

Middle East - Refugees and Capitalism

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THE IMAGES ARE heart-wrenching. The numbers are extreme, the living conditions appalling. I am speaking of Syrian refugees: women, men, and children who are fleeing the fire of war to face the ravage of sea, deserts, barbed wire, border patrols, beatings, imprisonment, encampment and condemnation.

An abundance of reports with sophisticated and well-presented statistical graphs depict the enormity of this human calamity. Stories are told, music and plays are performed, photos taken, paintings exhibited, and feature films and documentaries made — all to tell and show us the suffering, resiliency, creativity and resistance of this displaced and disposed population.

Rarely, if ever, will these informational and artistic productions help us, the readers and viewers, to fully understand the cause and depth of this human tragedy.

We read that more than 3,000 refugees from Eritrea, Niger, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan have died crossing the Mediterranean Sea since 2000 — a sea that is renamed “the Mediterranean Cemetery.” The UNHCR 2014 study, *World at War*, reports that this unprecedented level of human mobility is not limited to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), rather it is a global phenomenon that will not settle down any time soon.

The International Organization for Migration in its *World Migration Report 2015* estimated the global number of international migrants at 232 million and the number of internal migrants at 740 million. Lastly, about 60 million people across the globe are fleeing the condition of war, poverty and expulsion.

Shouldn't we be curious enough to ask what's responsible for this massive displacement of people? What condition forces people to take such risk in life only for the purpose of seeking food, shelter, sanitation, security, and safety? Who and what has caused this objectionable condition?

Shouldn't we ask what forces are setting the world on fire through drones, bombs, border closures, detentions, starvation and torture, forces that are turning people into “disposable” items?

In this short piece, I intend to offer some answers and think through to the root of this violence, this level of contempt for human life and dignity, whereby lives are stolen and bartered — not only now, but also in the past many decades.

Journeys of Death

After around one week of walking in the desert, during which some people died of starvation, we reached Tajor Mountain, where we stopped in order to have a rest. I was looking around me, I found some people dying, some were sleeping, and others were crying and asking for water or food. I was walking among people laying down, looking at them and thinking they were staring at me, but no answer from their side. There I realized I was going through a journey of death. (Testimony of a 15-year-old Ethiopian boy, Danish Refugee Council, 2012: 23)

The process of escaping violence has turned into a “journey of death” for millions of refugees. For Syrian refugees it is also a journey of “no return.”

The country is in ruin; a quarter of schools are damaged, half the hospitals destroyed or unable to function, and “about 70% of the population is without access to adequate drinking water, one in three people are unable to meet their basic food needs,... more than two million children are out of school, and four out of five people live in poverty.” (BBC, 2016)

The warring factions — Syrian Army, Free Syrian Army, Ahrar Al-Sham, Jubhat Al-Nusra, and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant/Syria (ISIS) — are engaged in a ruthless destruction of the nation in order to rule over it. These forces, in different ways, are supported by the Western imperialist powers and by Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Russia and the Gulf states.

The war has injured the body and spirit of the Syrian people. It has tormented parents who are helpless in dealing with the sleepless child screaming out of agony and fear, who are perturbed by their girls and boys who wet themselves or have gone silent out of the shock of violence. A mother says, “We’re just living on the edge of life. We’re always nervous, we’re always afraid.” (BBC 2016)

Syria is a traumatized nation rapidly realizing the impossibility of a full recovery for generations to come. The story of the ripping apart of this nation will be engrained in the memory of those who survive. Those who are gone will be lucky to be buried with their names engraved on a stone.

Hernandez and Stylianou (2016) recently reported that “More than 1,250 unnamed men, women and children have been buried in unmarked graves in 70 sites in Turkey, Greece and Italy since 2014.” On average 10 refugees bodies a day have “washed ashore” since that year and “at least one person each day has been buried in an unmarked grave.”

Yet Syrian people are also “determined to reclaim their dignity” (Halasa et al. 2014) in order to resist and rebuild a nation free from violence, oppression, and subjugation as in the current experiment in Rojava, the Kurdish region in Northern Syria.

