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07-09-2015

The Just Oppressors: Middle Eastern Victimhood Narratives and New Imagined Communities

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The only thing that rivals the amount of injustice in the Middle East is the region's production of of victimhood narratives. Jews are victims, Arabs are victims, Kurds are victims, and so are Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites, and Christians. But if we are all victims, then who are the oppressors?

In this article, I argue that victimhood narratives are seldom honest depictions of oppression, and that oppression and victimhood are conditions, relations and processes that are best described in the language of politics, economics, and law - not in terms of identities and origins. I also argue that we would do well to question the justice of communities (in both their ethnic and confessional variant), and the validity of what these communities say of themselves and others. The belief that one's community is righteous is often a measure of one's subordination and lack of moral independence; it is not a measure of a community's beneficence. We are often as right as we doubt our community's narratives about good and evil.

Injustice and victimhood

There is no way one can deny that there are real injustices that target certain Middle Eastern communities in a discriminatory fashion. These injustices deny particular communities political, social or cultural rights (or all of the above). This is a recurring reality not only in our region, but throughout the world. However, victimhood narratives are not honest portrayals of these injustices. These narratives are evocations of oppression stories from a near or distant past, which come to the fore specifically when these communities or segments within them (often the most organized or powerful) are emerging, and in order to rationalize exceptional demands, or justify current privileges. Victimhood narratives do not invent injustices per se, but they depict these injustices as systematic targeting of an "innocent" community by an "antagonist" other, the systematic oppression of which is typified by its own essence. A victimhood narrative cannot exist in absence of an oppression narrative - in opposition to

another community, which is ostensibly unified and homogenous. In this world, victimhood and oppression are not products of politics and social struggle, but of inherent natures, essences, and origins. Yet this is exactly what makes victimhood narratives political, as they are neither a form of social knowledge, historical investigations nor legal statements.

Victimhood narratives are facets of community building, community-member aggregation and remedying internal fissures in a context of competition for authority, influence, resources, and territory amidst the regression of modern political institutions (the state, political party, voluntary groups and the individual), and the failure of an international legitimation of such modern concepts. Because narratives are at the heart of community building, there are no communities (or at least ruling elites of such groups) that do not perceive their own community as victims. Elites produce narratives in a binary context: an intra-group, internecine struggle over leadership, and a pan-communitarian struggle over power, influence and privilege. This is not to say that victimhood is absolutely self-centered, but rather that communities are themselves products, (not producers, of victimhood (and superiority) narratives. An honest judgement of injustice does not take the form of a victimhood narrative, but actually a criticism and deconstruction of such a narrative, as I will argue below.

Assuming the unity of an oppressive community is a defining component of oppression narratives that accompany victimhood narratives: when it comes to “us,” the persecution, enmity and maliciousness directed towards “us”, we won’t find any differences between “them” -

“they” are all the same! Our supposed disunity is experienced with hardship and misery, while they stand united against us. Victimhood and oppression derive from the essence of communities and identities: their oppression emanates from their nature and identity, and we are targeted because of ours.

The marketplace of injustices

In our current contexts, it seems that victimhood narratives are based on three assumptions. First, victimhood narratives assume situations of communitarian conflict, such that a community’s elite produces a narrative regarding a community’s suffered injustice and prejudice that legitimate its leadership and competition for material and symbolic resources within the community. Second, they assume local and global forums for circulating, exchanging and contesting narratives and social distinctions. The information and communication revolution has provided such forums through social media, but these are also present in international organizations, as well as in public spheres and media of the most influential states – which have a larger impact on elites. Lastly, these narratives assume the centrality of justice conceived as non-discrimination – required by our current global political and legal situation – which can be defined more so negatively than positively: the crisis of the nation-state, which in theory provides equal justice for individuals.

