 Gulf War and failed insurrection and the decade of devastating economic sanctions, all before the 2003 American invasion. There are no certain estimates of the death toll under the Americans, but, as mentioned earlier, it was roughly a million, many killed by bombs dropped from airplanes. There were particular horrors and shames of sectarian killings, neighbourhood by neighbourhood. There was the helplessness, and the fear, the secret police and generalised corruption under the Americans that replaced the same experience under Saddam.

Moreover, most people in Iraqi public life have been compromised in almost everyone's eyes by collaboration with the Americans, or with sectarian murders.

There are also the consequences of the American gulag in Iraq. We have written elsewhere at some length about the horrors in Abu Ghraib, the rapes and endless sexual abuse, the constant beatings and torture, the murder of prisoners by interrogators. And about the odd fact that the wives, sisters and children of the male

detainees were kept on the cell blocks without paperwork, where they could hear and sometimes see the torture and rape of the men. But Abu Ghraib was only one of many prison camps in Iraq, an archipelago of torture.⁵⁰

As Atwan has noted, most of the middle and upper leadership of Islamic State had spent years in these camps. They are survivors of months or years of torture. Most of the present day leaders of Islamic State were military officers under Saddam who became Salafis, usually in a torture camp. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the caliph, has a doctorate in Islamic law. But of his two deputies, one was 'a senior special forces officer and a member of military intelligence under Saddam.' The other was a major-general in Saddam's army. The senior military leader was a lieutenant-colonel in Saddam's army intelligence. All three men were prisoners alongside al-Baghdadi in the American Camp Bucca. And the four leaders of the secret police of the Islamic State, were 'all high-ranking officers in Saddam's ... notoriously cruel security services.'⁵¹

Many people have commented on the particular style of Islamic State videos and public executions as a sort of theatre of cruelty, designed to glorify power and terrify people who might resist. This style has three obvious sources. One is American – the photographs and stories of the horrors in Abu Ghraib, with the dogs unleashed on

50 See Ryan Ashley Caldwell, *Fallgirls - Gender and the Framing of Torture at Abu Ghraib*, Ashgate, 2013; and Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale, 'Gendering Abu Ghraib', at *Sexism Class Violence*, 2015, <https://sexismclassviolence.wordpress.com/2015/03/05/gendering-abu-ghraib/>.

51 Atwan, *Islamic State*, 139-140.

men, the naked bodies of men writhing in piles, a crucified dead prisoner hanging in the shower.

Another obvious source is the public style and design of Saddam's regime. A third source are terrifying fireworks videos of the American 'shock and awe' bombing of central Baghdad in 2003. These were shown as news footage, either as an aesthetic justification for unleashing such gruesome force, or as if the violence was of no more consequence than that in a Hollywood action movie.

People across Iraq knew what was happening in those camps, and the effect of generalised fear and collaboration with such an obscenity effected everyone. One sign of the degradation of political life is the homophobic campaigns and murders of gay men organised by the Shia political parties in government and allied to the Americans. Islamic State, too, has imitated homophobic campaigns and killings on a smaller scale.⁵² But none of these atrocities are on the same scale as the continued American bombing. There is now a fashion to believe that small numbers of 'traditional' beheadings are worse than 'civilised' bombs burning alive and maiming hundreds of thousands Iraqis. We do not agree.⁵³

⁵² Nancy Lindisfarne and Jonathan Neale, 'ISIS, Sexual Violence and Killing Gay Men', at *Sexism Class Violence*, 2015, <https://sexismclassviolence.wordpress.com/2015/02/10/isis-sexual-violence-and-killing-gay-men/>

⁵³ The subject of the important new documentary film, *Concerning Violence*, is the relation between colonial violence and violent resistance. The film focuses on the resistance movements in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s in Africa, and looks at the process of decolonization through the text of Frantz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. The arguments of the film are of direct relevance to

Syria and Foreign Fighters

Islamic State is also an organisation in Syria. Their role there is complex, and often destructive. We discuss the Islamic State further in the next section on Syria. But Islamic State is fundamentally an Iraqi organisation. Most of the people under Islamic State control are in Iraq, and the core of its leadership is men who have been fighting American imperialism in Iraq since 2003.

Finally, a word about the foreign fighters. At least 30,000 men and women have journeyed to Syria and Iraq to join Islamic State, many of them from Europe. It is not hard to understand why. For fourteen long years, for all the conscious lives of many who journey to Islamic State, they have seen Muslims who resist invasions bombed and burned and tortured. The voices raised in the anti-war marches of 2003 are much fainter now, and the carnage is worse, and is spreading into more and more countries. In Europe, the domestic effects of recession and austerity have increased inequality and turned a spotlight on the ruthlessness of privileged elites, while the shriek of Islamophobia is louder than ever, and increasing. In this situation what many young women and men see is that Islamic State is made up of people who are resisting the endless imperial machine of mass murder.

The deep problem with Islamic State, the tragedy, is that they are a product of the triumph of divide and rule.

the neo-colonial (aka anti-imperial) struggles going on in the Middle East today. See <http://dogwoof.com/films/concerning-violence>

But American bombing will only reinforce the message of divide and rule, and drive frightened and desperate people, Sunni and Shia, into further division.