A Product of Capitalism

This human catastrophe is called a “refugee crisis.” However, a closer look can reveal a much deeper crisis that is shaking humanity.

The terminology of “crisis” is an ideological masking of the world capitalist crisis. It is “ideological” because it is presented to us as both “unavoidable” and as an “isolated” incident.

This perilous condition, however, is the creation of the capitalist imperialist order in an effort to resolve many of its deep contradictions. Among them, and the principal one, is the global-based mass socialization of production and the anarchy embedded in the privatization of the wealth being

produced by millions of laboring women and men.

Millions of people are circulating around the world in search of work. Women from the Philippines, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are leaving their families behind to look after the families of strangers in the Gulf States, North America and Europe. Their men are recruited by construction industries to build monumental towers under slave-like working conditions.

Workers from Mexico and the Caribbean are entering the United States and Canada as seasonal migrant workers to pick fruits and vegetables to cheapen the cost of labor for corporate agribusiness.

Most of us are affected by this “mass socialization of production” through selling our power to labor. The capitalist owners are in competition in buying, selling and exchanging commodities, ranging from labor power to finance capital or other forms of commodities such as food, garments or technology. Anarchy in the market requires the intervention of the capitalist state to regulate, moderate and control this anarchy on behalf of the capitalist class.

This unjust system has made life intolerable for the majority of the world population. The capitalist state often resorts to unrelenting wars, invasions, occupations or genocide. The predacious class controlling this state has left open the wounds of colonialism and centuries of slavery that have damaged the social fabric of communities and societies.

Homes, neighborhoods, villages and cities are ruined beyond recognition and, in the process of this unfathomable destruction, other entrenched forces of annihilation such as religious extremisms have emerged.

Western imperialism, now in conflict with its former Islamist allies such as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, fights fire with fire: While resources are focused on war, there is considerable effort to also promote “moderate” or “reformist” religious tendencies as an alternative to ISIS, Boko Haram or Al-Shabaab.

In more than two decades of military intervention in the MENA region, the imperialist collusion and collision with religious patriarchy has strengthened the rule of religion and has shrunk the secular spaces and possibilities in most of these societies. Let us consider the impact of these relations in the lives of Syrian refugees.

Among the 10 million displaced Syrians, the majority are women and children. They flee war zones, but cannot escape patriarchal religious violence. Rape and sexual assault are a frequent occurrence at checkpoints, on the borders, or in the camps.

Displacement adds to economic insecurity and therefore forces young girls into early marriage or prostitution. Hibaaq Osman (2016) reports that “the rate of child marriage among Syrians in Jordan” doubled between 2011 and 2012, making “them more vulnerable to abuse.” The patriarchal relations under the condition of war and displacement have forced women to effectively live “under house arrest.” (Ibid.)

It is well-established that rape and sexual violence are weapons of war. But other forms of violence against women such as domestic violence, abduction, forced prostitution, early marriage and sexual exploitation are daily experienced by women and young girls in the disruption of life by war.

Osman writes that “an estimated 250,000 Syrians have been killed in the last five years, the slaughter has left thousands of women as head of their household” and that the burden of care for the elderly and disabled is on their backs. Sex trafficking gangs are organized to transfer girls over 16 to the Gulf States.

Continuation of Colonial War

What appear as “civil” wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen or throughout the MENA region are in fact continuations of colonialist wars, reinforcing and realigning patriarchal, racialized and colonized forces. The horrific atrocities committed against women under these conditions leads us to conclude that imperialist wars are symbolically and literally fought on and over women’s bodies. Women signify land, nation, culture, ethnicity, religion and community to be captured, controlled, veiled or securitized.

A forgotten group of “refugees” within the border of Syria are Palestinians who have endured displacement for 65 years: from their homeland Palestine in 1948, and now since 2012 with the outbreak of war in Syria. About half a million Palestinian refugees are registered in twelve Palestinian refugee camps in Syria; all are displaced again.

