How Australia's Colonial History Helps Shape Its Racist Approach to Syria

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The key Australian founding myth was that no civilised people occupied this island-continent before British colonisation. From that piece of fiction the rights of more than 400 indigenous peoples, their ownership of land and their very existence could be ignored. They could be treated as if they did not exist.

Based on that central myth (eventually put into a legal doctrine called 'terra nullius') grew an ugly garden of racist practice: the ethnic-cleansing of Australia's fertile river valleys; the colonisation and enslavement of the Pacific Islands peoples; the 'White Australia Policy'; racialised immigration; engagement in a string of overseas imperial wars; and unique forms of physical and cultural genocide, which included concentration camps and stealing indigenous children from their families.

That colonial mentality has wider implications, and taints Australian approaches to conflict in Syria and the Middle East, based as they often are on an underlying assumption that Syrian and other Middle Eastern people do not exist, except perhaps as victims or refugees. Many who knew very little about Syria moved rapidly to condemn and attack the Styria Government, or cheer on unknown 'revolutionaries', as urged by Washington. No need was seen to speak with, recognise or respect the representatives and institutions of the Syrian people. Talking with Syrians or visiting Syria was effectively banned.

'Racism' is a term probably over-used, to include simple individual prejudice and ignorance. That trivialises the word. Yet all deep racial legacies stem from this colonial mentality, which denies the existence of other peoples while seeking to dominate, dispossess and displace them. This denial requires ideologies of systematic exclusion and dehumanisation.

The recent Australian Government approach combines these racial assumptions with a long standing, subordinate collaboration with the big power. And it is a sad historical fact that collaborators often try too hard to impress. They can sound more extreme than their masters, anxious to demonstrate their loyalty yet also keen to prove to the world they have something other than sycophancy to contribute.

So it is with Canberra's Middle East policy. In the same week (in November 2015) that Foreign Minister Julie Bishop put on a brave face at Australia's exclusion from the Vienna talks on Syria, her government presented the absurd claim that Australia was 'the second largest international contributor' to the military campaign 'against ISIS' in Iraq and Syria. Notice that Australia has coordinated precisely nothing with Syria. Bishop is referring to her commitments to Washington.

Australia's dependent foreign relations are conditioned by its racialist history. To back

Washington's 'regime change' line – from Afghanistan to Iraq to Libya to Syria – Canberra has pretended that these other peoples do not exist, or at least that they have no voice, no organisation and no representatives.

Even reading the Syrian, Iraqi, Iranian and Russian media on the Middle East is disdained, if not prohibited, because those nations are either not recognised or are somehow disqualified. This is deep racism, and the peculiar dilemma of a sub-imperial power with an unresolved colonial history. The narratives of others must be authorised and mediated by the great power.

Minister Bishop has not been the greatest authority on the Middle East region. In late 2012 – while appropriately criticising her Labor predecessor, Senator Bob Carr, over his outrageous call for the assassination of the Syrian President – she exposed her ignorance by claiming that al Qaeda and Lebanon's Hezbollah were both fighting the Syrian Government (Bishop 2012). In fact, Hezbollah has always been a close ally of secular Syria.

Nevertheless, a role was seen for Australia in pretending to reshape Syria. Ignorance has never been a barrier to colonial-style intervention. The new conservative Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, while certainly more articulate than his predecessor Tony Abbott, set out on that difficult tightrope all sycophants have to walk. His initial message, as reported by Mark Kenny in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was that 'Mr Turnbull's position is in lock-step with the Obama White House' (Kenny 2015).

On the other hand, and on the same day, according to Philip Coorey of the *Australian Financial Review*, Australia 'has had a different starting point to the US' (Coorey 2015). The difference, supposedly, is 'pragmatism and compromise'. The context was a western retreat from the imperious demand that 'Assad must go', though it is not clear what Australia contributed to this. In any case, Canberra was said to have been playing a 'constructive role'.

This 'distinct' role seems to mean that – while both PM Turnbull and the very uncharismatic Labor leader Bill Shorten repeat Washington's abusive mantras about Syria and President Assad – some form of 'transitional' power sharing may be possible. As though Canberra would have any say in the matter. Anyway, it was expected to say something.

