

# Syria and beyond: Global Lessons of A Catastrophe - A “failed world system”

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## Contents

- [Scale of the Crisis](#)
- [Open the Borders and More!](#)

THE CATASTROPHE THAT Syria has become, and the unfathomable refugee crisis it has unleashed, is a stark mirror reflection of the real condition of a failed world system. We have stated in previous editorials that “imperialism creates problems that it cannot solve,” which in these circumstances is a major understatement. It has figuratively — and literally — planted bombs all over the Middle East and elsewhere, blowing whole societies apart, overwhelming neighboring countries and casting refugees onto the borders of Europe and North America.

Two grimly coincidental events symbolize today’s reality. At the same time that Russia launched its air campaign in Syria in support of the Bashar al-Assad regime, the United States bombed Doctors Without Borders’ hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, killing medical staff and patients and wiping out the only trauma treatment facility serving the desperate local population. While this war crime (so-called “collateral damage”) sums up the bloody futility of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Russia’s move in Syria will also result in even more civilian carnage — and perhaps, propel the competing jihadist forces on the ground into an alliance (probably with enhanced funding and support from Saudi Arabia and Turkey), just as the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 gave birth to “Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” and ultimately the “Islamic State.”

What have the parade of U.S. wars and interventions been about? It’s a huge and complex question beyond the scope of this editorial. If they began in the context of the Cold War and the scramble to control Middle Eastern oil, and continued under the cover of “preventing chaos and fighting the terrorist threat,” these campaigns may now have become self-perpetuating, self-deceiving and self-defeating exercises. The present policy of the Obama administration appears to combine blind militarism, driven by habit and falsified “intel,” with strategic paralysis.

Beginning with the 1980s proxy war in Afghanistan between the Soviet occupation and U.S.-backed Islamist insurgents — a major factor in the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself — one disaster after another has unfolded as internal conflicts mix explosively with outside forces’ regional and global agendas. We will take Syria here as our leading present example, although by no means is it the only one. The factors that have produced it include:

- Decades of the Assad family military dictatorship based on a minority (Alawite) sect, abetted by foreign powers for their own reasons — Russia sent weapons, the United States sent “rendition” prisoners there to be tortured, etc.
- a social crisis generated partly by spillover from the United States’ ruinous invasion of Iraq, partly by years of drought driven by climate change that ruined thousands of farmers, partly by regime economic mismanagement;

- a democratic popular uprising during the Arab Spring that met brutal repression and became militarized as a result;
- the involvement of neighboring states and imperialist powers that have generally manipulated and intensified the explosive sectarian conflicts inside a Syrian state that was itself created within arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers. [1]

What can be said in the face of mass slaughter and genocide? In such circumstances, socialists have always demanded “Open the Borders” to people escaping disaster. It’s an entirely appropriate demand now, at a moment when some European states are disgracing themselves with border fences and refusal to accept refugees — and as we’ll see, the United States has no grounds to give moral lectures to anyone else.

But “Open the Borders,” as urgent and necessary as it is, doesn’t constitute anything close to a sufficient solution. Twenty-two million Syrians can’t just empty out. There has to be a resolution, but therein lies a brutal contradiction.

Civil wars are always horrible, but in general come to an end with some kind of political or military result. In the case of Syria, it’s a commonplace that “there is no military solution,” but there is no political solution either — at least, nothing that can be envisaged on the horizon today. It is doubtful that Syria as a country will survive in anything like its pre-war form, that the millions of its citizens who have fled will have a place to return, or even whether seven million internally displaced Syrians will be able to remain.

## **Scale of the Crisis**

The scale of the crisis landing on the shores and land borders of Europe is the reason why global media attention has fixated on the Syrian war and the refugees, which previously had generally been covered as secondary or marginal stories.

Can European states really accommodate the mass exodus from the utter collapse of what was one of the Middle East’s biggest and central countries? Even if they try harder to do so than most of Europe’s governments appear willing, the Syrian war, commentators and analysts agree, needs to be resolved at its source. Yet every outside intervention makes the situation worse. While U.S., Canadian and British bombers target the “Islamic State” (ISIS), the greater numbers of refugees are actually fleeing from the Syrian regime that Russia has stepped in to preserve. In fact, the genocidal attacks, beheadings and acts of cultural mutilation by ISIS, and the regime’s barrel-bombing of civilian markets, must be seen as symmetrical and symbiotic.

Meanwhile, the most effective ground force confronting ISIS — the Kurdish YPG in Syria, which carried out the ground fighting that saved the city of Kobani — is being bombed by the Turkish air force, as part of the Turkish regime’s renewed anti-Kurdish campaign. This move has been enabled by U.S. agreement, in exchange for Turkey allowing U.S. bombers to operate from its territory. Atrocity follows atrocity, betrayal follows betrayal.

The sheer volume of refugees from Syria obscures the mass murder taking place in Yemen, where Egypt and Saudi Arabia, stuffed with weapons happily provided by the United States and western powers, are carpet-bombing territories held by Iranian-allied Houthi insurgents with no regard at all for the fate of the population. These attacks include the use of cluster bombs against civilian targets, a certified crime of state terrorism — committed both by the regimes dropping those bombs and the United States government that supplies them.

