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Media [Mis]representation of the East in Reese Erlich's *Inside Syria*

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Media [Mis] representation of the East in Reese Erlich’s *Inside Syria*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Binu Kadariya, has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

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Abstract

This paper explores the traces of 'Oriental Gaze' in Reese Erlich's collection of reports on the Syrian war. It also examines the way to media misrepresent the reality or colonialism. is endorsed through media in Erlich's Inside Syria. As the journalistic report, this book explicitly presents the facts and figures during the crisis in Syria. However, that presentation of fact is guided by Western reports and its media and in most cases the writers of opinion articles demonstrated Western viewpoint. In this study, the researcher will try to make content discourse analysis of the entire report that is compartmentalized in different issue-based sections. In this work, the researcher will consider how one might re-orient an Orientalist gaze, extending this theoretical approach across Syrian war contexts, both in terms of the agency constructing this gaze as well as its subject. Drawing from Edward Said's classic theory of Orientalism, the researcher will examine how media institutions participate in constructing Orientalist representations of Middle East countries like Syria. Briefly reviewing how the US as an agency portrays the Middle East through Reese's investigative findings.

Key Words: Islamic, Fundamentalism, Neocolonialism, Dominance, Religion

This writing primarily focuses on how the Western media and authority use their influence and power to deviate people from the actual truth towards the truth serving them. People always seek power and recognition for good work. Either they do positive work or distort the events to make them recognize work done by others. This is done most subtly through the mediums of mass communication like newspaper articles, TV news, journals, radio broadcasts, theatre, movies, etc. Perhaps one of the oldest forms of misrepresentation of Middle Eastern history by the modern media can be found in a movie.

The initial mention of media misrepresentation can be traced in chapter, "Lawrence of Syria". Erlich writes, "in case the Westerners are informed on anything about twentieth-century Middle East, it's likely garnered from watching replays and reruns of *Lawrence of Arabia*." This 1962 movie depicts a tall, lanky and blonde British Army Officer, T.E Lawrence roaming the Middle East raising awareness and fighting the evil Ottoman Turks during World War I. Lawrence developed both the respect for and a romantic affinity for Arabs, a marked departure from the colonial arrogance of the times (*Page 6*). But the Arab leaders of the revolt against the Turks had a decidedly different perspective on Lawrence. They saw a minor British liaison officer who favored independent Arab states, but only to be governed by Arab monarchs who supported Britain and opposed France. They saw him as an advocate of neocolonialism who became famous after the war. As Stated in Edward Said's classical theory of orientalism, stereotyping of the Arab Other partakes of a wider western tradition that he calls "Orientalism". (1) Going back to the days of the European Empires, Orientalism is a body of western knowledge used to stereotype and subjugate those people who resisted in what used to be called the "Orient" (the Middle East of Far East). The orient was perceived to be both inferior yet

paradoxically also a severe threat to the political and religious stability of the West.

The need of control over this corridor gave rise to the character, Lawrence and comes along a savior who could release the Middle East from their sufferings. Erlich writes in his first chapter,

Lawrence basically pulsed the British lies of guaranteeing a postwar independent Arab nation. The British government had no intention of granting independence to the Middle Eastern people who fought together with them to overthrow the Ottoman rule. Sharif Hussein who represented a political alternative to the Ottoman Turkish Sultan Mehmed V (then the recognized leader of the Muslim world) offered to support British rule in return for a guarantee of a postwar independent Arab nation under his rule that would encompass virtually the entire Middle East. (2)

The need for control over people, power and politics over the people of Middle East gave birth to the Orientalism that is discussed by Said in his classical theory of Orientalism. As Said argues, it is during such crisis that the European and American media gets interested in “Islam”, a stereotyping label which stands in for the diversity and difference of actual Muslim people around the world.

The British were happy to use fierce intellectual supporters of the Arab cause such as Auda to win the war but relied on other aristocratic families to eventually rule the region. The then Industrial revolution of 20th century required huge amount of petroleum as a source of energy. Before start of the 20th century, the extraction oil was merely insignificant in the Middle East. In 1901 British businessman William D'Arcy convinced the Persian to award him a concession for oil exploration. Britain too pressured an existing British oil company, Burmah Oil, to finance assistance in 1905: shortly thereafter, large amount of oil was found. Britain which still was a great power

also wanted to maintain a political presence in the region which was further fueled by the discovery of huge oil reserves under the Middle Eastern region. After all, oil has a definite military value, protecting oil reserves becomes a prime concern for an industrial nation. This let the allies in the World War II to bomb the oil fields in Romania to strip the Nazis in Germany of this energy source and in more recent years, Iraq led by Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, threatened Saudi Arabia to do the same. The United States would soon be engaged in war with Saddam to restore Kuwait and to protect the Saudi Arabia which was going to have a profound impact on the politics and today's modern society. (4) The British during the Ottoman period were perfectly willing to ally with ultraconservative, religious rulers as long as they politically supported the British rule.