THREE: SYRIA

We turn now from Iraq to Syria. In Iraq we saw the consequences of great suffering, and of a resistance that accepted divide and rule, and was ruled. Here we write about the resistance in Syria, arguing that this resistance is against a tyrannous state and is part of the Arab Spring, and that we want the defeat of the Assad regime and their Russian backers and all the aerial bombing by the imperial powers to stop. Let us begin, as in the previous two case studies, with the history.

In the 1960s, Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current dictator, was a senior member of the Ba'ath party in Syria. The Ba'ath party were socialists, secularists, and Arab nationalists. Once in power, from 1966 on, they took the land from the great landowners and gave it to the farmers. They were opposed to British and French colonialism, American imperialism, Arab monarchies and Israel.

In 1970 Hafez al-Assad became the 'one party, one family' dictator. He ruled until his death in 2000, and his son Bashar al-Assad has ruled since.⁵⁴

Syria is not a rich state, and never has been. There is some oil and gas, and a piece of Mediterranean coast line. Cotton and wheat are grown along the Euphrates, but a lot of the country is desert, and most of it is short of water. Beyond that, the economy stagnated under a state

⁵⁴ For background on Syria, a good place to start is Patrick Seale, *Asad*, I.B. Tauris, 1988. For the inner life of the elite and professionals in the early 1990s, see Nancy Lindisfarne, *Dancing in Damascus: Stories*, State University of New York Press, 2000.

capitalist regime which depended on Soviet support and widespread corruption, among regime cronies, the army, and associated with the trade in drugs and arms across the region.

From 1970 to 1990 Syria was allied with the Soviet Union. But after the Soviet Union fell, the Syrian government switched to the American side. This was a key turning point. When Saddam's Iraq invaded Kuwait, the Americans put together a coalition to drive his forces out of Kuwait. Syria joined that coalition and sent a token force, and the country became one of the war winners. The country was opened up to neo-liberal development, and the Syrian regime came in from the cold. From 1990 to 2012 it was allied with the United States, and from 2012 with Russia again.

Obama was caught between wanting to be on the winning side if the revolutions of the Arab Spring were successful, and a fear of the consequences of supporting radical Islamists in the Syrian resistance. He did nothing but say that Bashar Assad needed to step away from power and that his regime should not use chemical weapons on the Syrian population. Not surprisingly, Assad turned his back on the Americans and returned for support to the regime's former imperial champion, the USSR, reincarnated now as the Russian state.

From the 1970s on, a new ruling class formed around the Assad dictatorship. Members of this new elite included Alawites from Assad's own Shia sect. Others, among them Shias, Sunnis, and Christians, were also part of the new ruling class. They included senior military officers, business owners in the construction industry,

merchants, capitalists, and smugglers. Some were upwardly mobile from poor families, and others were drawn from the previous ruling class and bourgeoisie.

The oppressed have been the blue collar and white collar workers, farmers, and the self-employed. Many professional and business people collaborated with the regime. They had to do so to live. But a large majority of Syrians hated the regime.

Throughout the last 45 years, the regime has been extraordinarily repressive, with many people disappeared, killed in secret prisons.⁵⁵ The public measure of the brutality took place in 1982, when there was a popular uprising against the regime in the major city of Hama, led by the Muslim brotherhood. This was quelled by Assad (the father) by bombing and killing some 20,000, perhaps even 40,000 citizens. The violence was so comprehensive, and effective, that it has never been possible to establish exactly how many Syrians perished. This episode was known internationally, but more or less ignored. Inside Syria, the massacre in Hama served to terrify the population, who remained more or less quiescent until 2011.

The Assads ruled through the ferocious, and deliberately random exercise of terror. As a citizen, you never knew who was watching you, or when something terrible would happen. Nancy did anthropological fieldwork in Damascus in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As she was told then,

⁵⁵ The photographic evidence of the extent and horror of torture and murder in Assad's prisons is overwhelming. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/01/they-were-torturing-to-kill-inside-syrias-death-machine-caesar>

‘Don’t ever talk of anything political near an open window.’

‘Never talk politics when there are more than two people in the conversation.’

‘If you’re ever in trouble in the city, scream with all your might.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Because nobody who isn’t close to the regime would ever call attention to themselves. So anyone who is pestering you will run like hell.’⁵⁶

When the Arab Spring began in 2011, the Syrians were almost the last to join in. This is because they knew the regime, and the extreme cruelty it was capable of. Perhaps because they knew this when they began, they are still fighting.

The Arab Spring

The Arab spring began when protesters in Tunisia brought down the dictatorship there in late 2010. The Egyptian people took heart. In January 2011 demonstrations began in Tahrir Square in the centre of Cairo, and the Mubarak dictatorship fell 18 days later. Protests and uprisings centred on city squares spread to Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, and parts of Saudi Arabia.

⁵⁶ Nancy Lindisfarne, ‘Postscript: The Pirates Socks’, in *Dancing in Damascus*.