According to reports, in a single day in April 2013, 6000 Palestinian camp residents in Ein al Tal Camp were displaced. The population of Yarmouk camp in southern Damascus, which once numbered some 160,000 people, has dwindled to a mere 30,000 following mass displacement in December 2012. (Al-Hardan, 2012) A total of 235,000 Palestinian refugees are now internally displaced within Syria. (White, 2013)

My point, so far, has been that the “crisis” of refugees is a manifestation of a multilayered crisis of capitalist imperialism wherein different wars, from Syria to Ukraine, Somalia, Libya or Congo, are overlapping and interacting. In Europe and North America, this “crisis” is hastening the growth of virulent fascist and neo-fascist currents.

Indeed, the sectarian, ethnicized, religious-based wars in the MENA region are spreading into the streets of Europe. Refugee camp workers and volunteers in European cities report the rise of sexual and sectarian violence within the refugee camps. As I have mentioned already, none of these tensions is limited to the MENA region nor is this the first time that it is happening in recent history.

The Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya is a case in point. Ben Rawlence’s *City of Thrones: Nine Lives in the World’s Largest Refugee Camp* (2016) presents a horrifying account of refugee lives. Dadaab literally means “the rocky, hard place;” but it also means a place of violence, brutality, starvation, rape, corruption, suffering and death.

The camp was built in 1992 by the UNHCR to shelter 90,000 Somali refugees fleeing war and persecution. Today, it is a ravaged metropolis with half a million residents from neighboring countries.

A recruiting ground for Islamist extremists like Al-Shabaab, it is a place where the humanitarian aid agencies, government and non-government forces collaborate with patriarchal religious and secular groups in sexually harassing, financially corrupting, and mentally persecuting the residents of the camp. This is a place of entrapment for generations of migrants who have not experienced anything but violence and dispossession.*

Bartered Lives

The mass-based migration of people is militarized and securitized. In 2013-14, Italy operated its Mare Nostrum humanitarian rescue mission in the Mediterranean. This operation saved the lives of 150,000 migrants in danger of drowning. The plan was canceled under the pressure of the European Union (EU) because it was deemed to “encourage” people to leave North Africa for Europe via the

sea.

The rescue mission was replaced by a punitive and controlling “Operation Triton” conducted by Frontex (the EU border police). Thousands perished in the sea and still dead bodies reach Europe’s shores.

The capitalist imperialist Europe put their forces together to solve the “refugee crisis” by “bartering refugees for refugees,” this time involving Turkey, the rising religious and autocratic regime in the region.

Iverna McGowan, head of Amnesty International’s European Institutions Office, wrote: “EU and Turkish leaders have today sunk to a new low, effectively horse trading away the rights and dignity of some of the world’s most vulnerable people. The idea of bartering refugees for refugees is not only dangerously dehumanizing, but also offers no sustainable long term solution to the ongoing humanitarian crisis.” (Amnesty International, 2016)

Here is how this “dehumanizing” deal was arranged: In November 2015, EU leaders announced an agreement to offer Turkey three billion Euros over two years to manage more than two million refugees from Syria, in return for curbing the flow of migration into Europe. In March 2016, another plan was finalized between the EU and Turkey:

The EU proposed to the Turkish government a plan in which Turkey would take back every refugee who entered Greece (and thereby the EU) illegally. In return, the EU would accept one person into the EU who is registered as a Syrian refugee in Turkey for every Syrian sent back from Greece. Turkey countered the offer by demanding a further 3 billion Euros in order to help them in supplying the 2.7 million refugees in Turkey. In addition, the Turkish government asked for their citizens to be allowed to travel freely into the Schengen area, i.e., the 22 nations of Europe that have abolished passport controls, starting at the end of June 2016, as well as an increased speed in talks for a possible accession of Turkey to European Union.

This plan was also “criticized on 8 March 2016 by the United Nations, which warned that it could be illegal to send the migrants back to Turkey in exchange of financial and political rewards.” (Nebahay and Baczynask, 2016)

In mainstream reporting and analysis the refugee is reduced to a disembodied person, fragmented into a nation, religion, or ethnic body, functioning and suffering outside of any structure of power such as religious or capitalist patriarchy. This approach cites “pull factors” to explain the mass desire of refugees to arrive in the EU.