I would argue that the prominence of victimhood narratives in community-building is a relatively recent phenomenon, one that goes back a generation or a little more. It has accompanied the rise of culturalist and civilizational doctrines, identity politics and the subsiding of labor

ideologies and policies (national liberation, nation-building, socialism) and those of social change – ideologies that were dominant up until the 1980s. Before this date, communitarian elites aspired to share global values, to interact with others and to frame their aspirations in global terms, perhaps to catch a global wave one may call “the train of civilization” or “the procession of history,” or a newer, more just, world order. Today, communities veer towards self-affirmation, differentiation, and their identity demands supersede social policy that transcends ethnicity and confession. It’s as if we’re returning to a time of organic, natural and inherited bonds, at the expense of artificial, voluntary and optional bonds, as nations metamorphose into giant tribes, excluding and marginalizing “subjects” within them. The global crisis of the modern nation-state is best exhibited by the propagation of state breakdown, as well as fenced and tightly-bordered states protecting themselves from an outside world made up of barbaric, people-exporting “failed states.” The phenomenon of failed states itself is a recent one, emerging at the end of the Cold War, when the victors were too busy congratulating themselves on their victory, leaving behind their previous battlefields for ruin. That was the most crucial moment in the history of the world in a long while, because it was impossible to conceive at the time that what the world required then was ... a revolution.

The genetic superiority inscribed in the structure of the victorious camp set off looking for an enemy, and seeing as there was no enemy in the form of a solid, ideological, military camp, the enemy was conceived in “civilizational,” “cultural,” and “religious” terms. The current rise of communitarianism and victimhood is only 25 years old, perhaps a little older.

Middle Eastern narratives

In the contemporary Middle East, there are many powerful victimhood narratives – with many more lurking in the wayside, able to spring up upon closer examination of local communities. Given what I’ve argued above regarding the relatively new phenomenon of community-building, these victimhood narratives are all modern – even if they borrow old language and symbols.

Perhaps the newest victimhood narrative in the Middle East is the Sunni narrative, which is barely a generation old. The narrative got its major push with the occupation of Iraq and the marginalization of its Sunni population, and was supplemented by the assassination of Rafiq Hariri in Lebanon, while the destruction of Sunni communities during the Syrian revolution evoked a relatively older memory, that of the Hama massacre in 1982 and occasionally the beginnings of Ba’athist rule in 1966.

Those who circulate this narrative, particularly Islamist politicians and militias, have a long litany of abuses at their disposal to which they can point – such as the situation of Muslims in Chechnya, the Serbian massacres of Bosnian Muslims, the American occupation of Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay’s prison camp, and of course, Palestine. Sometimes, they refer to older memories of Western colonialism, the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, and the abolishment of the “caliphate.” In its militant form, especially within Al-Qaeda, the Sunni narrative is pointed towards “The Judeo-Crusader alliance,” but in Syria and Iraq, as well as Lebanon, it is part of the Sunni-Shiite struggle. Again, narratives are not honest depictions of reality, nor do they strive for internal consistency. They are

purely dramatized, coordinated stories used to build communities and reinforce identities, and have nothing to do with social, historical or legal knowledge.

The Shiite narrative is also relatively new, even if it has an inveterate tradition in “the Suffering of Āl al-Bayt” (the House of the prophet Muhammad). One has to immediately acknowledge that this tradition has nothing to do with the modern Shiite victimhood narrative, even if the latter has framed itself in similar terms and borrowed its symbols, memory, imagination, and purported enemy. The Shiite narrative may seem older than its Sunni counterpart, and directed mainly against Sunni authorities (the descendants of the first Umayyad caliph Mu‘awiyah, or his son Yazīd, ... Hussein the martyr, Zainab the captive). However, this is the symbolic family of the Shiite victimhood narrative and its source of sanctity. The narrative itself has to do with contemporary struggles, and the aspirations of Shiite elites in contemporary societies. The narrative affiliates itself with the suffering of Āl al-Bayt as a way of “inventing tradition” Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions” in Eric J. Hobsbawm, and T. O. Ranger (eds). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge 1983, pp. 1-14.: the situation of Shiites today has nothing to do with a struggle between Ali and Mu‘awiyah or between Yazīd and Hussein more than 1400 years ago. In the Shiite narrative, the oppressor is mainly Sunni, or “Nāsibi” (of those who harbor hatred).