The uprising was most bitter in Syria, where the regime was most repressive. From the start, everyone in Syria knew that an Arab Spring would not be like Tunisia or Egypt. People waited. In March protests began in the provincial city of Daraa. Protests spread to Damascus. All the regime's secret forces of repression appeared on the streets. Samar Yazbeck was in Damascus:

Security patrols are dense in the streets; everywhere I go cars are coming and going, fast and slow; giant buses are jam-packed with security forces; men wearing helmets and military uniforms fan out in the markets and squares, in the broad intersections and anywhere else demonstrations might break out.

Men in plain clothes congregate here and there, but the size of their presence gives them away...

Suddenly I start to notice strange figures I haven't ever seen before materializing in the street. Oversized men with broad and puffed-out chests, their heads shaved, wearing black short-sleeved shirts that reveal giant muscles covered in tattoos, seething at everything that moves. Glaring as they walk, their hands swinging at their sides, figures that sow terror wherever they go, thickening the air around them...

Everybody knows the city's calm before was not a natural calm since nobody could challenge the power of the security apparatus... Suddenly the streets are transformed into a carnival of horror. Chaos is everywhere. Security forces watch the

people: some flee, others get arbitrarily eliminated. The gangs sprouted out of the ground just like everything around here, out of thin air, without any rhyme or reason. How could armed men suddenly appear and start killing people?⁵⁷

Because they had always been there. And this is how regimes of terror work.

The most important repressive force was the army. From the beginning, they were ordered to open fire, and killed large numbers of people, again and again. If soldiers refused to fire, their officers shot them.

But more than half the enlisted men were conscripts. All Syrian men were required to serve a year and a half in the army at the age of 18. The soldiers began to desert, taking their weapons with them. The Free Syrian Army was born.

Because so many young men, mostly conscripts, had to make the decision to desert so quickly, the Free Syrian Army reflected Syrian society as a whole. They were largely nationalists, working class, not very religious, and not very political before the conflict began. Many of them assumed that the United States would back them, and democracy, and their liberation movement against the most cruel of dictators.

In Syria, the politics of the rebels reflected more generally the politics of the general population than in other places. The young men who now constituted part of the Free Syrian Army tend to have generally Arab

⁵⁷ Samar Yazbeck, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, Haus, 2012, 2 and 6-7.

nationalist and socialist ideas. They also value secularism, and they are Muslim by religion.

Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt were the most important force in much of the Arab spring. This is less the case in Syria. The regime's vicious repression of all dissent ever since the bombing of Hama in 1982 meant that no Islamist party was able to build an effective opposition.

The way the resistance was created meant that it was also a communal resistance. In town after town, in suburbs and villages, the local community moved swiftly to secure food and water supplies and set up an alternative government, but one mostly not dominated by any one group. Support for the Syrian resistance was wider, and deeper, than in other countries. It was also a civil war from the beginning.

Great Power Reactions to the Arab Spring

Now we have to place the Syrian revolt in the wider context of competing imperialisms. The Arab Spring threatened dictatorship and repression throughout the region. But the example spread much further. Mass occupations of city squares challenged governments in Burkina Faso, Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Taiwan, and Spain. Many people saw other movements, like the strikes in Greece, the Walk-to-Work protests in Uganda, and the long student strike in Quebec as part of the same upheaval. And Occupy Wall Street brought the movement to America. Governments across the region and beyond were threatened by the Arab Spring, and they reacted to protect their power.

The hostility to the Arab Spring in Israel, and from the dictatorships in Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, needs no explanation. The deep knee-jerk hostility is a response to the increasing popular unrest throughout the region in the previous decade.

These conflicts were not identical, but were each directed against state elites, and provoked increasingly desperate state responses. Thus, there occurred in 2005 the largely middle-class Lebanese Cedar Revolution against Syrian occupation. Then came the Hizbollah – Israeli War in Lebanon in 2006. And throughout the decade there has been the repeated resistance and ever more vicious repression of the Palestinians in Gaza, including most horribly the winter onslaught by Israel in 2008 which saw more than 2000 civilians killed. So too had the Iranian government recently defeated another, largely middle-class revolt, the 'Green Revolution' of 2009-2010.

And on a whole other scale, the Russian and Chinese imperial governments have reasons to fear and hate both movements of Muslims and uprisings in the squares.

Russia has fought more than one war against Muslims in the south of Russia itself, and [as the USSR] lost a long war in Afghanistan to the Mujahedin resistance. The Russian rulers fear unrest in the Muslim republics in Central Asia. And there have been movements in the squares in Moscow and Kiev. China has serious lasting unrest among the Muslims of western China. And the Tiananmen protest in 1989 was the mother of all

occupations of public squares. That remains the nightmare of the Chinese ruling class.

The American position was more complicated. The Arab spring threatened American-backed dictatorships and American domination over Middle Eastern oil, and it was encouraging revolt across the world. So the American ruling class also feared the Arab Spring.

But from 2011 to 2013 Washington pursued a complex strategy. They wanted an end to uprisings, but they also thought the uprisings might win. And if the uprisings won, Washington wanted to be friends with the new governments, and re-establish old alliances.

Crucially, the US could not simply invade any more Middle Eastern countries. After the experience of Afghanistan and Iraq the American people were not going to accept that. Enlisted military personnel and their families were particularly opposed to new wars.