But everyone's perception of British people in the Middle East is not the same as the Westerners. Erlich in the following chapter brings up that the Reporter Lowell Thomas managed to create the myth of Lawrence of Arabia, specifically to promote his own career as a daring foreign reporter and spread myths about Arabs beautifully orchestrating the story in just a few days of interview. Thomas quickly through his stereotyped conjured up scenes of endless desert sands, veiled women and Bedouins carrying curved swords became the latest in a long line of Orientalists intellectuals who seemingly explain the mysteries of the Middle East while patronizing Arabs and promoting the superiority of Western culture. For instance, Thomas wrote in his book *Lawrence of Arabia* that Muslim leaders had sought to unify Arabs, "None was successful, but where they failed, Thomas Edward Lawrence, the unknown unbeliever, succeeded. It remained for this youthful British archeologist to go into forbidden Arabia and lead the Arabs through the spectacular and triumphant campaign". (5)

As claimed by Erlich, Thomas interviewed Lawrence for a total of a few days (according to Lawrence) or a few weeks (according to Thomas). Thomas during World War-I took funding from the Armour Company for his Mideast travels. During his late years, he syndicated radio broadcasts to NBS and CBS but collected salary from oil giant Sunoco (Show's Sponsor). We can clearly distinguish the main objective of establishing a hero Englishman favoring the Arab people which ultimately will help foster the establishment of British influence over the region.

The social and systematic administrative discrimination doesn't have roots with what the religious chants and writings as we have been taught and coached. Especially after the rise of Western world through the industrial revolutions people roamed around the world establishing their dominance using social, economical as well as scientific tools to lure mass in their favor. Havoc caused by atheist regimes of the West as like Hitler based on the racial superiority of the Aryans, depictions of tribal and underdeveloped world as peasants, widespread Christian missionaries on the far corners of the world and annihilation of local cultures provide us with hard evidence of sabotage that occurred during that period. (6) Those ripples of the Western bomb are still felt as racial disputes, civil wars and discrimination of people based on ethnicity, religion, origin and culture. When the French occupied Syria and Lebanon after World War I, they implemented a divide-and-conquer strategy that favored some Christian sects. Many Syrian Christians achieved higher incomes and educational levels than their Muslim counterparts, differences that persist today. When the Syrian uprising began in 2011, many Christians sympathized with the calls for democracy but worried about Islamic extremists who saw Christians as infidels. On papers, Assad is fighting to maintain secularism, but the reality shows a different grim picture. Even the Christian who sympathize with the Assad government are not

accepted as equals. Christians cannot hold the country's highest office. Syrian president must be a Muslim, according to the newly revised constitution of 2012.

This presents us with a certain degree of a paradoxical phenomenon, and some researchers claim that chaos, violence and discrimination of mortals by the Islamic affluent is dug deep in the behavioral characteristics of people in that region. But as mentioned above, the seeds of these acts of violence, discrimination and radicalism in religion are mostly the result of the geopolitical situation played upon the people of the Arab world. Erlich's *Inside Syria* provides us a weapon not only to dismantle the historically constructed discourses of Western civilization, but also to challenge the rigidity and absolutism of Islamic fundamentalism. Erlich's detailed research of each event is unorthodox to interrogate the ultimate truth of white colonial discourses which acclaim the West as the world of civilization, prosperity and development which does not hold any truth at all as it is established by power politics. From the eyes of Arabic journalist, Reese Erlich debunks the view of Western media that West is more civilized and offers more transparency of information than anywhere in the world. He reveals the undeniable fact showing postcolonial West as uncivilized and improper well after the imperialist and colonial era.

Said in "Covering Islam" clarifies that it should by now be clear that we are facing a mood and a movement far transcending the level of issues and policies and the governments that pursue them. This is no less than a clash of civilizations, perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our "Judeo-Christian" heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both. It is crucially important that we on our side should not be provoked into an equally historic but also equally irrational reaction against that rival. In other words, Muslims today react only because it is historically, and perhaps genetically, determined that they should do so;

what they react to are not policies or actions, or anything so mundane as that. What they are fighting on behalf of is an irrational hatred of the secular present which, they grandly proclaim, is "ours" and ours alone.

Upon dissection of hundreds of articles and interviewing residents, technocrats and politicians Erlich's culmination reveal the post-colonial legacy has not come to an end but it is further taking the form of new imperialism. Although it is said that colonialism has ended due to decolonizing process, colonial legacy is still persisting even in the age of post-colonialism. The colonial discourses which present the West as civilized are still manipulating the psychology of the people through the channel of media. But such elitist discourses are developed to empower their imperial rule and superiority to dominate the minorities in reality. That is why Erlich presents elucidation from both sides to criticize and challenge the discourses of white supremacy and falsify them by presenting the inherent exercise of new imperialism in post-colonial Middle East which requires further clarity of events of colonial era.

During the period of decline of the Ottoman Empire, in August of 1915, Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Francois Georges-Picot secretly made an agreement on dividing the Middle East in order to take control of the oil rich region. Ironically, The Sykes-Picot Agreement supported the creation of independent Arab States, but the clauses made clear the true intentions of the then colonial powers. "France and Great Britain shall be allowed to establish such direct and indirect administration or control as they desire and as they may think fit to arrange with the Arab State or Confederation of Arab States". (7) This clause as we might have guessed remained secret for a time because of its imperialist audacity, even by the standards of the time. In the film, Lawrence hears about Sykes-Picot very late in the war. In reality, he knew about the skullduggery very early and made false promises to his Arab allies. Towards

the end of the film, Arab armies have occupied Damascus and set up a governing council in the city hall. The scene is based on a description in the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. But unlike Lawrence's version, the filmmakers have Arab leaders' squabble and show no understanding of electricity generation, water works, and other modern technology. They blame others for the city's problem and threaten one another with violence. The film helps perpetuate the myth of Arabs as unable to govern themselves because they suffer from centuries of religious and ethnic diversions, a myth which continues to this day. (8)