For its part, the Alawite victimhood narrative in Syria did not employ the symbols and language of the older Shiite suffering, probably due to the tangential position of Alawites in the Shiite framework, and to the very particular circumstances of its rise. The Alawite narrative emerged

while the Assad family—itsself from Alawite origins—began to rule over Syria, and expressed itself in a social language deriving from the social position of Alawites in Syria prior to Ba’athist rule. It focused on poverty, marginalization and persecution, while pointing towards earlier supposed massacres, mainly to unify the Alawite community and justify the current conditions of Assadist rule. The Alawite narrative is not that of the regime, which promotes a narrative of Syrian patriotism today and promoted pan-Arabism in the past. The Alawite victimhood narrative is a discrete one that can be attributed to organic intellectuals who invoke the old marginalization of Alawites, and their relatively recent poverty, to justify current conditions. In this narrative, the oppressor is also Sunni. Today, due to Iranian sponsorship and protection of the Assad regime,

as well as the devastation of the Alawite community in the current war (with tens of thousands of its young men dead), the Alawite narrative may reluctantly evolve to incorporate more Shiite components

The fourth victimhood narrative is the Kurdish narrative. The Kurdish narrative’s main components derive from the age of nationalism, and at its earliest is less than a century old. However, we must distinguish between the victimhood narrative and Kurdish nationalist ideology, which justifies itself with national aspirations of statehood, self-determination, and equality. This nationalist ideology is little more than fifty years old (in Syria), but for a generation or so (i.e, since the end of global “progress”) it has metamorphosed into a victimhood narrative. The narrative fuses nationalist components and references to the discriminatory policies of four Middle Eastern countries against the Kurds along with aspirations for more equitable

circumstances and a national home. It also combines these elements with many older and newer civilizational components: on the one hand a Kurdish historical continuity whose most recent manifestation is Saladin and the Ayyubids who liberated Jerusalem for the Arabs, and on the other hand an assimilation with the modernist aspirations of the Western middle classes. In Syria today, their oppressors are the Arabs, who are stereotypically accused of being Daesh supporters. But of course, if one combines the Syrian and Turkish contexts, the biggest oppressor are the Turks.

One of the facets of the Palestinian national movement that arose in the 1960s was a Palestinian victimhood narrative which evoked older events, most prominently the Nakba (catastrophe) of 1948 and the Palestinian resistance against the British mandate. The Palestinian narrative is primarily directed against Jewish Israel, but also against Western Imperialism, with its constant feature being a feeling of disappointment and betrayal by Arab countries. I would argue that the exceptional nature of their enemy, in terms of power, immunity, and contribution to shaping the modern world, puts the Palestinians at a huge disadvantage. It makes them divided amongst themselves, unable to produce a unified or convergent narrative: Hamas's Islamist narrative is divisive, Abbas's authority has no narrative that can be adopted, and the diaspora is dispersed.

The oldest formulation of victimhood narratives in the Middle East is that of the region's most recently formed community, the Jewish victimhood narrative. This narrative has justified the establishment of Israel in Palestine, with the creation of such an expansionist state encouraging the global production and mainstreaming of its victimhood

narrative. The broad dissemination of Holocaust accounts in the West took place after the 1967 war, and not prior to it. That being said, the components of Jewish victimhood are older than the Holocaust, and go back to the European age of nationalism – most clearly expressed in the last quarter or third of the nineteenth century. While the Holocaust occupies an imminent position in the Jewish victimhood narrative, that narrative is directed towards justifying Israel's behavior today, and rationalizing Jewish privilege against the Palestinians. Terrorism is an essential component in this narrative, as all forms of Palestinian resistance are reduced to terrorism – which is attributed to the Palestinian identity and existence themselves. In most Western discourse, terrorism is attributed to the identity and existence of the perpetrators themselves, and is seldom described in the language of the humanities – another indicator pointing to the rise of communalist narratives and identity politics.. In fact, one of the main facets of the Jewish victimhood narrative today is the concept of “terrorism,” which is explained by the identity of Israel's enemies and not for any political or social considerations.

The Jewish narrative is directed against the world as a whole, including the West, and anti-Semitism is a cornerstone of the narrative. I would argue that the Jewish narrative is the early example on which other narratives have tried to build themselves. The pursuit of authority, exceptionalism, land, and the permanent exemption from the bounds of the law (i.e a permanent state of impunity) is the basis of a lasting, intrinsic justice for the Jews, them being the World's permanent victims. This is the model that all other communities in the Middle East look towards. Everyone wants to be Israeli; powerful, immune,

expansionist – and they are all on track to becoming so.