So Washington tried to surf the wave. In Libya they bombed the dictator, Gaddafi's forces in support of the uprising. In Yemen the American embassy brokered a deal where the dictator would leave but the rest of the old regime would survive. In the Gulf, Washington backed a Saudi army that invaded to put down the occupations and marches in Bahrain.

On the other hand, Washington told the Egyptian military to allow democracy. As soon as there were elections, Egyptians voted for a government of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist party. They did so because the Brotherhood promised a more equal society, and for a generation had long been the main underground

opposition to the dictatorship. Washington then tried to work with the Brotherhood.

In 2012 and the first half of 2013, much of the Free Syrian Army were hoping and waiting for American support. After all, the Americans were making all sorts of noises about democracy and overthrowing Assad.

In practice, there was an argument going on at the top of the Obama administration. Some of his advisors said that the Syrian resistance was probably going to win. So it would be best to arm the 'more moderate' among them now. That would give the US friends when the resistance won, and it would strengthen the moderate, pro-American wing of the resistance. Other people in the Obama administration said maybe the rebels were not going to win. And in any case, there were a lot of Islamists and jihadis in the resistance. The 'good' secularists in the Free Syrian Army might well share American arms with the 'bad' jihadis. From Obama's point of view, there was a lot to be said for both arguments. So the administration dithered, making anti-Assad noises but not sending weapons. The 'moderates' in the Free Syrian Army began to despair.

Divide and Rule

To defend the dictatorship, Assad and his generals turned to divide and rule. Their strategies to divide the uprising intersected with American, Saudi, Russian and Iranian ruling class policies in complex ways.

Syria is an artificial state – you can see that from the mostly straight line borders. Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia were all carved out of the Turkish

Ottoman Empire after World War One and divided between French and British empires. As an area it has always been mixed ethnically, and in terms of religious affiliations, but people have been getting on more or less well for hundreds of years.

However, over the twentieth century, the habits of Ottoman tolerance, and the socialist and communist ideals which inspired unity were systematically undermined and discredited by the politics of divide and rule from the top.

Among ethnic divisions, about 2 million Syrians (10 percent) think of themselves as Kurds and speak a Kurdish language. There are also Palestinian refugees, Druze and Armenians. If you think of people as divided along sectarian lines, about 75 percent are Sunni Muslims. Another 10 percent are Christians of one sort or another. But most people lived intermingled, particularly in the cities.

Assad himself belonged to the Alawite sect, an unorthodox branch of Shia Islam. About 13 percent of Syrians are Alawites. Assad and his father, the dictator before him, had long relied particularly on members of his tribe within the Alawites for close associates. Initially many Alawite Shias supported the resistance, then Assad mobilised Alawi militias to launch sectarian attacks against largely Sunni villages and neighbourhoods that supported the resistance, and the cycle of terror and revenge began.

Other ethnic and sectarian groups within the country were also divided. Most Syrian Christians, another large minority, had long had an ambivalent relationship with the regime. On the one hand, they feared Muslim

persecution and looked to Assad for protection. But they also feared the regime.⁵⁸ Now some Christians backed Assad, some backed the resistance, and many others fled.

And it took little time for international players to join the fight. Assad had a long standing alliance with Iran and with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah is a Shia militia and political party who had fought and defeated the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon. For years Iran, a majority Shia country, had sent money and arms to Hezbollah through Syria.

As the Syrian resistance grew, Iran and then Russia armed and funded Assad. Neither the rulers in Tehran nor Moscow wanted a popular uprising to win in Syria. And the Iranian leaders and Assad called in the debts Hezbollah owed them. Hezbollah sent many fighters to Syria to attack the resistance. The Hezbollah militia were brave, organised and battle seasoned and they won battles where the Syrian army could not, or would not. Their intervention was decisive in turning the Syrian revolt into a sectarian civil war. On the ground, everyone understood that the Hezbollah fighters belonged to a Shia group come to kill Sunnis.

Other powers took different sides. Saudi Arabia had long feared Iranian domination in the Gulf, and Iranian encouragement of revolt by the Shia minority in Saudi Arabia itself. For the Saudis, this was a proxy, and satisfyingly sectarian, war. So Saudi Arabia, and various small Gulf states, backed al-Nusra and other right-wing

⁵⁸ Panagiotis Geros, 'Doing Fieldwork within Fear and Silences', chapter 4 in Armbruster and Laerke, *Taking Sides*, is very good on explaining this contradiction.

Sunni Islamist rebel groups against Assad's Syrian government.

In this way the resistance was fractured through the ethnic cleansing of villages and neighbourhoods. On the one side were Alawites, Christians and Shias. On the other side were Sunni Arabs, and Kurds in northern Syria.

This did not mean that the majority in any community approved of sectarian murder. They did not. Their revulsion delayed the spiral. But in many areas they could not stop it. As the spiral grew more intense, many became sectarian, others kept their heads down and prayed they would get through, while several million desperate people sought refuge in Lebanon and Turkey.

By late 2013 the resistance was mostly Sunni. But this did not mean that only Sunnis opposed the regime.

Meanwhile, the US continued to sit on the fence. Washington expected the Assad regime would fall, and they wanted to be friends with the victors. But Washington also feared the Islamists among the resistance. So the US kept saying they would help with arms and bombing, but did nothing.