The tussle between France and Great Britain divided the country region into two parts. The division of Arab into British and French control based on a narrow, unscientific and biased survey of the people of Arab world, France boasted of bringing civilization to Syria in the form of new roads and railroad lines. But poor farmers were forced to build the roads for no pay. (9) The French administrators were notoriously corrupt, expecting bribes to carry out even minor government tasks. Films such as *Casablanca* helped bolster the popular impression that the pro-American Free French were better than the evil pro-German and revolutionary rebel groups. The colonized people however didn't see much difference, and in the case of Syria and Lebanon, the Free French were worse than the short reign of the Vichy. In 1945 mass demonstrations broke out in Damascus, capital of Syria, following inspiration from the Lebanese independence from the French, French brutally attacked the demonstrators only hardening the determination of the independence forces eventually leading to the formation of independent Syria. While the independence of more and more countries of the Middle East was a serious blow to the colonial powers, it was just the beginning of the elite controlled actions and deception of people through mass media and expansion of religious hate within the people and

among the outside worlds. Joel R. Campbell on article “The Wrong War: The Soviets and the Korean War” writes, “The clash between two ideologies- capitalism and communist ideology” When Soviet Union and United States of America with communist and capitalist ideology respectively collided between each other in Korean Peninsula, it resulted in partition on Korea into two countries. Therefore, there remains a great risk that Syria which is backed by Russia and USA each with different ruling policies may victimize Syria with their destroying power. As of Korean peninsula which got separated into South Korea and North Korea, Syria may also be parted into two different countries separating families and neighbors. The same interpretation applies here during the division of the region between France and the Great Britain. It was merely the clash of two ideologies and powerful nations for the influence over the oil rich region.

After the birth of Israel, all the Arab leaders were dissatisfied with the division of their land. Israel and Saudi Arabia with the support of the United States raged enmity with everyone around the region for global dominance and influence. What we do not hear in the news is how Israel and the United States provoked others in order to initiate harsh military action to execute their interests and even committed crimes against civilians. The Lyndon Johnson administration suggested sending US and Israeli warships through the Straits of Tiran in order to get the Egyptians to fire first. (10) Eventually Egypt was successful to nationalize and get control of its most important strategic location, the Suez Canal. In 1967, Israel occupied Syria's Golan, arguing that the area gave Syrian military free rein to fire artillery into Israel. Israel also seized the West Bank of the Jordan River from Jordan as well as the Gaza Strip. Officially, Israeli leaders promised to follow UN Resolution 242 by trading occupied territory for the recognition of Israel. But all Israeli government sent settlers into

Palestinian land, occupied East Jerusalem and annexed the Golan. In 1973, Israel withdrew its troops from the city Quneitra which it captured during the 1967 war, but Israeli soldiers intentionally destroyed much of the city before their withdrawal. They circulated the explanation through Western media that it was destroyed in fighting between the two sides and denied any intentional damage. (11) However; an official UN report contradicts those assertions.

In 1970, Air force general Hafez al-Assad overthrew the civilian Baathist dictator Salah Jadid. No one knew at the time, but Assad would bring a long period of relative stability to coup- prone Syria using sharp-witted combination of political deal making and harsh repression. Compared to other Arab countries Syria had more enlightened polity toward Palestinian refugees. By the time of 2011, an estimated 500,000 Palestinians were in Syria. But Syrian leaders also sought to control the Palestinian movement by providing political sanctuary, money and arms. Leaders in Syria, Saddam Hussein and Iran gave fiery speeches against Israel but did little to help Palestine. In fact, Assad tried to manipulate the Palestinian movement. Assads were generally in acceptance with American interest in the Middle East. In 1980, the Muslim Brotherhood (rebel group) sponsored a general strike in several cities and attempted an assassination on Hafez al-Assad. The Syrian government retaliated by killing over six hundred political prisoners in Tadmur Prison and over ten thousand people in Hama city. Rifat al-Assad, brother of Hafez, told British journalist Robert Fisk, "You in the West should be grateful to us. We crushed Islamic fanaticism here" (12).

Assad carefully played a clever chess match with the United States and the Soviet Union for years, constantly flipping sides. We portray Syria as the opposition of the US and Israel because of its projection in the media but that was not the case.

Syria joined in the invasion of Iraq during the US-lead Gulf War in 1991. Syria also accepted the two-state solution for Israel and Palestine also known as the Oslo Agreement which eventually failed just as talks for returning of the Golan.

Then, Bashar al-Assad became the president of Syria in 2000 after the death of his father Hafez. Within a few years Assad did make reforms, the kind that warmed the pockets and hearts of international bankers. He liberalized the economy by selling off some of the state enterprises. But it soon became clear that privatization mainly benefitted the Assad family and their elite colleagues. During that period, newspaper and TV reporting of the West differed their criticisms in favor of Syria. Bush administration even requested Syrian authorities to interrogate and torture Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen on suspicion of terrorism. It became one of the infamous cases of "extraordinary rendition" in which US authorities kidnap suspected terrorists and send them to secret jails for torture.