Yemen's death toll is already many thousands, with up to 80% of the population in danger of famine. If there is no flood of refugees, that's because geography gives people no escape route.

And along with those fleeing Syria are refugees from other regional nightmares — Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Eritrea. The Israeli state, having already interned or turned away refugees from Eritrea desperately risking rape and death in the Sinai peninsula, now resolves to construct a wall on the Jordanian border of the occupied West Bank to prevent "infiltration" there (by Palestinian or other Arab refugees).

The brutality of the Israeli occupation and murderous violence of Israeli settlers are pushing sectors of desperate Palestinian youth in particular toward acts of individual revenge — and moving the conflict into more religious avenues like the fighting over the cursed Temple Mount, a development that should terrify every sane observer.

### **Open the Borders and More!**

We have to begin with the most basic and elementary demand to open the borders of the rich countries of Europe and North America. Is that easy or simple? No. Would it solve the underlying issues of the Syrian and other catastrophes? No. Is it an immediate human and ethical necessity? Yes. How can it be financially and logistically managed? For openers, by diverting the military budgets that have contributed so much to creating these disasters in the first place.

Perhaps at some point, the outside global powers will find it in their mutual interest to find some way to end the Syrian war, which its internal forces cannot do. Perhaps — but if the fiddling and diddling negotiations that never go anywhere over stopping climate change are any example, we shouldn't hold our breath. (We'll come back to that.) Millions of human beings need refuge, asylum and pathways to a new life today.

Second and critically important for us in the United States, we don't only have obligations to assist in an overseas refugee crisis. The ravages of imperialism aren't confined to the Middle East by any means.

An underreported human rights atrocity is unfolding every day on our border with the detention and deportation of Central American refugees fleeing from the wreckage of their societies that U.S. imperialism and corporate capital have destroyed — through sponsoring genocidal wars in the 1980s, through "free trade" deals that have destroyed indigenous farmers with subsidized U.S. agribusiness exports, and the insane "war on drugs" that has created murderous drug gangs and cartels.

U.S. policy under Republican and Democratic administrations has made El Salvador, Honduras and parts of Mexico uninhabitable for young people in particular. Families have sent their children fleeing to the United States. Thousands are interned; some have already been deported and, yes, killed by the gangs they were fleeing.

Just a few examples reported by the advocacy organization Michigan United ([www.miunited.org](http://www.miunited.org)) include Alvaro Lopez, the father of two U.S. citizen children, who's facing deportation after living in the United States for 13 years; Ever Cornejo, another father in detention awaiting deportation; and Jose Zaldana, already "deported back to El Salvador where violent gangs are waiting for him," says organizer Adonis Flores.

The urgency of opening U.S. borders to victims of our own imperialism — the ravings of Donald

Trump, Ted Cruz and the unforgivable acts of the “deporter-in-chief” Obama administration notwithstanding — is every bit as great as the emergency facing Europe. And the United States, as much as any European state, shares the responsibility of taking in the refugees from the Middle East’s spreading calamities.

We said at the outset, however, that these disasters manifest “a failed world system.” And what we’re seeing in Syria, horrific as it is, will not be the last such crisis. Far from it: Environmental disasters will be a growing cause of wars and massive population displacements.

Drought was one underlying cause, though of course not the only one, of Syria’s meltdown. That was also the case in the western Sudan region of Darfur. Crop failures loom in heavily populated African countries of the Sahel region. The disruption of monsoon rains in south Asia could produce literally hundreds of millions of environmental refugees.

We are speaking of a “failed world system” of global capitalist production and accumulation that creates, by its very nature and driving mechanisms, extremes of wealth and poverty both within and among nation-states, inevitable civil and interstate wars, and now a forced ecological death march that threatens to bring the extinction of human civilization along with millions of our fellow species. Within the life span of children being born right now, humanity may all become “refugees” with literally nowhere to run.

What can be done must be done today to begin healing the lives of Syrian, Iraqi, Afghan, Central American and other refugees. The larger lessons of catastrophe are the necessity of overcoming and transforming a system that has destroyed so many lives and holds the specter of destruction over us all. There is no “military solution” for Syria. There is no conceivable solution anywhere that’s based on permanent armed camps.

There is no refuge for the world’s rich countries in hiding behind a Fortress Europe or North America. Open borders are essential, yes, but only for openers: For the global 99.99%, there is no way forward but to fight for a different world that is possible.

**The Editors**, *Against the Current*

*[The Trans Pacific Partnership has been announced shortly before we go to press. For an important analysis and call to action against this global corporate coup, we recommend “TPP Agreement Reached but Not a Done Deal,” by Mackenzie McDonald Wilkins of Popular Resistance at [www.flushthetpp.org](http://www.flushthetpp.org). [2] ]*

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**P.S.**

\* “Global Lessons of A Catastrophe”. From *Against the Current* n°179. November-December 2015: <http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4517>

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## Footnotes

[1] On the historical background see Yassamine Mather, available on ESSF (article 33458), [“Middle-East – From Sykes-Picot to “Islamic State”: Imperialism’s Bloody Wreckage,”](#)

<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article33458>

[2] Available on ESSF (article 36282), [Release of Trans-Pacific Partnership \(TPP\) Full Text Shows Victory for Corporate Rights](#).