

# Orientalism and the Islamic State Spectacle.

## “Leftists” Support US-NATO’s “Civilizing Mission”

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*The Guardian’s resident “Marxist” Richard Seymour has provided us an opportunity to briefly expand upon the prevalent Orientalist narrative oozing throughout the vast majority of modern Western commentary on the Arab and Muslim world.*(1)

To frame his latest feebly ambiguous opposition to NATO-bombs on Iraq, Seymour invokes a typically obfuscating perspective from “muted parts of the Left”. In these unspecified sectors of wrongheadedness, according to Seymour, “Leftists” are apparently in reluctant agreement with the recently commenced American airstrikes in Iraq – likely to extend into Syria – ostensibly aimed at the fundamentalist insurgency, morphed into an existential threat now known as the Islamic State.

Precisely who these “Lefts” are, and what exactly constitutes their political persuasions within an ever-growing and ever-politically abstract demographic of Western “Lefts” remains a mystery. Are these “Lefts” Marxists, Social Democrats, Liberals, anti-imperialists? Or perhaps imperial core opportunists such as the “socialist” cheerleaders for NATO’s destruction of Libya? Who knows, but the desired effect of endowing these pro-NATO characters so terrified in their suburban dwellings of the ISIS monster – “under their skin, infesting them” – with the abstract title of “Left” allows Seymour to portray them, and their pro-imperialist, pro-war, white supremacist “fear” of the Other Barbarian, their irrational and wholly uninformed “reason” for supporting the civilising mission, as something sensible, something to be quietly debated over a frappaccino slouched on a corduroy Starbucks sofa – as opposed to being vehemently rejected.

Of course Seymour’s pro-war “Lefts” are entirely fictional and built to provide him the opportunity to give his petty bourgeois white western *liberal* readership the luxury of self-identifying as the all-encompassing benevolent “Left”, while massaging their culturally racist affection for the fantasy of the Noble White Crusader destroying the Evil Arab Savage.

The principle that domination is indeed the ultimate motive of imperialism isn’t really touched upon, no totality of analysis is even attempted. Seymour may perhaps believe, as appears do his “Left” subjects, that US imperialism perceives ISIS – a paramilitary organisation the US itself played the principle role in creating and empowering(2)- as an imminent threat, rather than the reality of a strategic boon(3), and is intent on pursuing its God Given altruistic mission of Vanquishing Evil for the good of all mankind – humanitarian intervention(R2P). But surely no serious Marxist would entertain such subjectivist nonsense. Nevertheless, rather than expose this Orientalist spectacle and the civilising mission pretext

it now affords imperialism, Seymour instead opts to furnish it, and proceeds to form his reductive analysis and “explanations” for the Islamic State with idealistic twaddle and Western media’s false premises.

The explanation then, for this somewhat rationalised “Left fear” and consequent support for American imperialism are the “monsters” of ISIS, and by offering this explanation all Seymour achieves is to justify the racist ideology underlying his Western “Lefts” agitprop-incited fear of ISIS and the false altruism masking Western imperial machinations. Of course as any serious analysis shows, the West has no real intention of destroying its Frankenstein ISIS, but merely corraling and manipulating it toward meeting strategic objectives.(4)

But how has this organisation of “monsters” come to be? And how has it been able to engender this supposedly justifiable fear within Seymour’s “muted Western Left”? First and foremost, according to Seymour, is the organisations apparent “widespread support within much of the population it seeks to rule”, support “gained on the basis of vicious sectarianism”.

“..whereas the jihadi ultras of the “war on terror” era were an unpopular, marginalised minority within the Iraqi resistance, always fought and opposed by the mainstream of the Sunni Arab insurgency, Isis succeeds because of the support it enjoys within much of the population it seeks to rule. And this support, be it noted, is gained on the basis of vicious sectarianism.”

And the alleged reason for Seymour’s assertion of widespread support is nothing but a regurgitation of US State Department propaganda, “President [sic] al-Maliki’s repression of Sunni Arabs is now driving an insurgency against his rule, from which Isis is gaining” says Seymour, and this one-sided repression is quite literally all that is offered as explanation for the rise of ISIS.

For at least 8 years, the US, and its Gulf Cooperation Council clients – primarily Saudi Arabia – have led a policy of bolstering “Sunni”(5) militants in the region to incite sectarian aggression against the perception of an expanding “Shia crescent” consisting of Iran, Syria and Hezbollah.(6) No account or even acknowledgement of this – the crucial context for the US’ latest bombing campaign and wider imperial strategy – appears in Seymour’s article. Not a single mention of the three-year NATO/GCC sponsored Wahhabi insurgency across the border in Syria, nor any word on tens of thousands of foreign fighters, thousands of tons of arms and billions of dollars thrown at ISIS and its intermittent “moderate rebel” allies and competitors.(7) Through this sweeping omission of vital historical context, Seymour’s analysis erases the concrete reality of the policy it purports to examine and instead relies on the rhetoric and propaganda of the spectacle being used to further it.