This 'poodle pie' is a difficult dish to cook, but history tells us that extreme loyalty has been the main ingredient. Back in 1966 conservative PM Harold Holt coined the phrase 'All the way with LBJ', emphasising Canberra's commitment to US President Lyndon Baines Johnson's disastrous war in Vietnam, which would fail only after destroying the lives of three million Vietnamese people.

Forty years later the conservative Howard Government was Washington's willing fool for a last minute manoeuvre to frustrate Cuba's annual motion at the UN, to condemn the US economic blockade of the Caribbean island. These motions, consistent with international law, had always passed with overwhelming support. However, urged on by the US, Australia proposed a gratuitous amendment, critical of Cuba.

Cuba's then Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque reacted by calling the Australian approach one of 'pocket imperialism' (*imperialismo de bolsillo*). He lashed Canberra for its support for the US torture camp at Guantanamo, declaring that Canberra, which had submitted its Aboriginal population to 'a real apartheid-like regime, had no moral authority to criticise

Cuba' (Prensa Latina 2006). The proposed amendment failed and Australia voted with Cuba. It was a pointless intervention, only carried out to impress Washington. It was humiliating too because, just a few years later, Canberra felt obliged to develop a foreign aid partnership with Cuba, which by then had become the major medical trainer in the pacific islands.

This Australian sycophancy has been bipartisan. In 2010 Labor PM Julia Gillard rejected calls for a withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. 'Australia will not abandon Afghanistan', she said, in a speech where her voice was described as 'shaking with emotion'. She expected Australia's role in the occupation to continue 'through this decade at least'. The following year President Obama began his 'drawdown' of US troops from a conflict he knew the US could not win. Gillard's emotional display in favour of endless occupation was contrived and absurd.

In the current war, seeking overthrow of the Government of Syria by use of proxy Islamist militias, Canberra has been keen to play the role expected of it; but what is the correct line? The idea of 'humanitarian intervention' is virtually dead, having been replaced by a new 'war on terror'. The problem here is that all the major supporters of the sectarian terror groups are the closest allies of Washington: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Israel (see Anderson 2015).

One thing that makes Australia's colonial-style approach to Syria distinct has been the participation of many on the 'left' and in academia. Somehow the mission of 'saving' an unknown foreign people excites liberals enough to join forces with the more overt imperialists. This has echoes of the 'civilising missions' of 19th century colonialism. A similar racial contempt can be seen across a range of ignorant but highly opinionated Australians, who happen to share most of the US State Department's 'talking points' on the target nation.

For example Corey Oakley, writing in *Red Flag* (9 June 2015), the paper of the small Trotskyist group Socialist Alternative, claimed there were "clear signs of coordination between ISIS and the [Syrian] regime". This was repetition of a Washington-generated myth, created to maintain an artificial distinction between the 'moderate' and extremist terrorist groups attacking Syria. A few days earlier the US Government had insisted that "ISIS advances on Aleppo [were] aided by Assad" (Guardian 2 June 2015). In fact, the US and its allies sponsor every single terrorist group in Syria and most of the victims of ISIS and the others are Syrian soldiers and pro-government civilians (Anderson 2015).

Oakley goes on to criticise the US for not providing arms to "rebel groups" then praises Turkey and the Saudis for "finally" deciding to do so, facilitating the jihadist invasion and ethnic cleansing in north Syria. This *Jaysh al Fateh* ('Army of Conquest') coalition was led by the al Qaeda groups *Ahrar al Sham* and *Jabhat al Nusra.* In this way a small western 'left' group lent support to the most vicious and backward reactionaries, proxies for the big power.

Alex Chklovski in *Red Flag* (13 October 2015) backs another of Washington's fictions, that the Syrian Government is founded on "narrow sectarian divisions", echoing the 'Alawite regime' claims advanced by the Gulf Monarchies, Israel and Washington, because President Assad is from an Alawite family.