George W. Bush, with strong senate support helped create a general acceptance for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Western media picked the exact propaganda and parroted that the invasion of Iraq would result in the spread of democracy throughout the region. Saddam was projected as a great threat to the security of Western states because of his nuclear ambition. In fact, all the weapon research programmers and military missiles were already dismantled as soon as 1997 as confirmed by the UN weapons Inspector in Iraq during the 90's. The Bush Administration mastered their projection on hiding the true intention of controlling oil fields for its growing economy using media. An investigation by the *New York Times* discovered that top Pentagon officials met with news analysts where they gave the analysts 'special information' and then tried to convince them to speak favorably about the Iraq war. The discovery was based on 8000 pages of secret information that had

been revealed to *The New York Times* through a lawsuit under the Freedom of Information Act. The article states that top Pentagon officials would invite news analysts to secret meetings and urge the analysts to speak positively of the war. Often, the US would give "classified information," trips, and contracts to the news analysts. It was revealed on October 2, 2016, that the Pentagon paid British PR firm Bell Pottinger \$540 million to create fake terrorist videos, fake news articles for Arab news channels and propaganda videos. Norm Chomsky, an American critic, stated that the media accurately covered events such as the Battle of Fallujah but because of an ideological bias, it acted as pro-government propaganda. In describing coverage of raid on Fallujah General Hospital he states that *The New York Times*,

Accurately recorded the battle of Fallujah but it was celebrated...it was celebration of ongoing war crimes. During all live war coverage of war, *Fox News* was a waving flag animation in the upper left corner and the headline was "Operation Iraqi Freedom" along the bottom. MSNBC also brought the American flag back on screen and regularly ran a tribute called "America's Bravest" which showed photographs sent by family members of troops deployed in Iraq. At least three different Western reporters were fired or disciplined due to their actions in covering the war. Peter Arnett, an NBC and National Geographic correspondent was fired for giving an interview with Iraqi officials in which he questioned the United States' role and saying the "first war plan had failed. (13)

Assad's intelligence agencies met with Iraqi Sunnis and the opposition groups. Some rebel groups slipped across the Syrian border into Iraq, leading US officials to claim Syria was sponsoring the penetration. In October 2008, US even sent helicopters inside Syria to attack a supposed terrorist cell in Al-Sukariya. The US killed six

construction workers and wounded two others. It was the invasion of Syria which was covered by few Western media and almost no one remembers. The US military was looking for scapegoats to blame for their own losses in Iraq. Even if Syria had been the most compliant and helpful country on the planet toward the United States of America, the situation in Iraq would not have been dramatically different.

The Iraq War intensified the Sunni-Shia conflicts and general political chaos. In comparison, Syrians saw the government as relatively stable and secure. Assad, prior to the 2011 uprising, rejected demonstrations and overturns, convinced that his brand of secular nationalism would prevail. Assad said, "Syria is a stable state. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people... When there is divergence, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbances". (14)

Never in history has leaders of Syria been proved tragically wrong in the face of a grassroots movement which we now call the Arab Spring. Two months after the statement, the uprising in Syria grew tremendously giving birth to many fronts which would have profound impact on the lives of the people of Syria and the Middle East as a whole. Almost immediate merciless crackdown on the peaceful protest gave rise to rebel groups of different ethnicity and background ranging from ultra right-wing violent protestors to liberal independent groups. Syrian government, using the learned Western tactics of media manipulation and false narrative, tried to blame Saudi Arabia, the gulf state of Qatar, Israel, United States and Europe. Agitators were extremist violent security forces armed and paid by these foreign forces. The regime's narrative contained some elements of truth; they were never Gandhi-styled nonviolent civil protestors. When the government with its forces fired live ammunition into the mass, the dissidents hurled back rocks. Ahmad Bakdouness a civil society activist told Reese Erlich during an interview, "Ours is not a Facebook revolution. We use

Facebook and similar networking sites only to alert the outside world that someone famous would be participating in the demonstration". (Page 40)

They relayed developments on the ground to satellite TV stations such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya. Quickly the opposition movement grew as new organizations sprang into existence. What we do not hear and see in mainstream media is the prosecution of gay and marginalized groups in US backed Middle Eastern Countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel is the fact that Middle East countries including these above are far worse violators of gay and human rights. Among the protestors too legitimacy of non-Sunnis, non-Muslims and homosexual were denied by extremist rebel groups. Ultra right-wing rebel groups al-Nusra, al-Qaeda, al-Islam as such pushed for a unified Arab country guided by Islamic laws which was frightening for all the non-Muslims and the non-Arabs. Extremist rebel leaders, accused by some opposition, have been released from jails by the Assad government in hopes they would take up a divisive armed struggle and make the war more entangled.

The main tactics of the chaotic encounters in the region was various forms of guerilla warfare which in instances seemed cruel and against the war ethics. In current exchanges in the West, Islam is often equated with extremism and terrorism. The rhetoric, "Not all Muslims are terrorists but all terrorists are Muslim" often goes on repeatedly on many platforms. However, terrorist tactics have a long history that has nothing to do with Muslims. The first modern-day terrorist suicide bomber blasted a grenade to kill the Russian czar in 1881 who was a Christian. The first car blast was by Zionists fighting the British occupation of Palestine before 1948. Islam is a religion of peace just as is Christianity, Hinduism and all other religions. Extremists in the US have murdered abortion doctors or blown-up government offices, massacred hundreds of Black people in the name of Christianity. Opportunist Islamic speakers

try to seize power quoting the verses of Koran, but we all know their actions are anti-Islam. To analyze the extremists, we must focus on their politics, not their religious delivery.