Community action

In any case, victimhood narratives are modern discursive constructs that invoke old injustices in varying proportions in order to justify current privileges or aspirations for privilege sought after by community elites. The producers of victimhood narratives are not the communities themselves, but elites within them who seek to unify the community as a strategy to control it, and to compete with other elites for said control. In a sense, narratives are quite successful in unifying the community according to one formula: collusion with the community's most aggressive elements against "them." Most individuals within a community do not participate in its most egregious acts – those perpetrators are often a minority within a particular community. Yet, communities seldom object to these egregious acts. Moreover, the voices of those who wish to silence objection against a community's most egregious acts are often louder than the voices of those who object. There is no shortage of examples exhibiting this herd mentality in punishing dissent: Israeli, Shiite, Sunni, Alawite, or Kurdish examples.

Communities as a collective do not commit acts of murder, torture, rape, or genocide. These are individual or small group acts. Yet communities are the only perpetrators of acts such as collusion, zealotry, docility, compliance, silence and silencing. Communities are not legally responsible for the first set of acts, but they are culturally and morally responsible for them. Arabs are responsible, culturally and morally, for crimes that Arabs have committed against non-Arabs (pan-Arabists have a political responsibility as well as

their augmented cultural and moral responsibility). Muslims are culturally and morally responsible for crimes that Muslims have committed against non-Muslims or non-conventional Muslims (Islamists have an augmented cultural, moral, and political responsibility). Jews are culturally and morally responsible for crimes that Jews committed against non-Jews or non-conventional Jews (Zionists have an augmented responsibility - political as well as cultural and moral). This responsibility is not lifted unless segments from within these communities come to unequivocally admonish and condemn these crimes, without being silenced or persecuted by the community.

Victimhood narratives have an inherent contradiction: they only emerge in an open field for deliberating and discussing collective discourses which assumes equality between different communities. Yet, narratives also emerge in a context of social struggle, and work to justify social privileges and advantages against the unjust other. In other words, the concept of justice between different communities is what makes victimhood narratives ontologically possible, yet victimhood narratives make justice ontologically impossible.

In the six cases I have described above, victimhood narratives are not melancholic complaints about old or current injustices. They are discourses that justify special aspirations now, and seek to unify communities behind the pursuit of these aspirations. They are either used to legitimate current demands (e.g the Palestinian and Kurdish narratives) or to seek exceptions for an aggrieved community and obfuscate the injustices this community commits against other communities (e.g The Sunni, Shiite, Alawite and Jewish narratives) or a mixture of both (all six!)

The argument is as follows: “We are victims, we are subjects of injustice, so we cannot be oppressors ourselves.” This is never said in order to monitor and prevent whatever injustices we may commit, but in order to justify said injustices. Victimhood narratives never lift the veil of injustice and its victims, but in fact shield these injustices even more – whether it is the injustices committed by our “victim” community against another “oppressor” community, or worse, the injustices committed against those who are weakest within a particular community. Victimhood narratives are not those of victims, and their producers are not victims – they are elites who seek to control a community by exploiting current or past injustices. Organic intellectuals may perform this task, but they are often agents of a community authority’s elite on the one hand, and tools of community struggle on the other.

The worst school of justice

The fact that victimhood narratives are employed to shield injustice (particularly that which occurs within a community), and because they are the discourse of privileged elites, not the victims themselves, emancipatory and critical thought is required to attack them at all times – and never to have any courtesy towards their perpetrators under the pretext that there are real injustices. The injustices are real, but victimhood narratives are exploitations of these injustices for elite competition, not for the struggle of the victims. Moreover, victimhood narratives almost always feed a community’s chauvinism and selfishness, and destroy its relations with neighboring communities (victimhood narratives are exclusively aimed at neighboring communities).