In fact, Syria's Muslim Brotherhood back in 2011 called for a holy war on Syria precisely because it was a "secular regime". The insurrectionists would have to ensure that "the revolution will be pure Islamic" (Al-Shaqfa 2011). That view has been shared by all major anti-government armed groups in Syria, as US intelligence privately observed in 2012: "the Salafist, the Muslim Brotherhood and AQI [al Qaeda in Iraq = the Islamic State in Iraq] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria". The eventual plan to create a "Salafist principality" in Eastern Syria was "exactly" what Washington and its allies wanted, US intelligence admitted (DIA 2012).

Similarly, 'Solidarity' member Mark Goudkamp (21 May 2015) celebrates the "renewed victories for the insurgency" which came from this 'Army of Conquest'. As thousands of sectarian fanatics from dozens of countries poured into Syria from Turkey, funded by Saudi Arabia and Qatar and armed with US weapons, Goudkamp repeated Washington's false claims that the Syrian Government was worse than ISIS and had been "responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths". There is no source for this claim, but it does mimic the Washington line. This 'left' rhetoric, denying the existence of a Syrian nation and celebrating extreme reactionaries as 'revolutionaries', helps the US smokescreen for its dirty war. Those who might otherwise have opposed this dirty war either made fools of themselves or were lulled into silence.

Pretentious interventions also come from academia. Tom Switzer of Sydney University's U.S. Studies Centre (established with government money to counter 'anti-Americanism' in Australia, in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq) joins US colleagues with a proposal that both Syria and Iraq be balkanised, divided into tiny sectarian statelets. 'Iraq and Syria as we have known them are gone. Iraq is not one people, but rather three peoples … Syria is also three peoples', he claims (Switzer 2016). That idea has support from Tel Aviv, as it would tend to 'normalise' the apartheid state of Israel in a region thoroughly partitioned on sectarian lines. The idea has long been a 'Plan B' for Washington in both Syria and Iraq, in case they cannot tame unruly governments in Baghdad and Damascus.

The partition idea was detailed six months earlier by the US Brookings Institute (O'Hanlon 2015), which brazenly called for Washington to break its 'Syria problem' into 'a number of localised components … envisioning ultimately a more confederal Syria made up of autonomous zones rather than being ruled by a strong central government' (O'Hanlon 2015: 3). The Brookings report urges an initial two autonomous zones or 'safe zones' next to the borders of Jordan and Turkey, to allow 'secure transportation lines for humanitarian as well as military supplies'.

All this, of course, would be in complete violation of international law, and only conceivable if the Syrian nation-state were destroyed and on its knees. Despite Washington's best efforts, that is not the case. These academic ideas only have currency because 'divide and rule' has always suited the interests of big powers, intent on regional domination.

What is common to these pseudo-leftist and academic narratives, apart from their repetition of Washington's talking points, is a deep contempt for Syrian people. None of the above authors pay attention to national organisations or representatives. The Syrian and Iraqi nation-states effectively do not exist. These colonial-style assertions rely almost entirely on western sources, consistent with the themes of colonial racism: refusing to listen to others' voices, refusing to respect their organisations, in short refusing to recognise that other peoples exist.

Despite these colonial fantasies of 'revolution' and partition, the recent Vienna talks reaffirmed the important principle that only the Syrian people can decide their political leadership, and that Syria cannot be dismembered. Reassertion of these principles comes as Damascus finds itself in a much stronger military position, after Russian air power came to support a strong ground force led by the Syrian Arab Army and including local and neighbouring militia, the latter from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon. The broader US plan is failing and, sooner rather than later, will be looking for some sort of face-saving exit.

Enter the Australian initiative of late 2015, which suggested that Syria, the one country in the region with a genuinely pluralist constitution, should abandon that in favour of the Lebanese 'confessional' model. This new constitution, according to PM Turnbull, was needed because Syria's Sunni Muslims have been 'disenfranchised'. He claims that the base of ISIS 'is a Sunni population that has felt disenfranchised or depressed in Syria ... [and has also felt] left out of the Shi'ite government [sic] in Iraq'. The implication is that a Lebanese-like system, where everyone must identify with a particular religious community, would somehow destroy the basis for sectarian terrorism. The sectarian history of Lebanon gives the lie to that.

