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Death, carnage and chaos: How NATO became one of the most destructive forces on the planet

From Eastern Europe to Afghanistan and Libya, the military alliance has left a trail of devastation in its wake

VIJAY PRASHAD, ALTERNET
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In May 2012, in the warm Chicago sunshine, I sat with journalist Jim Foley who had just returned from Syria. Jim and I had come for a large demonstration against a meeting of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). War reporting in Afghanistan, Libya and Syria had not been easy on Jim, who was an easy-going man. “You can’t get what the Afghan people really think,” he said, when you travel with US troops and rely upon a US-military translator. Nearby sat a group of Afghanistan and Iraq War veterans who had planned to return their medals to their commanders. Jim had a great deal to say about warmongers, the merchants of war. NATO’s advocates were among them. They had come to celebrate their war on Libya. Meanwhile, in Libya, the devastation had spilled social toxicity across its landscape. This mattered little to NATO’s bureaucrats.

Jim would later return to Syria, where ISIL took him prisoner. Sadly, two years later, Jim would be the first American to be beheaded by ISIL on camera. He was another victim of a senseless war. At the NATO protest in 2012, one protestor carried a sign, “I can’t believe we still have to protest this shit.” I remember pointing that sign out to Jim. One more war, more civilians dead, more chaos produced, less security for all.

European Divides

President Barack Obama went around Europe this week with two apparent purposes: to urge the United Kingdom not to sever its ties to the European Union and to plead with European countries to increase their military spending. European unity, Obama argued, was a force for good. NATO would only be able to function if Europe remained united and if it spent more on military goods. “I’ll be honest,” Obama said, “sometimes Europe has been complacent about its own defense.”

Europe is rife with political conflict. Southern European economies continue to splutter along on fumes. The defeat of the Grexit (Greece’s departure from the Euro) is temporary. When the pain of austerity rises once again, the politics of exit from Europe will return. In Spain, there is no government as the conservatives refuse to give up power to the anti-austerity bloc in parliament. The “refugee crisis” continues to rattle European societies, where an anti-refugee bloc has made gains at the ballot box. Austria is the latest test, where the far right anti-refugee party and the Green Party displaced the establishment parties in the presidential elections; it is the right and the Greens that will go for a run-off. It is this polarity between the Far Right and the Left that has broken the “centrist” consensus of European politics.

The politics of departure from the European project oscillate from the Right to the Left. It is the Right that sees “Europe” as the Trojan Horse for unbridled immigration, while it is the Left that sees “Europe” as the instrument of the Bankers. Britain’s departure—Brexit—is framed by the Right’s anti-immigration stance, while Greece’s departure—Grexit—developed out of the anti-austerity spirit. Even if Britain votes to stay in the European Union, bilious ideas about immigrants will not be defeated. They will fester. The anti-austerity bloc in Britain—the Scottish National Party and sections of the Labour Party—wants the country to remain in the European Union. It is prevented from making the case against Europe because of the strong anti-immigrant sentiment of that side of the spectrum.

Obama’s case for Europe is rhetorically about immigrants and refugees—although Obama’s own country has been tepid in its welcome to refugees from conflicts in North Africa and West Asia.

A united Europe, Obama argues, is necessary for world security—that is the why European unity is important, and why a strong NATO is essential.

Security

The question of refugees and security are not separate. NATO's last major campaign—the war in Libya—destabilized the country and delivered it to human smugglers. It has become a major staging post for the refugee transit across the Mediterranean Sea. Victims of wars that have often been egged on by NATO powers and victims of trade policies pushed by European countries now line up on the Libyan shores and in Turkey, waiting for entry into Europe. Their countries have been vanquished by war and poverty. If the “security” strategies of NATO have produced refugees, why should NATO be strengthened?

Is NATO as essential to world security as Obama claims? NATO's recent adventures—in Afghanistan, Eastern Europe and Libya—have created insecurity rather than order.

Afghanistan: When NATO entered the Afghan theatre in 2001, a decisive victory seemed imminent. Al-Qaeda fled the country and the Taliban fighters threw off their guns and went amongst the population. Elections followed and all seemed over. As the winter snows receded in 2002, the Taliban returned. Each spring they have come back, stronger and more determined to defeat their adversaries. This year has been no exception. The head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Jean-Nicholas Marti, says that 2016 has already shown the highest number of civilian casualties—thirty per cent higher than last year. Opium cultivation has grown, and Afghanistan now ranks as the second highest refugee exporter to Europe. A UN report on education and healthcare in Afghanistan shows that the condition is dire and getting worse. “In 2015 children increasingly struggled to access health and education services due to insecurity and conflict-related violence, further exacerbated by high levels of chronic poverty,” says UNICEF chief Akhil Iyer. NATO has begun to gradually withdraw from Afghanistan, which is fated to return—in some manner—to Taliban rule.