Narratives attribute justice (and oppression) to communities, not towards individuals or socially or politically privileged segments within these communities (or even community-transcendent elites). Attributing justice to our community is precisely what make victimhood narratives extremely convenient for the most aggressive and unjust among our community, and detrimental to the most just among us. The most just among the Jews are those who have confronted the Jewish victimhood narrative and the "Holocaust Industry," Norman Finkelstein. *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*. London 2000. not those who are the most vociferous advocates of this narrative. The latter are the Jews who are the most racist and aggressive towards the Palestinians. This applies to all other communities in theory, even if they are not always at an equally disproportionate level of power vis-à-vis their communal rivals as the Israelis. The worst Islamists, Kurds, Shiites and Alawites are those who are at most harmony with their community's victimhood narratives, and are its most ardent adherents. The most just among "us," whoever "we" are, are those who are most dubious of our community's narrative, and who object most vociferously to the injustices towards others and towards our community's weakest - not the "heroes" who unquestionably follow the herd, raging along with the rest of the tribe and only finding reason in the collective wisdom.

In any case, victimhood narratives are much more conducive to committing injustices than to resisting them, and much more convenient for the most powerful than the most vulnerable. Adopting them leads to moral apathy, to ignoring the voice of reasoned caveat, to prioritizing conflict against the oppressors, and to disabeling critical thinking

which is then perceived as a distraction from the core conflict. Perhaps because of its utility in disciplining and unifying a community and justifying its exceptional aspirations, victimhood is the worst school of justice. In fact, victimhood is a school of aggression and oppression with a clear conscience, as long as those who are being oppressed are from “them” and not from “us,” or from our masses and not from our elite. If the Middle East has become notorious for its massacres and crimes, it is because most of its elites received their justice education at its worst school: that of victimhood, before they became dedicated to promoting it. Victimhood is a school for identity, discrimination, separation and insensitivity, not a school for justice, solidarity and cooperation.

The current regional political order, which is based on promoting and expanding victimhood narratives, not only enhances communitarian injustice and strife. Its victims are not only members of “other” communities, but they are the most just and integrative among “us.” The dissident Jew is a “self-hater,” the non-nationalist Arab is a “traitor,” the Muslim who is unconvinced by his own victimhood is an “apostate” or “secularist,” and the Kurd who does not promote the community’s narrative is “Arabized.” This is how victimhood narratives marginalize the most just among us, and thus are suitable for the most oppressive.

Superiority narratives

Given that victimhood narratives typically emerge as a particular community is rising and justifying its rise, they are typically accompanied by superiority narratives: “we are of a higher caliber (morally, intellectually, religiously, and in terms of modernity, justice and nationalism) than

others!” Just like victimhood narratives, superiority narratives also aim to unify a community and serve as tools of competing elites within this community. As such, they entail the succumbing of the community’s masses to the whims of its masters, elders and notables. Victimhood and superiority narratives are not just promoted in the context of communitarian rivalry and struggle, but are also inseparable from power and authority dynamics within communities themselves.

As narratives are strategies of identity, oppressed communities are themselves those who are superior. In the Middle East, we have Shiite, Alawite, Sunni, Kurdish, Jewish and Palestinian superiority narratives, conjuring real or imagined (but always exaggerated) characteristics and distinctions. These narratives are never honest depictions of any valuable accomplishments, as much as they are discourses that justify privileges and exceptions. Just as victimhood narratives are schools of injustice, so are superiority narratives: “Who are these low lives, whom we should respect, and whose humanity we should consider? No amount of aggression and humiliation is enough for them, given that they - in addition to their backwardness - are our oppressors and antagonists!” goes the rationale.

It is worth mentioning two specific issues when it comes to these narratives (both of victimhood and superiority). First, even when victimhood narratives adopt a “social” language, discussing poverty, deprivation, marginalization and prejudice, they are employed to build identity walls that separate communities from other similar communities, never to unify them or bring them closer. Second, and in opposition to this dynamic, community construction, and the act of bringing all the community’s “children” under its

tender loving wing (as a mother would), never occurs in isolation of privilege and exploitation. As far as elites are concerned, community unification is worthless if it does not allow for control of the community, and for a superior position of controlling resources in opposition to another community.

“We have a big one!”

From a historical perspective, victimhood narratives are fairy tales, with the good people being good in essence, only committing good deeds, and committing evil out of necessity – whereas bad people are inherently bad, with a long history of misconduct. From a political perspective, this is a refusal of maturity, and a resistance to bearing responsibility. Communities that do not resist their own victimhood and superiority narratives are communities that resist maturing to become historical communities that bear responsibility for their own actions in the world.