The result was a stalemate and bloodbath, with 200,000 dead, over 200,000 in Assad's prisons, and at least 8 million driven from their homes. This was entirely acceptable to all outside parties – the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and also China. It was useful to them that Syria became an example of the terrible things that can happen if people tried to make a revolution.

Everything Changes

Then, on 30 June 2013, General Sisi led a military coup in

Egypt that replaced the elected government of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Everything changed. Sisi is running a classic military dictatorship, condemning all opposition as terrorists. The army and police have broken the movement of Tahrir Square, the heart of the Arab Spring. The streets have been cleared of demonstrators, with three thousand killed. At least 30,000 have been jailed, and large numbers have been tortured.

After the coup, the US government was no longer fearful of the Arab Spring. They no longer had to surf the wave of revolution. Things came to a head in August of 2013, just after Sisi's coup in Egypt. Obama threatened to bomb Assad after a poison gas attack on rebels. The American military as a whole was opposed to such an adventure, and so were the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Republican controlled House of Representatives, and the UK parliament. Crucially, a solid majority of the American people wanted no more interventions in the Middle East.

Obama backed down. Instead, he seized the moment to begin a working alliance with the government of Iran, and began to swing towards support for Assad. There was now, effectively, a coalition of the US, Russia and Iran supporting Assad.

Why these strange new bedfellows? There was a simple explanation. They had come together to bury the memory and hope of the Arab Spring. It was a massive and inspiring popular movement. So it will take great cruelty, killing and repression to break the memory of it and the possibility of any resurgence. And each of the governments in the alliance has strong reasons for wanting to bury the Arab Spring very deeply indeed.

'Hijacking' the Revolution

In 2013 the governments of the US, Russia and Iran assumed that with their tacit agreement to support the Assad regime by doing nothing, the regime, with the support of Hizbollah and the Shia militias from Iran and some Russian money and arms, would be able to crush the resistance. But they were wrong.

That resistance has been split into four broad wings. One is the largely secular, community based units of the Free Syrian Army. The second is a broad range of Islamist organisations. The third is the Islamic State organization. The fourth wing is comprised of the Syrian Kurds who have recently allied themselves militarily with the United States.,

Until recently the Free Syrian Army and the Islamist groups have done almost all the fighting against Assad's army and Hezbollah. Islamic State organization in the east and the Kurds in the north have both had effective truces with Assad's forces, in part because the Syrian regime is defending its heartland, and they are furthest from Damascus and Latakia.

The Free Syrian Army and the secular groups have fought with great courage and endurance, but their support has drained towards the Islamists. There are two reasons this has happened. One is that many units of the FSA, and some Islamist organisations, have hoped and asked for American backing and American bombers. When, however, this backing failed to arrive, the Islamist organisations, who said from the beginning that the Americans were the enemy, gained support.

A second reason has to do with the nature of war. Because of the way the revolution began in Syria, most of the resistance started as local community groups. This was true of those more secular in flavour, and those of a more Islamist turn. That was an enormous social strength, because such groups were also quite democratic. But centralisation, unified command, mobility of forces, and obedience to officers are crucial to success in war, which, of course, is another reason warfare is inimical to human decency and equality.

The Islamist groups with links to experienced international jihadis, like al-Nusra, were much better at these tyrannies of war than the community groups. And the Islamic State is the best organised military group by a large margin, and they began to recruit more Syrian fighters.

As we described above, the Euro-American media and many politicians, academics and others are deeply hostile to the Islamists. And there are many explanations of how Islamic State suddenly tricked masses of people. Sometimes it is claimed they only have power because they have money from the Gulf to pay poor, unemployed men. Other times it is claimed that in 2013 Assad released hundreds of Islamic State leaders to create another front against the Free Syrian Army. Others say that Assad, or the Americans, or Israel really founded the Islamic State.

There is probably some truth to some of these accusations. Certainly Assad and the Americans are not above divide and rule, nor are the leadership of Islamic State above compromise to gain a breathing space. As we noted, many of the core leadership of Islamic State were

once officers and secret police in Saddam's Ba'athist regime. Their roots and experience are not that different from Assad's Ba'athists. But they have been clear – they plan to take all of Syria.

Meanwhile, Assad's alliance is composed of Islamic State enemies: Iran, Shia Hezbollah and Shia Alawite militias. Nor can the Islamic State organization compromise with a Russian occupation of Syria, not least because many of their core leadership who are not Iraqi ex-soldiers, and many of their fighters, are refugees from the Russian war in Chechnya and the cruel secular dictatorships of ex-Soviet Central Asia. As we describe in the next section, since the Russian invasion in September 2015, Islamic State troops have been fighting hard against both Assad's forces and Russian troops.

And above all else, the point of the Islamic State organization is that they have been at war with America for twelve years. And that war with America, and the war with Iran, Britain, and France, still rages. Whatever else they do, they are at war with both the American and Russian oil empires.