In 2011, Muslim Brotherhood published the Ten Point Pledge and Charter aimed at showing Syrians and other external forces that it could govern the country. Similarly, other rebel groups began to sprout such as al-Sham, al-Qaeda, Islamic front, ISIS as an opposition to Assad. Assad also mobilized many military and non-military groups as pro-government forces such as Mukhabarat, National Defense Force (NDF) and Shabiha. In that same year, seven Syrian army defectors announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army [FSA], the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar backed the FSA. The State Department officially allocated \$15 million to provide nonlethal aid, such as medical supplies and communication but the non-lethal category expanded until it included pickup trucks, night vision goggles and flak vests as read by a *New York Times article* by Micheal R. Gorden. The CIA along with the Turkish Authorities established a control centre in Istanbul to coordinate rebel activities and poured arms to favored groups. The Obama Administration provided \$100 million for salaries and equipment to the SNC. The CIA improved the quality of assault rifles, sniper rifles, RPGs and ammo. The then American government wanted to make American people believe that the FSA represented major Syrian Opposition groups and that they aimed for a secular democratic nation. Zack Beauchamp argued on a very serious factor on US military strikes on Syria. Every time US hits a Syrian target, there is always a risk that something goes wrong, US accidentally hits a civil target or kills a Russian or Iranian backed fighter promoting one or both of those countries to retaliate against United States, creating the war more complex and difficult to end. On contrary Reese Erlich highlighted on the failure of

Obama's government to act on the chemical attack in 2013. The consequences of future military strikes of US could create multiple scenes. Either Assad's force will back off and the FSA will gain their strength on the 4 reign, or it could retaliate Assad's aligned countries against the United States.

Then, the typical traditional Orientalist gaze from the West as mentioned by *Edward Said's* classic theory of Orientalism, began to germinate in news and print media. As mentioned in the description of T.E Lawrence's depiction in the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*, US backed militias were portrayed as the saviors and moderate enough to be accepted by the Western world. The general basis of Orientalist thought is an imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, "different" one called the Orient, the other, also known as Our World, call the Occident or the West. Such divisions always come about when the Orient has uniformly been considered an inferior part of the world, it has always been endowed both with greater size and with a greater potential for power (usually destructive) than the West. Insofar as Islam has always been seen as belonging to the Orients, its particular fate within the general structure of Orientalism has been to be looked at first of all as if it were one monolithic thing, and then with a very special hostility and fear. Westerners were the one that represented the whole of the population who were fighting the repressive government. They could be trusted by the Americans to lead the country to democracy and form a government favorable to the US. Headlines such as "FSA takes control of major strategic locations" began to pop up in the prime news channels such as *CNN* and *FOX*. Online magazine *Foreign Policy* stated,

US interest in the group [Islamic Front] reflects the bedraggled state of the Supreme Military Council and the desire to keep military pressure on the

Present Bashar al-Assad. The SMC is being reduced to an exile group and the jihadists are taking over. Senator John McCain sneaked across the Lebanese border into rebel-held Syria and met with General Salim Idris, a leader of the Supreme Military Council (Military wing of Free Syrian Army). (14)

On contrary to this news, the US and Turkey backed militias failed to take control of any such major region that could have any significant effect to overturn the outcomes. They failed to get enough traction to gain support from the Syrian public who were already tired of the growing number of rebel groups causing havoc in the Syrian streets and villages. The Assad regime has tried to uphold secularism in the face of Muslim Extremism. But the wedge between Sunni Muslims and Syria's minorities was rather intensified. Soldiers started even at the checkpoints, they are automatically suspicious of Sunni Muslims but not worried about Alwaites and Christians. Assad cleverly plays on the fears of minority groups that they would suffer under majority Sunni rule. By employing coercion, a pervasive spy apparatus, constructed tribal and family alliances, bribery and the tactics of divide and rule.

Syrian government used the same tactics of mass deception and misrepresentation of the uprising that was devised by the US government during the war on terrorism. The twisting of facts by the US government on the truths about the prisons of Guantanamo, how the drone attacks never kill the civilians and only the evildoers meet their disastrous fate, NSA (National Security Administration) is protecting us from the terrorists by having access to every phone call and email sent in the United States. Over years of close encounters with the Western Orientalist deception of facts among the public, Syria too learned some to use in their favor and used to gain traction among the Russian and Iranian counterparts. In 2013, the backup military launched artillery barrages at villages going door to door, stabbing and bludgeoning

entire families. A UN report later estimated that around 300-450 deaths had occurred from the rampage searches, most at the hands of government forces. Syrian government TV reported that the army had defeated a band of terrorists and blamed them for the horrible atrocities. Some government supporters are convinced that if the civilians do not leave rebel areas, they must support the rebels. They treat the civilians living in the rebel controlled as they would treat the extremist rebel groups terrorizing the people living in Syrian villages.

Despite the presence of American military and intelligence units across the Syrian boundaries, Assad's government always finds its way out of every major crisis and gains control of enough influence to defend itself from those crises. Assad became a major player in the fight of Arab world against the State of Israel, exerted control over Lebanon, and allied with Iran against Iraq. Even without a powerful army or economic supremacy, Assad created smart strategic alliances to display Syrian power. One of those extended helping arms has been a unique neighbor and non-ignorable ally, Iran. An unapologetic media ignorance of events that the US government did on Iran shapes the whole perception of Syrian presence in the region among most Iranians. In 1953 the CIA instigated a coup against the democratic government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and installed the pro-US dictator Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. The geopolitical alliance of Assad and Iranian dictators' dates to Iran's 1979 revolutions. Over the years Iran developed strategic interests in Syria. Iran's Revolutionary Guard helped create many extremist rebel organizations. It remained a key source of military and economic aid to rebel groups in the Middle East region.

