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Indefensible: Idlib and the left

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On Saturday regime and Russian airstrikes intensified on Idlib in what appears to be a prelude to the long anticipated campaign to regain control of the province.

Only a day before, thousands of Syrian men, women and children took the streets in over 120 cities towns and villages across the remaining liberated areas under the slogan 'resistance is our choice'.

They were demonstrating for their lives. Idlib is now home to three million people, a third of whom are children. Of the current population, over half have been displaced, or forcibly evacuated, to the province from elsewhere. Their options for fleeing the assault are limited. Borders are closed and there are no safe-zones left. They don't want to be forcibly displaced from their homes. At the protests many held signs rejecting recent calls by UN envoy Staffan de Mistura to evacuate civilians to regime-controlled areas, where they could disappear into torture chambers or face forced conscription, as has happened to others before them. 'Reconciliation' in the Syrian context means a return to subjugation, humiliation and tyranny.

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Through signs and chants, the aim of the protests was clear: to prevent an assault by the regime and its backers, to show the world that there are civilians in Idlib whose lives are now under threat, and to affirm that they continue to refuse Assad's rule. As-shaab yurid isqat al nizam (the people want the downfall of the regime) rang through the crowds, reminiscent of the early days of the uprising. They were not only protesting domestic fascism, but foreign imperialisms too – those of Russia and Iran – which have backed the dictator in his campaign to wipe out domestic opposition.

Yet once again the calls of Syrian anti-war protesters were largely ignored by the western 'anti-war left'. Instead of calling for an end to the bombing or supporting the victims of war, many have instead chosen to buy into the regime's 'War on Terror' narrative that the aim of the assault is to wipe out militant jihadists. Such illusions should have been shattered on Saturday. Sham hospital in Has village, southern Idlib, was targeted by barrel bombs and missiles, taking it out of service. The hospital had been located underground, in a cave, in an ultimately futile attempt to protect it from aerial bombardment. According to the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations, three hospitals, two Civil Defence Centers and an ambulance system were attacked on 6 and 7 September in Idlib and northern Hama, leaving thousands without access to medical care.

Extremist groups have a presence in Idlib – some have been sent by the regime itself following evacuation from elsewhere. Hayaat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) with former links to Al Qaeda dominates much of the province with its 10,000 fighters. Yet far from being an 'Al Qaeda stronghold' HTS has failed to win support from much of the population which has continually resisted the group's presence and hard-line ideology. At last Friday's protests in Idlib city, HTS fired live ammunition to break up the demonstration. The crowd quickly turned on the militants calling them shabiha (an insult once reserved for

regime thugs) and chanting “Jolani get out” – in reference to the group’s leader.

Many on the ‘left’ claim that out of a population of three million individuals there are ‘no good guys left’ to support. Or believe the presence of a few thousand extremists is justification enough for razing Idlib to the ground and collectively punishing its residents. The invisible majority of Syrians who don’t use guns to wield power are dismissed as irrelevant. They choose to ignore those who have been resisting all forms of authoritarianism and are committed to creating a better future for their families, communities and society at large. They present a grotesquely simplified binary in which the choice is between Assad and Al Qaeda, as if the conflict and deep-rooted social struggle were a football match between two sides. The side they back is a fascist regime – because at least it is ‘secular’ – a regime which gasses children to death in their sleep, operates death camps in which dissidents are tortured to death and which has been accused by the UN of ‘the crime of extermination’. Anyone who resists a return to regime control is presented as an enemy and a legitimate target for attack. Freedom, democracy, social justice, dignity – they are goals to which only westerners should aspire. The rest should just shut up and make do.

In this sinister and racist world view, everyone is either an Al Qaeda member or sympathizer. The fact that there are women in these conservative, rural communities that don’t dress like them, or have to courageously overcome numerous obstacles and threats to their safety in order to participate in the public sphere (as they did at last Friday’s protests) is presented as evidence of terrorist leanings, justification in itself for their annihilation. Instead of standing in solidarity with the courageous women in Idlib who are resisting both the regime and other extremist armed groups and fighting to overcome deeply entrenched traditional and patriarchal social mores, they would rather support a state which sent militia

to carry out mass-rape campaigns in dissident communities, which inserts rats into the vaginas of female detainees. The dehumanization of Syrians has been so thorough that many struggle to believe that amongst the chaos and war-lords there may actually be ordinary human beings worthy of support – people like ‘us’.

It is hard to understand how devastating bombing campaigns carried out by the Syrian state and Russia on densely populated residential areas, which have killed hundreds of thousands, can be ignored by anyone who claims to be ‘anti-war’. It seems Syrian lives are only meaningful if they’re destroyed by western bombs. Today’s ‘anti-imperialism’ is often used as a cover in support of totalitarian regimes, by people privileged enough to never have experienced what it’s like to live under them. Not content to ignore war crimes and other mass atrocities, attempts are also made to absolve the perpetrators from blame and deny that atrocities have occurred. Conspiracy theories, often originating in Russian state or far-right media, are circulated about chemical attack ‘false flags’ to white-wash regime crimes and justify the targeting of civilians and humanitarian workers. Syria has become a talking point to score political points without a second thought given to the real-life danger such false accusations place people in, or the deep pain and offence caused to the victims.

In her recent book, *Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution and the Rhetoric of Anti-imperialism*, Rohini Hensman asks; ‘How has the rhetoric of anti-imperialism come to be used in support of anti-democratic counterrevolutions around the world?’ She argues that there are three kinds of ‘pseudo-anti-imperialists’. The first are those who believe that “‘the West’ has to be the only oppressor in all situations”, a “Western-centrism which makes them oblivious to the fact that people in other parts of the world have agency too, and that they can exercise it both to oppress others and

to fight against oppression”. The second category consists of “neo-Stalinists” who “will support any regime that is supported by Russia, no matter how right wing it may be”. The third “consists of tyrants and imperialists, perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and aggression, who, as soon as they face a hint of criticism from the West, immediately claim that they are being criticised because they are anti-imperialists.”

In support of her argument, Hensman gives a detailed overview of genuine anti-imperialism as opposed to ‘pseudo-anti-imperialism’ through case studies from Russia and Ukraine, Bosnia and Kosovo, Iran, Iraq and Syria. She shows how self-declared ‘leftists’ have repeatedly supported authoritarian regimes over people’s democratic struggles, spread anti-Muslim bigotry, built tactical alliances with fascists, spread conspiracy theories and Kremlin/state propaganda, and engaged in genocide/atrocity denial and victim blaming. Her book is a timely reminder that the narratives propagated around Syria, in which the far-left echoes the talking points of the far-right and places geo-politics over people’s struggles and lives, are emblematic of a much broader malaise.

As bombs rain down on Idlib, few Syrians expect to see mass protests around the world in support of their cause or in defence of their lives. Those who claim a politics of ‘internationalism’ have abandoned them and retreated into isolationism or, worse, into apologia for fascism. Without addressing these issues the prospect of building an international movement against authoritarianism, imperialism, war and capitalism seems unlikely. In the meantime, we can expect the horrors which led the world to declare ‘never again’ to happen again, and again and again.