Crucially, the accusations of 'hijacking the revolution' allow people to conceal from themselves the popular appeal of Islamic State. It is not hard to understand this appeal. In Syria they say, 'We told you: the enemies were the Americans, the Iranians and the Shias. Now look, that is exactly what they are'. In Iraq they say almost the same. In both Iraq and Syria they say, 'Look our justice is swift and hard but fair. You can live in peace, free from the death squads, the gangs and the warlords'. This is a message remarkably similar to that of the

Taliban, and in desperate circumstances it is a promise which offers some hope.

In both Iraq and Syria, and across the world, the Islamic State propaganda says, 'Look, we are stronger than jihadis have ever been. We have conquered land. We have a state'. The dream and the fear are linked. The dream recruits the fighters, and the fear makes enemies buckle down or flee. And it is enormously important that on the horizon there are no likely alternative forces willing to take on the oil imperialists.⁵⁹

The Russian Invasion of Syria

Whatever their attraction and ambitions, for the moment the Islamic State is doing the fighting in Iraq, and the other Islamist and secular groups are bearing the burden in Syria. And they have been winning.

By September, 2015 Assad's forces were dwindling, exhausted and retreating on almost all fronts. And Assad's foreign backers knew that something had to be done or Assad would fall. At that point, Putin's Russia intervened to save the Assad regime. They opened military bases in Syria, and sent bombers and helicopters. They also sent

⁵⁹ Meanwhile, *Prevent* is a British government programme aimed at stopping young women and men, outraged by the wars in the Middle East, from joining Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria. It is part of the government's counter-terrorism clampdown on dissent and 'non-violent extremism'. However *Prevent* has angered many British Muslims who see it as another aspect of the increasing Islamophobia in the country and it has barely touched the morality and hope driving IS recruitment. See Alex Preston, 'The Long Read Interview with Sara Khan', *The Guardian*, 28 October 2015, 31-33.

troops to protect the bases, Special Forces, and forward air controllers to direct the bombers from the ground.

Since that time the Russian planes have flown thousands of bombing runs, and Russian ships have launched cruise missiles into Syria. The carnage is terrifying – whole areas have been flattened. Yet it is important to note that the great majority of these Russian bombs have been dropped on the broad alliance of the resistance, and not on the Islamic State. This is because the broad alliance, not Islamic State, is the main and immediate threat to Assad's regime.

In the wake of the bombing, the Assad regime has announced a ground offensive against the resistance. Several different forces have joined this offensive. These include what is left of the Syrian army, some fighters from Syrian Alawite militias, Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, Shia militias from Iraq, Iranian government troops, and some Russian soldiers. This advance has been gaining ground, but much more slowly than most people expected.

The American planes are now supported by bombs from France and Russia in Syria, and from Britain in Iraq.⁶⁰ The American and Russian military keep each other informed of their flights and bombing runs, so no one shoots down other countries' planes.

All this leaves American policy in a deep contradiction. Imperialism always has two faces – it is both a system of competition between imperial powers,

⁶⁰ In late October 2015 David Cameron, the British Prime Minister was discouraged from asking the UK Parliament for formal support to bomb IS, the Islamic State organization, in Syria, as it seemed unlikely he would win a parliamentary majority for the project.

and a way of controlling subject populations. The American ruling class is now torn between these two imperatives.

They are torn because they cannot send troops. This is a consequence of the strength of a group of people we have hardly mentioned up until now, workers in America. Ordinary people in the US by and large supported the American invasion of Afghanistan. They were divided over Iraq, and as the war continued a large majority were in favour of withdrawal from both Afghanistan and Iraq.

The picture is complicated. After the election of Obama in 2008, the anti-war movement formally dissolved. Liberals, and much of the left, have put support for Obama ahead of support for peace. Obama withdrew American troops from Iraq, then sent them back, ran down the numbers of American troops in Afghanistan, and then halted the withdrawal. He has extended the American air and drone war greatly in Pakistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. Yet there has been a resounding silence about such imperial aggression from liberal America, although this may be changing with the Sanders campaign.

The strong opposition to war has come from enlisted military people, their families, and their friends and neighbours. The US has a career army, and the numbers of soldiers are limited, so soldiers and marines have had to do four, five, six or seven tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. In previous wars the main danger was death, and the people in danger were combat troops. In these wars the main danger is IEDs (homemade bombs) and mines. Both combat troops and the much larger number of support troops are in danger. Most people are

wounded, not killed, by the bombs and mines. The chances of this happening over six tours of duty are high, and the soldiers and their families know this every day for years. The common injuries are tinnitus, back pain, and brain damage because the shock waves of a bomb smash the brain against the skull. The loss of a limb or paralysis are less common, but people think about them a lot.

In the last few years, 45% of American veterans of Iraq or Afghanistan have applied for permanent disability payments.⁶¹ The majority of these disabled veterans have physical damage, and a minority PTSD. But the doctors are beginning to realise that many of those PTSD cases are in fact people with organic brain damage.

American soldiers and their families have lived for years with constant anxiety because of these high casualty rates. It has produced a general conviction against war. This comes out in complex ways. On American country western music stations over the last few years, many songs express similar sentiments – We support our troops, we honour them for their service, but that does not mean we support war, and why is it always people like us who have to go?