The Iranian grim visage of Khomeini is deeply imprinted in the American Psyche. His long gray beard, tightly wrapped black turban, hawkish nose and harsh

expression came to personify evil among the American public mainly due to a student demonstration that broke into the American Embassy and held fifty-five members hostage for 444 days. The new religious government of Khomeini after 1979 broke from the US economic paradigm. It diversified its oil sales, made alliances with nationalist movements and helped Iran get into an economic boom following a period of US controlled political and economic framework. Iran's ambitious military aims however contradicted American Middle East policy and interest. Its military projects threatened USs' and Saudi Arabia's national security. Iran's involvement in fueling rebels and militia groups disrupted the national interest of pro-US governments around the region and vice-versa. Iran's gravity towards religious unification of the Arab world does not dispute its unavoidable involvements with civil and rebel groups in the region. There is a debate about the role of religion in the civil wars of Shia-Sunni majority Middle Eastern region. Some analysts say the war puts a dent on the Sunni majority against the Alwaite and Shia minority, reflecting century old religious antagonism, but that as it may, according to another sect of analysts, the civil war is political, not religious. But the ground results of an independent and conscientious group of reporters find both sides using religion to rally their followers and defame the enemy.

Iran's national interest compels its presence in the region as inevitable more so than the US national interest. The historiography of the approaches between the East and the Western differs significantly contrary to our newly developed economic ties and web. The brutally impressive facts are, of course, that the Gulf oil-producing states suddenly appeared to be very powerful, there was an extraordinarily ferocious and seemingly unending civil war in the region. On the whole it's fare to say that few of these happenings might have been illuminated by expert writings on Islam in the

West, for not only had been the experts not predicted them nor prepared their readers about then, they instead provided a mass literature that seemed, when compared with the real occurrence, to be about an impossible distant region of the world, one that bore practically no relation to the turbulent and threatening confusion erupting before one's eyes in the media. The *Wall Street Journal* reported,

The Syrian fighters got better training in Tehran and helped boost the influence of Syrian government on its territories. "Before I could only hit targets 50 percent of the time, now I can hit a target around 90 percent of the time" said one trainee quoted by the Journal. (15)

While Tehran acknowledged sending military advisors to Syria, it denied providing military combat troops. But Western sources argued that Iran had significantly boosted the revolution using some of the Revolutionary Guard as combat troops. After the fall of the pro-US regime in Iran, men who hoped to spread their version of Islamic sect persisted rapidly as opposed to US imperialism and to Communism. The post-colonial government obviously did not gain popular support among the Western counterparts. At first the US denounced Iran for instigating "terrorism" referring to rebel groups like Hezbollah. By 90s the US and the Israel came up with a new line up of attack against the Iranian military advances. They insisted that Iran was about to develop a nuclear bomb. Then began a long line of sanctions which sharply escalated inequality and chaos among the public.

Officially, sanctions were to worsen conditions Iranian leaders and key industries, not the ordinary people. Discontent at street level was largely accepted by Western media like *The Washington Post* in hopes that they would eventually pressurize the government making them realize that they need to change their ways.

(16) The tactics are in reality, devastating the people of Iran. Another major

underpublicized aspect of US's organized media perception is about the sanctions it uses to weaken the dictatorial regimes. Sanctions against Syrian government are depicted as the major tool to suppress Assad's economic power over the country. Media states its effectiveness as an important weapon to overthrow dictatorial regimes and establish democratic liberalism. However, these sanctions result in loss of exports, destruction of factories, small industries and vendors. The Syrian gross domestic product (GDP) grew by 3.2 percent in 2010 but dropped to -21.8 percent in 2012 and -22.5 percent in 2013. The economic crisis also hit those independent Syrian business as well as small business people many of whom had supported Assad.

Each party still hopes for decisive military progress. Iran will likely keep on backing Assad until some other leader comes along who is willing to have friendly relations with them. Similarly, Washington will back rebels to install a pro-US regime in Damascus. It will continue reporting events based on self centered worldview and biases providing analysts and research with plenty of materials for further analysis and clarifications. Eventually, the United States, Syria and Iran will have to directly or indirectly agree on a political compromise in order to make peace for the sake of millions of Syrian people who have been grinded by the conflicts of these power houses:

Erlich in drawing things to close carefully shows the diversity of people within the Syrian boundaries. The oppression of Kurdish people in the northern region of Syria by the Syrian government, extremist rebel groups and the US backed militia is carefully described in the chapter "Will the Kurds Have Their Way". The Kurdish majority region of the north is bordered with Turkey. So, it's obvious for Turkey to acts on delegitimize the PYD and PKD controlling the region. Turkey at the time was a close ally of the United States whose media minutely published news in support for

the US control of the Kurdish region. Despite the failure of the US backed militias to control any significant area to gain enough public support, the Western media subtly influences us with its global soft power of its modern culture and language. One instance of such depiction is mentioned in an interview of a Kurdish refugee girl in the Moqebleh Camp of the Kurdish region,

Balo took me on a walk tour of the three-hundred-person Moqebleh Camp, which is consisted of dirt roads and concrete-block houses with plastic roofs. Balo taught herself to speak English by watching TV and movies. I love English, and I love to speak, she said. I asked her the name of her favorite movie star. "Jackie Chan!" she shouted with glee. Ah, the joys of globalization. A Syrian Kurdish refugee learns English from a native Chinese speaker more famous for his fighting skills than his Diction. (17)

The statement above proves us the despairing reality of the post-colonial school of thoughts being exhibited by most of the Medias of mass communication over the Western Hemisphere. Gradually this conception of self centric nationalist or even racist doctrine sadly still prevails today throughout the globe. Not only on economic and social level, post-colonial maxim is also finding its way up in each and every crack of local culture, tradition and heritage.

The Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD), or Democratic Union Party formed in 2003 as the Syrian offshoot with the goal of protecting Kurdish region and the rights of the people living there is also a major force to be considered while discussing the portrayal of Western media on the events of Syrian fight. Syrian authorities have been using deceitful means to defame such militia groups even in cases where the fighters did nothing but protect the region from extremist rebels or the government oppression. They are among the groups which neither support extremist rebels nor

support the Assad government. One instance of defamation of PYD occurred in 2012 by the Syrian authorities. Turkish authorities told their national media that the Syrian government has rewarded the PYD for its support by allowing it to take over four Syrian towns. Many Western Media took up the tune. Dutch journalist and analyst Wladimir offered a view:

The main goal of the PYD is to create an autonomous region, so it doesn't matter to them if they need to cooperate with al-Qaeda, Assad, Free Syrian Army or anyone, as long as it serves their goal. They are not a proxy of anyone, they follow their own strategy. They cannot defend tyranny and oppression and they want to bring down the regime, the only difference is in the mechanism and the means. (18)

The two opposite bridge narrative of Western media between the extremist Islamic rebels and Assad group fails to clarify all the power dynamics of the region. Either you support extreme Islamic rule or the autocratic Assad rule; this is the de facto view on the people of Syria by most of the media columnists and the people as well. This linear view of sides fighting to establish their influence in Syria is an insufficient outlook. The PYD who oppose both Assad and the Islamic opposition breaks the nuanced perspective of the media. The PYD however is a pragmatic party that has its own interest to administer. One can aspect to make all the alliances they need as a temporary compromise pending it does not harm people directly. Kurds living in the PYD controlled towns and villages told the story to the *Global Post*, "Almost everyone in Afrin has been threatened by the PKK (PYD). They demand taxes from everyone. If you refuse, they threaten, steal or destroy our property" (19).

However, ground realities of the reports from journalists of Middle Eastern origin reveal a different reality. Many Christians said the PYD protected their areas

but did not interfere in their areas. The Christian inhabited neighbor was terrified of the extremist rebel groups such as al-Nusra and Hezbollah and believed that PKK may be able to stabilize the region. Human Rights Watch of New York sent a delegation to the newly formed autonomous regions which was declared by PYD stating that the region was relatively stable than other parts of the country. Contrary to these reports, the Obama Administration came up against autonomy. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Gordon said, "We do not see for the future of Syria an autonomous Kurdish region, we want to see a Syria that remains united".

Another major force extending its arm over Syria is Israel, which is a direct dissident of the Orientalist Western mother nations. The very first media deception by the Israeli government began simultaneously with the birth of the nation. While claiming to be a victim of the Arab forces, Israel had the strongest military in the region. Every time Israel went on for a war claiming self-protection, it expanded its territory. By 1967, it had grabbed more than three times the size of its original borders under the UN convention of 1948. The lone lion in the wild does as it pleases, just as the Israeli government did on the playgrounds of the Middle East. Sadly, this practice of Israel still persists till this day. Deadly attacks on the people of Gaza by the Israeli army at the beginning of the year 2021 were witnessed by millions of people of the world. Palestinians were forced to crunch into little fragments of West Bank and Gaza which made Israeli occupation easier and foreign aid almost impossible. Israel created a militarized structure that functioned as border crossing between countries controlled only by the Israeli soldiers in the 1990s. Palestinians are trapped in an area dictated by Israel. Israel claims these procedures protects both countries from terrorism, but they serve only to increase hostility and make peace talks more difficult. The Israeli

Defense Force (IDF) attacked Syria too on many occasions, each time claiming it was not taking sides in the civil war but stopping arms shipments to extremist groups. The IDF obviously does not acknowledge the attacks, but US intelligence confirmed t'/hem. There's a quote popular among anti-establishment analysts, "attacking and firing missiles at another country is an act of war, unless you are Israel or the United States". During the same period of 2013 the *New York Times* wrote, "As the death toll has mounted, more Israelis joined camp, Amos Yadlin, a former head of Israel argues that the devil you know is, actually, a devil you should be ousted sooner than later" (20).

These types of direct threats by a powerful country to a county like Syria, toggled between the conflicts are saddening to everyone. Media too does not find any language of oppression and misuse of power on those statements and acts. Phosphorus weapons used during the aggression against the Gaza strip in 2008 and 2009 were not too widely criticized as they were when used allegedly by Syrian soldiers. Not that its use by Syria is acceptable, use of any kind of weapons and devastating people's life is inhuman and punishable by any means. What the main point of focus is the one-sided reporting and biases that knowingly or unknowingly is transcended through the news articles and columns mainly from the Western Hemisphere.