The close relationship between victimhood narratives and the special emphasis of an entitlement to eternity or immortality is perhaps another indicator for resisting maturity and refusing history. Israel “was not created in order to disappear,” Assadist rule shall remain “until eternity,” Daesh is “remaining and expanding,” the “Kurdish people” is residing on “its historical homeland” (“historical” here given an unnecessary significance: referring to time immemorial). This is also closely tied with a deep dedication to enshrining the status quo, and ensuring its sustenance. An Israel which is superior to its Palestinian rivals and its Arab environment (and whose superiority is guaranteed) is the example followed by the Assadist state in dealing with its Syrian environment. It is

also the example followed by Daesh in dealing with the wretched souls who fall under its rule.

While Israel forms an “Oasis of Democracy” in a backward and tyrannical Middle East, the Assad regime forms an “Oasis of Secularism”—as its advocates are wont to say—amidst a Syrian revolution filled with terrorists and jihadists. As for Daesh, it is the “Islamic State” faced by none other than the heretic camp, while Kurdish female fighters are emphasized in order to affirm the “modernity” (and importantly, not the gender equality) of the Kurdish community and its likeness to the Western middle class (not its partnership with its vicinity).

All of these are ostentatious elements similar to what Ghassan Hage (2015) calls “Phallic Democracy.” Ghassan Hage. *Alter-Politics: Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination*. Melbourne 2015. Israel declares: “We have democracy, you don’t!” as opposed to “we live a democratic life.” Similarly, one can talk about “Phallic Islam,” as a member of Daesh can easily tell a member of Jabhat Al-Nusrah “We have more Islam than you do!” Or “Phallic Secularism,” as members of the Alawite community can say: “We are secular, our sect is secular, unlike yours!” Or even a “Phallic Modernity/Feminism,” as Kurdish communitarians can say: “Our women are liberated, your women are veiled!” In any case, these are formulas of possession that are suitable for identity construction, and for enlarging the penises of communities as they face off each other by saying “We have a larger penis than yours!” Superiority narratives are a community’s claims of possessing large penises.

Communities and Dementia

It is quite noticeable that the duopoly of superiority and victimhood has a similar structure to paranoia, whereas the latter is based on a combination of megalomania and persecutory delusion. One can say that victimhood and superiority narratives are two faces of a community's dementia, or its deep psychological troubles. It seems to be that the obsession with identity and paranoia are inseparable, and that they have the same makeup. Identity is a dynamic process directed toward self-resemblance and differentiation from the other, and at its greatest extent is geared toward internal homogeneity and total separation from an alien exterior.

As for the psychological condition that reflects a community's demand for participation as equals in the world, one may call it schizophrenia. Here, I mean the desire to live in two worlds and possess two characters, a general world with which we hope to engage, and a special world with which we are most familiar. Schizophrenia is an affliction of "secular" communities, whereas paranoia is an affliction of religious communities, which often accompanies communitarian self-worship.

As forms of a perpetual apprehension of persecution felt by a community that does not doubt its own worth, conspiracy theories are one of the most recognizable facets of the social and psychological climate in which communities live. Seeing as victimhood narratives are not honest depictions of injustice and oppression, conspiracy theories are also not realistic accounts of any collusion (which is a staple feature of international relations and political formations), but are also political elements of identity- and community-

construction.

Which communities, though? At this juncture, one has to say that communities who depend on victimhood and superiority narratives, and do not develop any critical thought or policies to counter them often turn into organic groupings, tribes or sects that are unfit for cultural, moral and political development. It is quite possible that communities develop critical thought and policies to counter the dominant narratives – that point out injustice within the community, the possibility of community-transcending justice and partnership, the defects and shortcomings of their own community and the positive features of others. Yet it seems that no community in the whole world is heading in that direction, as all global communities willfully succumb to their own narratives.

Towards a world with no narratives

If one accepts the validity of the above analysis, then it becomes apparent that this world of narratives is one of deep political and moral decline, and that human emancipation requires confronting and changing the state of this world today. This is a tremendous challenge, an undertaking that can be approached on two levels: on one level, confronting the narratives themselves, and on the other confronting a world of communities which thrive on such narratives.