In these accounts, Europe is considered to be the place of safety, security, and prosperity, of a much desired “West.” Slavoj Žižek (2015) wrote: “The hard lessons for the refugees is that ‘there is no Norway,’ even in Norway. They [refugees] will have to learn to censor their dreams: Instead of chasing them in reality, they should focus on changing reality.”

Then there are “push factors” such as ISIS, Boko Haram or El-Shabab. But poverty, violence, corruption, authoritarianism, legacies of colonialism, and decades of occupation and neoliberal austerity measures do not constitute “push factors.”

More importantly, the dependency of these two factors — “push” and “pull,” even if we attempt to consider them seriously — on each other, and the totality of the unbearable conditions that they create for people, is left out in this analysis.

Imperial/Fundamentalist Symbiosis

My point is that instead of relying on the positivist analysis of “correlating” factors, we should expand and broaden our analysis to understand the conflicting but nonetheless complementary relations between imperialism and fundamentalism. In reality there is a symbiotic relationship between them.

Defending or supporting either imperialism or fundamentalism will strengthen both. Every terrorist attack is responded to with a rally organized by fascist groups in Europe; more bombings fuel the fire of war, more radicalization of the youth to join extremist groups; more displaced people appear on the borders of the West, more rise in anti-immigrant sentiments, racism and Islamophobia.

Humanity is ensnared by the belligerent forces of imperialism and fundamentalism. The ideology of us/them, civilized/barbaric, tradition/modernity, religious/secular or tribal/cosmopolitan is reinforcing this contradictory but complementary set of relations.

The capitalist imperialist system shows much contempt for the lives of millions, easily expelling them from their homes and lands, bartering them and disposing them through the mechanism of “savage sorting.” (Sassen, 2014) This should be a wake-up call — a call that the world needs a completely and radically different social order.

The current crisis is full of real and serious dangers, and the world condition is explosive. But it can bring real opportunities for radical social transformation. The 2011 Arab Uprising raised hopes for the building of a better world, but the millions who engaged in street politics lacked revolutionary leadership and were content with replacing dictators by those who promised fair elections and the rule of law.

Religious fundamentalists and imperialist powers, in collaboration with military, local and regional powers, were ready to impose war and destruction to shatter people’s aspirations for democracy, freedom and equality.

Understanding “The Crisis”

Final thoughts: To understand the “crisis” of our time, we should not limit our analysis to the current events. If we do so, we will never understand the depth of the human misery under the capitalist imperialist condition nor be able to answer why and how patriarchal, racist, nationalist, religious fundamentalist relations are (re)produced.

Humanity does not deserve this life and condition. This level of wretchedness is not limited to zones of war in the world. A characteristic of today’s imperialism is the convergence of its domestic and international relations.

For instance, the “War-on-Terror” is an instance of the overlap of domestic and international forms of co-dependency in surveillance, racialization, incarceration or policing. The sex trafficking of women, barbed wire fences along the U.S.-Mexico border or between European nations, or the “separation walls” in Israel and the “normalizing” of the right of the state to securitize citizens in border crossing or in schools, are all forms of racialized and gendered violence.

What I have laid out as a Marxist feminist educator allows us to consider the applicability of theories, policies and practices in building a movement for changing the conditions of war and violence and the aftermath of these conditions. We must build a revolutionary social movement

demanding a world without borders and bullets; without nations; without sexual and racial violence; without prison and camps — one without exile, destruction, poverty and fear.

The major challenge remains, however: how to revive a revolutionary movement in an era of theoretical confusion, in the absence of a powerful international movement, without inadvertently supporting racist, masculinist, culturalist, nationalist, religious and colonialist projects.

A revolutionary feminist praxis allows us to understand the complexity of the current global power structure in the context of the history of colonialism and capitalism, in particular its very masculinist, theocratic and patriarchal nature.

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*The Guardian reported on May 13, 2016 that after the Kenyan government announced it would send all refugees at Dadaab back to Somalia, both residents and human rights organizations called on the government to reverse its plans. [1]

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P.S.

* From Against the Current n°183, July-August 2016.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/may/13/refugees-urge-kenyan-leaders-to-rethink-closure-of-dadaab-camp>