American or British bombs seem to offer a tempting short cut. This is what has always given “humanitarian intervention” its compelling ideological power: while we as citizens watch in horror, we know that there are powerful people in the world who could stop this without breaking a sweat.

Seymour thus successfully reduces the antagonism into an ahistorical idealist binary of a Sunni-Shia divide in Iraq, through which alleged Shia repression of the Sunni community has resulted in the “natural expression” of the Other: the Savage ISIS. Yet this crass assertion isn’t backed up by a single piece of evidence, it is undoubtedly based on the wretched

reporting of Western media and the fantasies promoted to obscure ISIS' material causes and real sources of influence, those being externally supplied money, fighters and weapons. ISIS and Co. rule the areas they *invade* through coercion and violence, not through the ridiculous idea of a "tech-savvy popular base".

This false perception is further exposed by the fact a large contingent of ISIS fighters are not even Iraqi in origin, or Syrian for that matter. A recent report by the CIA(8) revealed that there are approximately 15,000 foreign fighters in ISIS ranks – a figure that has been consistently undercounted by the "experts" to maintain the fantasy of an indigenous uprising in Syria. This coincides with the Syrian Observatory's latest death toll – often cited by western media & NGO's – which tallied up to 15,000 foreign fighters killed in action in Syria. Put another way, that's roughly 1000 foreign fighters for every month since the Syrian insurgency began. Are we supposed to believe all these fanatics took it upon themselves to travel to Iraq & Syria due to Maliki & Assad's "sectarian policies"?

Contrary to the one-sided idealistic tales of Seymour and John Kerry, the simplistic portrayal of ISIS & Co. earning "grassroots support" simply through the Sunni community's alleged persecution is entirely false and built to conflate foreign-sponsored militants and their collaborators with the whole Iraqi Sunni population, while shifting the blame for the massive expansion in militant fundamentalism into a reaction against the alleged oppression of "Shia regimes" and away from its chief protagonists: the Wahhabi clients of NATO imperialism.

Peddling sectarian narratives serve several purposes for the Western commentariat, a consistent example of which is provided by the Independent's highly regarded Patrick Cockburn, who recently went as far as to suggest that "Sunni's of Syria in areas under ISIS control prefer it to the Government", an utterly wrongheaded and misleading sentiment that has been repeatedly debunked in the face of ceaseless propagation on behalf of Western and Gulf media for over three years. Yet these narratives persist as they are the primary ideological camouflage to hide external material causes, those causes being Western imperialism.

In Syria for example, the oft-repeated refrain of a supposedly sectarian "Alawite regime" is largely made up of a Sunni merchant class. The "Alawite army's" ranks are dominated by Sunni conscripts, along with Christians, Shia, and Druze. But the Assad government has been ceaselessly portrayed as a "sectarian regime" intent on suppressing the Sunni majority. The reality of course is the precise opposite, militant forces of the opposition are of a majority Salafi/Wahhabi fundamentalists, and this has been the case since the very beginning of the Syrian uprising(9) – if you are looking to blame anyone for the rise in sectarianism in Syria then you need look no further than the reactionary Wahhabi clients of Western imperialism.

Equally, blaming the "sectarian policies" of the Maliki government is just as hollow a narrative in the Iraq context(10); the US is responsible for installing the sectarian political system in Iraq in its attempts to divide nationalist resistance to its occupation and ongoing exploitation, a system in which the Maliki government was by no means an innocent bystander.

But the historical record shows that Maliki's more recent attempts to reverse this destructive process, along with a multitude of other policies which upset US strategic ambitions, including his refusal to allow the permanent installation of US military bases; his governments close alliance with neighbouring independent Iran; their efforts to aid the

Syrian government against the NATO-sponsored Wahhabi insurgency; and not least attempts to remove the vassals of the GCC from Iraqi politics—formed the real motives behind the US-Saudi-led campaign to incite Wahhabi fundamentalists against Maliki's Shia dominated government. Maliki's "sectarian policies" no doubt existed to an extent in reaction to the circumstances imposed upon it by the dominant aspect driving the antagonism; such policies came about as a result of both the historical legacy of the US occupation and the ongoing US-Saudi-led sectarian incitement and subversion, which in fact forms the historical "social base" for ISIS & Co.(11)

Cockburn and many others within the corporate media circus have continued to peddle these sectarian myths as a useful tool in idealizing the spectacle and extricating wider politics, more specifically culpable external actors. Although rightly regarded as one of the more sensible and rigorous journalists covering the Middle East, Cockburn is nonetheless just as susceptible to selling ahistorical reductive tales in what appear to be attempts at whitewashing or mitigating the role of Western imperialism; often putting repeatedly destructive Western policy down to "mistakes" in lieu of explanation for ceaseless aggression and decades of empowering reactionaries – supposed enemies of "Western Democracy". The flip side being of course the compassionate West must now attempt to fix its mistakes by means of further intervention, and on and on it goes.