The first task one has to perform when confronting victimhood narratives and the injustice that is perpetrated under their auspices is to disaggregate narratives and identities from oppression and justice. Some members of communities may be privileged, and some may commit just

or oppressive acts, but there are no communities that are inherently just or oppressive. Justice and oppression are products of a community's (and society's) historical conditions.

Secondly, one must warn that a criticism and deconstruction of victimhood narratives which ignores actual oppression and discrimination will only strengthen these narratives. What would undermine victimhood narratives and acknowledge current injustice is describing the injustice that befalls our community in universal terms, with a universal language that one would use to describe any other injustice, referring to the same principles of justice. Contrary to victimhood narratives, injustice and oppression are best described in the language of social science, not the language of identities and origins.

If one adopts the language of social science, then oppressors take the form of individuals or groups but never entire communities; they are agents who have artificial ties and never natural or inherent ones. Oppressors are described as a class, an elite, or a faction, never a religious, ethnic, or ideological group. It is most dangerous to affiliate entire communities with injustice, as this is the pretext for annihilating these communities, including women, children and elderly.

If the language of identity states that we are right and just and they are wrong and unjust, then the language of social science says justice and oppression are relations, and that those who are just are those who do not cease to improve themselves (and their justice), whereas the oppressors are those who think they are just no matter what.

Justice equally necessitates a resistance to pride and superiority narratives. Pride and superiority are malevolent emotions whatever form they may take, and are more heinous as communitarian traits than individual ones. Rather than depicting any accomplishments that can be universalized, they enshrine privilege and exception.

Thirdly, we must face narratives with history, with detailed accounts, with well-researched and documented information, while resisting relativity and an entirely interpretive approach to history. We must resist the epistemic position that argues for the scrutiny of all historical accounts, which necessitates that one place all narratives on an equal footing and assign them an equal level of accuracy and moral legitimacy. Such an epistemic position leads to the logical conclusion that power is the ultimate arbiter of communitarian relations, and that such relations are a Nietzschean product of power dynamics. It is possible and necessary to defend a fluid and dynamic conception of objectivity, an intersubjective conception that is based on partnership and the possibility of consensus.

The first history with which one ought to confront narratives is the history of narratives: how they have been collated from dispersed elements before being weaved into more solid depictions, the relationship between the rise of narratives and the rise of communities, their lack of being accounts of the oppressed themselves, or being records of actual atrocities that have befallen them.

Fourth, it has already been said that narratives lack consistency, that they encompass partial truths and occurrences and do not present any opposing evidence. The Sunni victimhood narrative does not say, for example,

that the Americans intervened (belatedly) in the Balkan War of the 1990s and protected the Bosnians from the Serbs. Nor does it say that those who espouse the narrative most ardently have killed more Sunnis than any other community. Similarly, the Kurdish narrative refuses to acknowledge any solidarity Kurds may have received from Arabs, because it is quite suitable to view all Arabs as equally hostile to Kurds, while it also withholds the injustice and discrimination being perpetrated by Kurds against fellow Kurds. Meanwhile, Israeli society resists the Nakba history being produced by Israeli New Historians, because it depicts Zionist Jews as aggressors. This applies, in varying proportions, to all other communities, which encourages the behaviors I have previously alluded to: collusion, zealotry, docility, compliance, silence and silencing.

We cannot resist injustice without undermining narratives of victimhood. We will not mature as public and just agents unless we do so.

The second level refers to working on changing the global order that celebrates communities and their narratives. The current global order is based on unjust privileges, and is designed to protect and shield injustice. Communitarianism is the birth child of this global order of privilege, just as sectarianism is the birth child of a domestic order of privilege. The world is changing, and is moving towards higher fences and walls around its wealthier countries, and deeper failure and vulnerability for its poorer ones. Syria is a microcosm of the world today: its poorest are exposed and migratory, and in their faces long fences stand erected, at home and abroad. A trajectory towards a world that is free of failed states which produce Barbarians and roving wanderers is but one facet of a trajectory towards a world

with no fences, borders, or gates.

Was this not the promise of “progress” and transcending feudalism?