This convoluted proposal is mixed with the proviso that it is the Syrians who must decide and that 'dictating terms from foreign capitals is unlikely to be successful'. Quite so. But Australian proposals for a new constitution, prepared with zero Syrian input, are inconsistent with recognition of the right of the Syrian people to self-determination. Mr Turnbull seems to not recognise that Syrians have been just as opposed to the idea of a religious or sectarian state as would be most Australians.

US intelligence observed this fact back in 1982, after the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood insurrection at Hama. In a report of May that year, the US DIA noted 'total casualties for the Hama incident probably number about 2,000. This includes an estimated 300 to 400 members of the Muslim Brotherhood's elite 'Secret Apparatus' (DIA 1982: 7). The Brotherhood, in their typical way, would later inflate this to '40 thousand civilians'. Although the US had backed the insurrection, through their agents the Saudis, Saddam Hussein, the King of Jordan and others, US intelligence dryly concluded: 'the Syrians are pragmatists who do not want a Muslim Brotherhood government' (DIA 1982: vii). That last observation was quite right.

It is just as foolish to say that Sunnis Muslims are 'disenfranchised' in Syria as it is to say that Protestant Christians are disenfranchised in Australia, because we have had two successive Catholic Prime Ministers (Turnbull is a convert). All Syrians are full citizens, regardless of their religion and, as it happens, most ministers in the Syrian Cabinet are from Sunni Muslim families. It is equally foolish to call the Baghdad Government a 'Shi'ite Government', simply because most of the population and most MPs are from Shi'ia families.

Demanding that Arab and Muslim peoples be forced back into a sectarian box is old school racist ideology, used many times in the colonies, repeated by the sectarians and adopted by the big powers who see their own advantage in pushing sectarian division. The Australian PM references this idea to what he calls 'Sunni Arab states'. That is Washington's euphemism for the despotic Gulf monarchies, the least legitimate of all governments and the principal financiers of sectarian terrorism.

A few weeks after this 'Turnbull initiative' a UN Security Council resolution made it irrelevant. The UNSC called for an end to the Syrian conflict, demanding that the Syrian

people decide their government, that terrorist groups be excluded from any truce and that a 'unity' government be formed. These principles require a Syrian vote on any possible constitutional change. However Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signalled his country's support for Syria keeping its "united multi-confessional" national constitution. Syria has voted several times on this constitution and has maintained the most progressive, pluralist constitution in the region. Lavrov, who has constantly consulted with Syria, appreciates that fact; Turnbull does not.

Subsequently the Australian government set a limit to its military commitments (training Iraqis and air campaign assistance) to the US coalition but said it would consider 'providing humanitarian support for Syria and Iraq … in consultation with our coalition partners' (Doran 2016). In typical colonial manner, it had not consulted Syria on 'humanitarian support'.

The good news is that Australia's racist interventions and weak attempts to join in the subjugation of Syria will have little influence. Iraq has decided to join with Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Russia to defeat the western backed proxy armies: ISIS, Nusra, the Islamic Front, Ahrar al Sham and the rest.

That will mark the beginning of the end for Washington's bloody spree of 'regime change' across the region, aiming at a US-led 'New Middle East'. How much more Canberra decides to poison its relations with Syria and its neighbours, to maintain most favoured status with Washington, remains to be seen.

It is a particularly Australian dilemma to have a culture pervaded by big power collaboration and colonial racism: looking for pretexts to intervene, refusing to listen to the other people's voices, refusing to respect their organisations, even refusing to recognise that they exist. That racism goes well beyond government and overtly imperial sub-culture, into servile academia and imperious left-liberal ideologies.

We have been deceived by the dirty war on Syria, reverting to our worst traditions of intervention, racial prejudice and poor reflection on our own history. Our main hope seems to be restoring some decent understandings through our better traditions: the use of reason, ethical principle and the search for independent evidence.

Tim Anderson's book 'The Dirty War on Syria' will be published online by Global Research (Canada) in January 2016.

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