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Middle East

Disasters in Syria and Yemen

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Gilbert Achcar is the author of the forthcoming book *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*. A longtime Marxist analyst of Middle Eastern social movements and politics, he currently teaches at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. A recent interview on the status of the “Arab Spring” is online [here](#). Against the Current editor David Finkel interviewed him by phone on March 3, 2016 to discuss the current crises in the region as well as the impact of the horrific refugee crisis.

Against the Current: What does the recently announced “cease fire” in Syria mean, and what are the chances it will hold?

Gilbert Achcar: Please note, first of all, that it is not officially called a cease-fire but rather a “cessation of hostilities.” The main difference is that Russia and the Syrian regime, and the US-led coalition, will continue to fire on so-called terrorist forces, supposedly meaning ISIS and the Nusra Front.

For Russia and the Assad regime, this can be seized as a pretext for targeting other groups in the opposition, which is what the opposition has been denouncing. This shows you how fragile this whole agreement is. If it's more or less holding right now, it's because all parties need to take a deep breath after the intensive battles of the past few weeks.

However, the continuation of that will depend on the resumption of political negotiations. Nothing has emerged up to now that would lead to any optimism in that respect. We shall see, probably in the next few days rather than weeks: if the “cessation of hostilities” collapses, it will bode ill for the whole process.

ATC: Do you see any possible track toward ending the war?

GA: This can only happen if there's a major change in the position of the Syrian regime. The minimum that might be seen by the opposition as the basis of agreement would be a transitional government, with Bashar al-Assad stepping down — any transitional set-up that would be presided over by Assad would be a non-starter.

The United States has been waffling on this whole question — sometimes saying Assad must step down, other times talking about him staying in place during a transition period. If Obama and Kerry try to impose on the opposition an agreement with Assad remaining in position, it's bound to fail, all the more because U.S. leverage is limited for having done nothing to stop Russia, let alone Iran, from intervening massively on the side of the regime.

The United States has consistently vetoed the main means that the opposition needed from the start and still needs, i.e. anti-aircraft weapons. The major leverage Washington could have now would be to promise to lift this veto! But that would be a complete change of strategy on Washington's part, going back to when parts of the Obama administration advocated enabling the opposition to become a real threat to the regime. This policy was not accepted by Obama.

There was a basic contradiction in Obama's position, when he said in 2012 that he wanted a “Yemen solution” for Syria, by which he meant the agreement that ended the 2011 uprising in Yemen, with a coalition government formed and the president stepping down while keeping main instruments of power in his hands.

That was what the whole Obama administration wanted in Syria: none of them was in favor of toppling the Assad regime. But Obama thought he could get his “Yemen solution” by refraining from giving the opposition the means to fight effectively, fearing that the situation might get out of control and lead to state collapse.

The result, however, has been that the regime felt free to use all its means in destroying the country and massacring the people, believing that it could thus win eventually. And yet it has been twice close to a major defeat. But each time, it has been rescued by a massive involvement of its patrons, first by Iran in 2013 and then Russia since last fall, with Washington passively contemplating, if not acquiescing.

ATC: At the present moment, how would you describe U.S. strategic policy – or paralysis, as the case may be – with regard to both Syria and now Libya?

GA: Barack Obama was elected in part on the argument that he had opposed George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq. He came in with a view that appeared to be catering to the antiwar sentiment, although he kept some ambiguity in making a distinction between the “good war” in Afghanistan and the “bad” or “stupid war” in Iraq. He actually organized a “surge” in Afghanistan that proved such a total failure.

Obama took part very reluctantly in the intervention in Libya in 2011. He thought he could operate by some kind of remote control as he was quite reluctant to put “boots on the ground,” and the Libyan insurgents themselves were clearly opposed to any such perspective. The result, here again, has been dismal failure.

So there you are – an administration that gives the image of a weak and paralyzed United States, which annoys much of the U.S. imperial establishment, especially due to the sharp contrast with the interventionist boldness of Putin’s Russia.

ATC: Why do you think we hear so little about the terrible war in Yemen, and how do you read that situation?

GA: You don’t hear much because, first of all, the poorer a country is the less you hear about it. That’s why millions of people in Central Africa can die from war or famine with hardly any notice. It’s never the scale of the tragedy that dictates media attention, but the country’s strategic importance.

Syria became a major issue rather recently, and the key determinant has been the impact of the refugee crisis. When big waves of refugees began reaching the European Union, the panic started in Western capitals. The Russian military intervention took advantage of this Western panic, thus contributing to giving the Syrian crisis such a global dimension.

On the other hand, the situation in Yemen is quite complex. Basically, you have the former president Saleh, the one who was brought down by the 2011 uprising, attempting a comeback using the resources of power that he had maintained and allying with one religious fundamentalist movement (the Houthis, repressed by Saleh when he was in power) from the sect to which he himself belongs, which is related to Shia Islam. Hence Iran’s support of this alliance.

The “legitimate” regime of president Hadi, who was elected in 2012, is fighting back, with the Saudis and their allies intervening on behalf of this government. In sum, it is as if Morsi, the 2012-elected president in Egypt, was fighting back against the coup led by Sisi. The Saudi-led bombing is causing a lot of civilian damage, however, which is the inevitable result of using air force against densely populated areas.

It is a criminal intervention, which must be condemned. But to condemn it while saying nothing about Russia’s

bombing of Syria and Iran's heavy involvement in that same country " which are equally destructive and murderous, and actually much more so " amounts to using a double standard.

There's no way to predict the outcome of these ongoing conflicts. No one can say how any of them will end, and insofar as they're stalemated they can go on for a very long time. Western governments, with John Kerry leading the chorus, are trying to foster negotiated agreements everywhere " Libya, Syria, Yemen, even Egypt " so as to stop the descent into mayhem and try to stabilize the region again.

ATC: The scale of the refugee crisis has become overwhelming. What do you see as its longterm implications both for the Middle East and for Europe? (NOTE: This conversation preceded the announcement of a horrific deal in progress between the Turkish regime and the European Union to force refugees who have reached Greece back to Turkey.)

GA: The country where I am based in Europe, Britain, like the United States, has taken in a very small number of refugees compared to countries like Sweden relative to its population, or Germany. This is utterly indecent and shameful.

The fact is that Europe and, above all, the United States bear a major responsibility for all the tragedies that are producing the recent refugee waves, whether Afghanistan and Iraq, which many of them invaded, or Syria where they have let the ongoing catastrophe unfold. It is the moral duty of these countries to welcome the refugees and to stop these wars.

The European Union members engaged in a "beggar-thy-neighbor" attitude on the issue of the refugees, especially the countries where the refugees first arrive coming from Turkey. Several EU governments refuse the principle of population-proportional quotas for accepting refugees. It shows again the limitations of an institution like the EU, when faced with an economic crisis that has already created huge strains on the euro (common currency) and provoked a potential British exit.

ATC: Tell us a little about what to expect in your new book.

GA: It will be coming out in May. The main title *Morbid Symptoms* [1] is taken from the famous quote by Gramsci about when the old order is dying and the new one cannot be born, and it applies to the situation in the Arab countries described by the book's subtitle: *Relapse in the Arab Uprising*.

It is basically an analysis of the present stage of the regional situation, against the background that I analyzed in *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* [2].

I discuss the counterrevolution taking place since 2013 within what I have called from the start a long-term revolutionary process, which will see a lot more ups and downs over the course of decades. The book focuses on two especially salient cases, Syria and Egypt, which are of central importance, but it also gives an overview of the broader regional situation.

[Against the Current](#)

[1] <http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=28113>

[2] <http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isb...>