Such narratives are largely premised upon the white supremacist ideal that the Western imperial bourgeoisie inherently seek "progress", or perhaps even "democracy" within foreign nations, as opposed to the fundamental characteristic of imperialism seeking political reaction all along the line(12). Contrary to Cockburn's perception of benevolent imperialism, the US does not seek even "stability" within nations unwilling to submit to exploitative Western capital—it seeks their destruction, as has been historically proven time and time again. Yet this concept of "bumbling benevolent imperialist" persists and is drawn from an inability to see past the Noble Western Empire's altruistic mythology and grasp the reality of a rapacious class destroying its competition.

Imperialism intentionally bolstered ISIS, its predecessors and intermittent Wahhabi allies, in the aim of setting them against Shia dominated political actors and states in the region opposed to US domination. It is now using the ISIS "threat" and spectacle as the moral pretext to both re-invade and divide Iraq, and reinvigorate its regime change and destructive agenda in neighboring Syria.

Instead of attempting to expose these policies in an international totality, Seymour & Co. aim to bolster the white supremacist mythology underlying the imperial civilising mission; on the one hand Seymour Others the Sunni population of Iraq as sympathisers of the ISIS Savage, a racist caricature dutifully embellished in all avenues of Western corporate media. On the other, by portraying "oppressive sectarian (Shia) regimes" as an even worse option than ISIS the entire region and its peoples are painted into a dystopian landscape of Savages and brutal sectarianism; accordingly, Noble Western Empire must save them from their own barbarity.

Moreover, by blaming Iraqis for the barbarism imposed on them externally, Seymour & Co. successfully extricate imperialism from its principal culpability in fomenting and sustaining sectarian antagonism in the Middle East. It therefore needs repeating that ISIS in Iraq is but a continuation of the imperialist-sponsored insurgency in neighboring Syria and the longstanding support to militant fundamentalism preceding it. The states acting under the autonomy of US imperialism responsible for arming and funding said insurgency hold the

same principal objectives in Iraq as those pursued in Syria for the last three years, namely: the destruction of state sovereignty; weakening the allies of an independent Iran; the permanent division of Iraq and Syria along sectarian lines establishing antagonistic “mini-states” incapable of forming a unified front against US/Israeli imperial domination.

**Notes:**

1.) Bombs wont solve the ISIS problem - Richard Seymour: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/15/bombs-isis-beheadings-iraq>

2.) How the West created the Islamic State - Nafeez Ahmed: <https://medium.com/@NafeezAhmed/how-the-west-created-the-islamic-state-dbfa6f83bc1f>

3.) ISIS: an expression of imperialism in Iraq: <http://notthemsmdotcom.wordpress.com/2014/06/18/isis-an-expression-of-imperialism-in-iraq/>

4.) US Intervention Is Not Humanitarian and Will Not Protect the People of Iraq - Sami Ramadani: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2014/ramadani080814.html>

5.) While consistently referred to as “Sunni” within Western and Gulf media it should be stressed that the ultra-conservative strains of Islam practiced by the majority of both “moderate rebels” in Syria and their overtly fundamentalist counterparts within ISIS, Al Qaeda, Jabhat al Nusra et al, are of the Wahhabi/Salafi doctrine and largely rejected by the majority of practicing Sunni muslims outside of the reactionary Gulf Kingdoms where such doctrine is enforced. By applying the Sunni label, authors such as Seymour enable the crude conflation of ISIS & Co. with the indigenous population, furthering Orientalist dehumanization and false sectarian narratives.

6.) The Redirection - Seymour Hersh: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/03/05/the-redirection?currentPage=all>

7.) How Saudi Arabia helped ISIS take over the North of Iraq - Patrick Cockburn: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/iraq-crisis-how-saudi-arabia-helped-isis-take-over-the-north-of-the-country-9602312.html>

8.) CIA says ISIS numbers under-estimated: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/09/cia-triples-number-islamic-state-fighters-201491232912623733.html>

9.) The Reactionary Essence of the Syrian Insurgency: <http://notthemsmdotcom.wordpress.com/2014/01/07/the-reactionary-essence-of-the-syrian-insurgency/>

10.) Nouri al-Maliki: the scapegoat in Iraq -Ali Raza: <http://lubpak.com/archives/315192>

11.) The strange case of Nouri al-Maliki - Eric Draitser: <http://journal-neo.org/2014/07/03/the-strange-case-of-nouri-al-maliki/>

12.) Imperialism and the Split in Socialism - V.I. Lenin: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/oct/x01.htm>

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