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## Deadly Blowback from Neo-Imperial Wars

By Jonathan Marshall

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**Exclusive:** The E.U.'s crisis – with the post-World War II project to unify Europe spinning apart amid economic stress, refugees and terrorism – can be traced back to E.U./U.S. neo-imperial wars in the Arab world, says Jonathan Marshall.

In what may be the most dramatic blowback yet from Western military intervention in the Middle East, terrorism and the mass influx of foreign migrants are now putting the very existence of the European Union at risk. Foreign wars fanned by European and American interventionists in the name of democracy and humanitarianism now threaten those same values in Europe as never before since the end of World War II.

This threat comes at a time of popular discontent over the region's chronic economic weakness, caused by Germany's austerity policies and the straightjacket of the euro monetary union. The region has been further buffeted by the rise of right-wing parties, confrontations with Russia over Ukraine and NATO expansion, and the potential withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the E.U. In short, Europe faces a perfect storm.

Martin Schulz, president of the European Parliament, warns, "We are threatened as never before." The European Union's chief executive, Jean-Claude Juncker, declared that Europe may be facing "the beginning of the end." International financier and private statesman George Soros says, "The EU is on the verge of collapse."

Frans Timmermans, the first vice president of the European Commission, said, “The challenge to the European project today is existential. The refugee crisis has brought that to light. What was unimaginable before now becomes imaginable, namely the disintegration of the European project.”

This is also a nightmare that keeps Secretary of State John Kerry up at night. If turmoil gets any worse in the Middle East, he told reporter Jeffrey Goldberg, “You could have a massive migration into Europe that destroys Europe, leads to the pure destruction of Europe, ends the European project, and everyone runs for cover and you’ve got the 1930s all over again, with nationalism and fascism and other things breaking out. Of course we have an interest in this, a huge interest in this.”

Yet remarkably few voices are stating the obvious: The crisis isn’t simply caused by foreign extremists bent on destroying Western values. Like Br’er Rabbit, Europe punched the Middle Eastern tar baby repeatedly, only to become hopelessly stuck. Whether Europe will prove as wise as its folkloric counterpart and find a way to get free remains to be seen.

### **Ganging Up on Syria**

The crisis in the E.U. has many self-inflicted causes. One was President George W. Bush’s catastrophic invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was opposed by France and Germany but supported most notably by the British government. That war gave birth to ISIS, whose bloodthirsty tactics now bring terror to millions in Europe as well as the Middle East. The Iraq War also drove 1.2 million refugees into Syria, ravaging its fragile economy and helping to trigger the outbreak of war in 2011.

Another contributor to E.U.’s crisis was the equally catastrophic NATO intervention in Libya in the spring of 2011. It was demanded most adamantly by the French government, with support from London and Washington. The intervention opened a major arms pipeline into Syria and propelled hundreds of thousands of North African refugees — including jihadists — into Europe.

The continued anarchy in Libya poses an ongoing threat of terrorism, drug smuggling, and human trafficking to the European Union. The E.U.’s foreign policy chief warned recently that nearly half a million displaced people in Libya “could be potential candidates for migration to Europe.”

Perhaps the single biggest cause of the Europe’s current crisis was the fateful decision of U.S. and European leaders to demand that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad “step aside” in the face of escalating attacks by rebels, many of them extreme Islamists.

Prime Minister David Cameron of Britain, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany joined Obama in making that demand in August 2011, just a few months after violence erupted between Syrian security forces and protesters.

That Western demand was based on wishful thinking and hubris, not a well-informed estimate of Assad’s political support within Syria. Longtime United Nations diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi

called the overconfident assessment of some Western intelligence agencies and politicians that Assad would quickly fall “utterly condemnable.”

Senior State Department officials said the joint statement was prepared in a rush to appease humanitarian critics and especially the French government, “based on a faulty and thoroughly unsupported, unsubstantiated assumption that this guy was going to be gone in 20 minutes.”