⁶¹ Marilyn Marchione, Us vets' disability filings reach historic rate, US Today, 28 May 2012, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/health/story/2012-05-28/veteran-disability/55250092/1/>. So far only about half these claims have been agreed, because there is a very long wait for decisions on claims, but in the long run almost all are approved. See also National Public Radio and Pro Publica's impressive series of over twenty programs from 2010, *Brain wars: how the military is failing its wounded*, at <http://www.npr.org/series/127402851/brain-wars-how-the-military-is-failing-its-wounded>.

It is no coincidence that Republican members of the House of Representatives were against Obama's plan to bomb Syria in 2013. Those Republicans are more likely to represent the southern and small town constituencies where military families live.

All this means that sending large numbers of troops to Syria would not just be politically toxic in the US, it might split the military. So Obama, and the American ruling class, have compromised. They will send few, if any, troops. This does not mean that they will stop killing. But they will do it from the air, increasingly with drones, so that no Americans die, and of even more importance, so that American soldiers are not maimed.⁶²

Any such policy of air death requires troops, administrators and supporters on the ground to permanently secure the bombed areas. That job now has to be done by proxies. But in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria the local soldiers are refusing to do that job, in different ways. That means more reliance on gangsters, militias, and sectarian death squads in all three countries. But that reliance increases the loathing of most people for any local politicians or regime associated with the Americans. Continued air death has the same effect.

Moreover, a quarter of American drone pilots quit every year, because they see death so up close on their screens, so many times. Former drone pilot Heather Linebaugh has written that she just wanted to ask the politicians:

⁶² For drone warfare start with Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty Wars*, Avalon, 2012.

How many women and children have you seen incinerated by a Hellfire missile?’ And: How many men have you seen crawl across a field, trying to make it to the nearest compound for help while bleeding out from severed legs?⁶³

So the US ruling class was prepared to cooperate with Russia and Iran in Syria as long as Russia supplied the arms and money, Hezbollah and Syrian militias did the fighting, and Assad's air force did the bombing. When Russia sent troops and planes into Syria, and led a ground offensive, that changed. Now Putin is demonstrating graphically the weakening of an American power that has no troops on the ground, at the same time as he increases Russian power in the region. American imperialism has lost face.

It is not clear how long Putin will be able to keep this up, and how many troops he can lose. The economic situation in Russia is already dire. Russia is deeply entangled in Ukraine. The Syrian resistance is unlikely to collapse. There have already been anti-war demonstrations in Russia, and while there may be support

⁶³ Heather Linebaugh, ‘I worked on the US drone program. The public should know what really goes on’, *The Guardian*, 29 December 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/29/drones-us-military>; see also ‘Why Are Drone Pilots Quitting in Huge Numbers’, *In These Times*, 10 March 2015, http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/17718/drone_pilots

for successful military adventures, a long running war like Afghanistan in the 1980s would be quite different.

But for the moment, the American ruling class is losing the imperial competition. Yet preventing a victory for the Syrian resistance remains of central importance to Washington, because both the Arab Spring and the kind of resilience shown by the Taliban pose such a threat to imperial control of the oil and the people in the Middle East.

Some people in the Syrian resistance have called for an American no-fly zone to protect the resistance. It is easy to see why they are asking for this. War is a terrible thing, and people in a war take whatever help they can get. But the Americans have not put up a no fly zone for the past four years, because they do not want the Syrian resistance to win. Now if they put up a no-fly zone, it would lead in hours to an air war between Russia and America, which would not be limited to Syria. The American military is not going to do that, and a large majority of Americans would be appalled and frightened if they did.

At the moment, the American military are bombing Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, and the Russians are bombing the resistance in the rest of Syria. The US and Russian military provide each other with information on their flights, and the Russians inform the Israelis as well.

Divisions in the Resistance

There is an important split in the resistance in Syria. The Islamic State organization in the east argue that the main enemy is the Americans, the Iranians, the Russians and the Shias. Most of the rest of the resistance argue that the

main enemy is Assad and anyone who supports him. Most Syrians support the latter position, and most resistance groups understand the necessity of keeping unity between the more secular fighters and the more Islamist fighters.

In some areas this split has led to bitter fighting between Islamic State and other resistance groups. In other areas, local groups on each side have managed to keep a fragile peace. The effect of prolonged American and Russian bombing is likely to increase the number of people on both sides of the split calling for some form of truce or unity.

The last twelve years in Iraq are a terrible warning of what happens when a resistance movement is divided along sectarian lines. That way lies defeat and cruelty. American and Russian bombing of the Islamic State will only increase sectarianism and Sunni bitterness. Moreover, it will kill a lot of people who support Islamic State because they oppose American planes and Assad's regime.

CONCLUSION

To summarise, don't bomb the Taliban, don't bomb Islamic State, and support the Syrian resistance. However, there are a few points we need to add now at the end of our case studies.

The first concerns the question of inequality – between oil empires and the people who run them and ordinary people. This inequality when experienced in war is staggeringly great – homemade bombs against 2000 lb. daisy cutters, a drone pilot's life in the suburbs of Nevada against that of a young suicide bomber's death in Baghdad. But war is war. Those who dare to speak out or fight back against the oil empires know this. They know also that the scale of the tragedy, of lives lost and families destroyed, is disproportionate and unspeakable. And they know that their only real strength is in numbers, in being the majority, in having overwhelming popular support.