One of the most important revelations on misrepresentation of news and policy formation of the US government comes from *Inside Syria's* last chapter 'United States, Russia, and Outside Powers' where it was made public by one of the spokespersons of the State Department during an anonymous interview with Reese Erlich; she said that the legality of military intervention and attacks are never discussed by policy makers. Controversial policies are sent to the legal department for review and they'll always find a way to justify whatever policy is decided. As argued

by Said, that the European Orientalism was at least based on experience of the Muslim culture, the new Orientalism finding voice particularly after 1970 American media has no such comprehensive intellectual or experimental basis. Subsequently, American knowledge on “Islam” is suspiciously protracted, full as well as empty at the same time. Said’s notion about American media is further clarified through the statement of Peter van Buren, a Foreign Service officer. He said that the State Department’s wizardry over clever use of words is exceptional. He told:

Word games about human rights only carry weight in the United States. In the real world, none of these words mean anything. If you are in Saudi Arabia and speak out against the government, you are going down. You will not be found again. If you are in Syria and do the same thing, you will be a freedom fighter as you go down. (21)

That sums up the policy formation of the US government between its allies and the opposition countries. Ignoring the abuses of the allies and concentrating on finding liberal justification for wars has been the doctrine of Western media. Erlich, in the last chapter, discusses about the policy perception of the US government and some of the core columnist of the Western Hemisphere towards the Middle East region. As Edward Said explains in “*Islam as News*”, cultivation of this perception may be due to little concreteness to be found in America’s experience of Islam as well as lack of experts on Islam and the Middle East. The absence in America either of a colonial past or a longstanding cultural attention to Islam makes the current obsession all the more peculiar, more abstract, more secondhand. The *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman is one of the many experts finding liberal justifications for crimes and interventions. He states in an article,

I believe that if you want to end the Syrian civil war and tilt Syria onto a

democratic path, you need an international force to occupy the entire country, secure borders, disarm all the militias, and midwife a transition to democracy. It would be staggeringly costly and take a long time with the outcome still not guaranteed. My view is that anything short of an external force that rebuilds Syria from the bottom up will fail. Since there are no countries volunteering for that role (and I am certainly not nominating the United States), my guess is that the fighting in Syria will continue until the parties get exhausted. (22)

Danny Postel and Nader Hashemi, of the centre for the Middle East Studies at the University of Denver, wrote in a *New York Times* opinion article,

If the Assad regime didn't lift the sieges, an external international force must be introduced to guarantee the safe passage of food and medicine to starving Syrian civilians. The sieges must be broken by any means necessary. If a multinational force cannot be assembled, then at least some countries should step up and organize Syria's democratically oriented rebel groups to provide the necessary force on the ground, with air cover from participating nations. (40)

In simple terms, both made a racist assumption that Syrians and Arabs can develop a civilized society only through occupation. Erlich argues that these arguments have already gone out with the death of colonialism. Syria and the whole region somehow are made to cover everything that one most disapproves of from the standpoint of civilized, and Western, rationality. It is as if discrimination between religious ideologies, a struggle for a just case, ordinary human weakness, political competition, the history of men, women and societies cannot be made when Islam is dealt with by reporters, novelists, policy makers and experts. Instead of analysis and understanding as a result, there can be for the most part only the crudest form of us-versus-them.

Huge media houses and columnist like Friedman and Postel based in the United States spread across the globe echo the clever words used by the State Department which sets the standard for other publishing houses of the world. They set the standards for the people of the world and they better get in step to avoid any form of retaliation. All that matters to the media is not the human rights reports but rather the policy alliance with its government to secure its interest.

Ultimately government policies on the Middle East are based on oil supply protection and profits. But one thing is sure, longer the fighting continues in the region, the more foreign powers along with its media will interfere. Even countries like Russia, Britain, China, France and Iran are resource greedy giants willing to support any dictator or democratic government to their commercial advantage to varying levels. Russia sent massive number of arms and provided diplomatic cover for the Assad's repression. Iran sent arms and military advisors, and facilitated the entry of Hezbollah. The United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and the Israel all backed the rebels. All the countries want to take some control of significant areas to secure their interest. Media's perspective too relies on the bedrock principle that its role enlightens public and secures human rights but none of those matters more than its consortium with the governments of powerful countries.

Despite the convergence of Western media toward unified echoes of expert strategists from Washington, Brussels and Geneva, we find some optimism because the rapid growth of connectivity among people of the world enabled by the technology called Internet helped minority groups to make their voices heard by the general public. The growing backlash of people on events like of Gaza, of the democratic demonstration of Hong Kong, media control policy of India and torture of black community by US police personnel gives us buoyant picture of growing

political and social literacy. Rise of many local media houses such as Al Jazeera in Qatar, DW News in Germany, NDTV in India, Xinhua News in China as significant regional players provides a dynamic competition to the global media power houses such as BBC and The New York Times. Overall increase in global literacy has made people able to distinguish national interests and can make opinions on any events happening in the far corners of the world. This, even half a century ago, was an unimaginable feat. The gradual global shift of power dynamics from the Western to the Eastern Hemisphere serves as a major perspective change from post-colonial dogma. The search for ethnic origin and cultural significance of local tradition too serves to establish equity in media representation of worldly events. Considering the rapid technological progress and human agility to change existing perspectives into a new progressive one gives us the glimpse of an uplifting future ahead.

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