The alliance of Washington and major European capitals did not topple Assad but it severely weakened his regime, creating space for the rapid rise of disciplined Islamic insurgents — as experts warned from the beginning. The European Union contributed to this outcome by imposing tough economic sanctions on Assad’s government — while approving purchases from Syrian oil fields controlled by Jabhat al-Nusra, the powerful Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria.

Some E.U. nations also joined Washington in covertly arming radical rebel groups to overthrow Assad. Leading them was Syria’s former colonial master, France.

In 2012, just one year after the joint call for Assad to step down, the *Guardian* reported that “France has emerged as the most prominent backer of Syria’s armed opposition and is now directly funding rebel groups around Aleppo as part of a new push to oust the embattled Assad regime. . . . The money has been used to buy weapons inside Syria and to fund armed operations against loyalist forces.”

Despite CIA attempts to vet which opposition fighters received the arms, the paper reported that “Some of the French cash has reached Islamist groups who were desperately short of ammunition and who had increasingly turned for help towards al-Qaida aligned jihadist groups in and around Aleppo.”

Already, the *Guardian* noted, much of the rebellion against Assad was being led by “implacable jihadi organisations, such as Jabhat al-Nusra.” (That assessment was confirmed by a classified Defense Intelligence Agency report in August 2012.)

Last year, President François Hollande himself finally admitted that France began delivering weapons to Syrian rebels in 2012 — in violation of international embargoes and contrary to the French government’s public claims. The weapons included machine guns, rocket launchers, anti-tank guns and artillery, helping to turn Syria into a giant killing field.

The United Kingdom reportedly also provided covert military aid to rebel forces as early as November 2011, when British special forces allegedly met with Syrian guerrillas to assess their training needs. British intelligence services based in Cyprus provided timely news on Syrian government troops movements to help opposition fighters win tactical victories.

In 2013, the *Independent* reported that the British government had sent more than \$12 million in “non-lethal” aid to Syrian fighters, including armed vehicles, body armor, trucks and SUVs, and satellite communications systems.

Last but not least, in 2015 France and the UK joined the United States in bombing Islamic State targets inside Syria — without permission from Syria’s legally constituted government. France had earlier demanded Western military action following a use of chemical weapons near Damascus in August 2013, which Western governments widely blamed on the Assad regime. However, President Obama balked when U.S. intelligence failed to confirm the culprit and Britain’s Parliament defeated a motion to approve military action.

By mid-2015, the fighting in Syria supported by these Western governments had generated more than four million external refugees — a record from any single conflict in the past generation, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Including internal refugees, half of Syria’s population was uprooted by the violence.

### **Blowback from Intervention**

Rather than concede any responsibility for this tragedy, however, liberal interventionists in Europe blamed the humanitarian crisis on the West’s alleged *failure* to intervene.

As the *Guardian* newspaper editorialized in September 2015, “What appears on our TV screens as a sudden emergency is really the culmination of years of failure to confront Syria’s bloody collapse. . . The refusal to intervene against Bashar al-Assad gave the Syrian president permission to continue murdering his people . . . To begin restoring . . . hope will inevitably mean international intervention of some kind.”

This popular narrative — echoed at home by liberal and neoconservative critics of President Obama — makes Europe out to be the innocent victim both of the refugee crisis and of ISIS-directed terrorism. Make no mistake — ordinary Europeans *are* innocent victims, and nothing excuses terrorist violence against them or civilians in the Middle East. But key European governments do share blame for triggering the devastating blowback from Syria.

The terrorism inflicted on the people of Paris and Brussels is despicable but not random. The message of ISIS’s attacks, concedes French political scientist Dominique Moisi, is “You attack us, so we will kill you.”

University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape, a leading authority on suicide attacks, says they almost always represent a violent response to “a military occupation of territory that the terrorists view as their homeland or prize greatly. From Lebanon and the West Bank in the 80s and 90s, to Iraq and Afghanistan, and up through the Paris suicide attacks . . . that’s what prompts suicide terrorism more than anything else.”