It is not only the people in resistance areas who suffer. It is a fantasy that in these times you can bomb 'the other side' with impunity. The victims of these wars include the ordinary people who died in the Twin Towers in 9/11, in 7/7 in London, in Charlie Hebdo and the Ankara bombings and the recent Russian airliner, and in an unending stream of suicide bombs. They include the ordinary American, Russian, British and Turkish soldiers who have died, and been paralysed, and will die and be paralysed. For nothing. Or worse, for the price of oil.

Our second point is that people change. In 1965 the voters of Kabul elected Anahita Ratebzad, a woman, a Communist and a nurse, as their member of parliament. In 1978 many in Kabul welcomed the Communist coup, though it was less popular in the countryside. In 1980 the civil servants in Kabul went on strike against the Soviet occupation, and all across the city people went onto the roofs of their houses and shouted 'God is Great'.

In the 1980s most Afghans more or less supported the Mujahedin. In the 1990s they turned bitterly against the Mujahedin, and many of them welcomed the Taliban. By 2001 few were prepared to fight for the Taliban. Most people accepted the Americans, and a majority voted for America's ally, Hamid Karzai. By 2015 the Taliban have support in and control most of the countryside.

As in Afghanistan, so in Iraq. People change. In 1958 the secular Communist Party could bring a million people onto the streets as part of a revolution. By 1987 the socialist Ba'ath Party was widely hated. By 2003, after years of sanctions, people hated the American invasion too, and, in response, a resistance rose almost immediately. By 2008 the great majority of Iraqis had turned away from the sectarian death squads of the Shia and Sunni resistance. By 2015 most of those same Sunnis were prepared to accept the Salafi Islamic State, and the Shia militias were fighting alongside the Americans.

In Syria the story is the same. People learn from experience. They change, and they change sides. That is how they make history. And for more than seventy years the people of the Middle East have been rising, in wave after wave of resistance, looking for a more equal world,

trying to find a way to be free from the boot of empire and the tyranny that has come with the riches in oil.

Our third point concerns the real contradiction which lies behind the politics of the Middle Eastern wars. This article has been written, in part, in response to changes of the political left in Europe and North America. Support for American or Russian bombing has been growing across that left, and in liberal and progressive circles more generally. Islamophobia is also increasingly common in these circles. But if we do not side with the resistance against the vast and disproportionate power of the capitalist empires, we miss the only chance there is to break that power. And we may also miss the only chance we have to put an end to the folly of the oil imperialism which will also burn our planet to a cinder.

We – Nancy and Jonathan – are feminists, socialists and revolutionaries. People like us cannot change the world without the support of the majority of workers, small farmers and the poor. We cannot have that support if we have proven ourselves their enemies.

However, things are not simple when there is a clear class struggle, but the leaders of the oppressed are also committed to inequality. This is the situation across much of the Middle East. As we have tried to show in all three case studies, a central reason for this situation is that the 'left' has been on the wrong side, and aligned and allied themselves with the oppressors.

If the left and feminists double down, yet again, to support the dictators and the empires against the common people, there will never be an escape from tragedy of oil imperialism. The only way out is to reach across the

divide. This does not mean joining forces with the right-wing leaders of popular movements. It does not mean accepting the oppression of women or the massacre of Shias. All that we have to do is oppose the carbon empires and the local dictatorships.

Two very different examples will suffice. When the Taliban took Kunduz, Doctors Without Borders remained behind to treat the wounded from both sides. They did not take the side of the Taliban, they just did not take the side of the Americans. For this, the American soldiers targeted and killed them. Does anyone think those doctors and nurses were enemies of feminism? In Afghanistan for years to come, people who support the Taliban will listen to anyone who ever worked for Doctors Without Borders.

In Egypt, from 2003 to 2011 the Revolutionary Socialists, a small left wing party, allied themselves with the Muslim Brotherhood in demonstrations against Mubarak's dictatorship. In 2011 Mubarak fell and President Morsi of the Brotherhood was elected. The Revolutionary Socialists campaigned against Morsi's sectarian and neoliberal government. In 2013 Morsi and the Brotherhood were ousted in a military coup. Now the Revolutionary Socialists cry out against such tyranny and the jailing, torture and massacres of the Brotherhood.

In one way, it is not hard to take a position that marks you out from the empire, the dictators, and right-wing leaders of the resistance – and marks you out in such a way that you retain the respect of the oppressed. Of course, the penalty is often prison or death, from one side or the other. Sometimes one can only say such things in secret, or from exile. But it is not hard to think such things.

And for feminists and the left in Canada or Britain, there is no such price to be paid. But it does require not assuming everything in a vastly complicated political arena like the Middle East is tidy, black and white, good and bad.

Finally, another way of looking at political change is to challenge the popular assumption that the American or Russian empires are all powerful. This is not the case. In Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria the popular resistance has been winning. The empires push harder, and kill more, and the outcome is uncertain. But for the moment, the empires are in retreat. This makes them more cruel. But if you support one bombing, you are on the road to supporting all that follows, abandoning the resistance, abandoning the common people to their fate, and abandoning the possibility of a socialist revolution.