A recently released police report on last November’s terror attacks in Paris quotes one gunman as threatening to kill his hostages unless France stopped its military strikes in Syria: “I want you to leave the country. I want you to remove your military. I want a piece of paper signed that proves it!”

ISIS had a sophisticated appreciation of what its terrorist attacks in Europe could accomplish. An ISIS newsletter, published shortly after the Paris attacks, predicted that they would create “a state

of instability in European countries which will have long-term effects,” including “the weakening of European cohesion” and “demands to repeal the Schengen Agreement ... which permits free traveling in Europe without checkpoints.”

## Europe’s Refugee Crisis

The Schengen Agreement on open borders lies at the very heart of the European experiment and is a precondition for the common currency, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel noted in January. But free movement is threatened not only by fear of terrorism, but by popular opposition to the huge influx of foreign refugees.

The mass movement of more than half a million refugees into the E.U. through Greece and the Balkans last year “precipitat[ed] a refugee crisis on a scale unprecedented since the end of World War II,” writes Kemal Kiri?ci, director of the Turkey Project at the Brookings Institution’s Center on the United States and Europe.

As a result, he explains, millions of people now “sense that Europe has lost control of its borders, which has in turn fueled xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments. This has strengthened the hand of right-wing politicians with little regard for the EU’s hard-won liberal values.”

Illiberal and far-right parties have made gains across Europe, from Denmark to Greece, and control the governments of Hungary and Poland.

Secondly, Kiri?ci adds, “the crisis sent shockwaves across Europe and tested the EU’s solidarity at a time when the EU was barely recovering from the shock of the euro crisis. . . This breakdown of unity is forcing a number of member states to introduce border controls, effectively suspending the Schengen regime as well as restricting the free movement of both people and goods within the EU — two main pillars of European integration.”

Ironically, in its desperation to prevent the refugee crisis from tearing apart Europe’s liberal regime, the E.U. recently struck an agreement with the notoriously authoritarian regime of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to return migrants to Turkey — including promises to accelerate talks on making Turkey a member of the E.U.

“First morally, then politically, and finally structurally, the European Union is unraveling before our eyes, destroyed by its own contradictions and failures of solidarity,” writes Maria Margaronis, *The Nation* magazine’s London correspondent. “The discussion is now not even nominally about how to protect the refugees, but about how to keep them out. . . . Cutting that deal with Turkey means that the EU has to hold its delicate nose and turn a blind eye to President Erdogan’s increasingly blatant human-rights violations.”

Most discussions of how to save Europe focus on short-term remedies, ranging from better intelligence sharing to beefed up border enforcement. But Europe will never overcome its crisis until it faces up to the root causes, including blowback from its neo-imperialist ventures in Africa and the Middle East.

Back in March 2011, when France spearheaded NATO's attacks in Libya, the pro-interventionist political scientist Dominique Moisi remarked that "the French, according to early polls, are proud again to be French."

Moisi shared that pride: In Libya, he maintained, "the West is defending common values, such as freedom, respect for human life and the rule of law. . . France, together with Great Britain, and with the more distant support of the US, is undeniably risking much, for it is easier to start a war than it is to end one. But it is a worthwhile risk."

Moisi was wrong on all counts. The French government chose to intervene not for noble ends but for crude economic and opportunistic political motives, as Hillary Clinton well understood. And the result, as everyone knows, was anarchy in Libya, the unleashing of jihadists and arms across northern Africa and the Middle East, and the start of Europe's refugee crisis.

Western intervention in Syria was sold under equally fraudulent pretenses, with even more dire results. Now Europe must begin a serious debate — akin to America's ongoing discussion of the Iraq debacle — over what price it is willing to pay for continuing to fuel wars and social upheaval in former colonial lands.