

Past and Present-day Western Imperialism in the Middle East and Beyond



Otro Mundo es Posible, Creating Positive Change, a panel discussion on local to global issues, held at the Esperanza Center as part of *Dream Week* on January 18, 2019 included (l to r): moderators, Marissa Ramirez & Yaneth Flores and speakers, Nadine Saliba (author of this article), Carolina Canizales, Amy Kastely, and Alex Birnel.

By Nadine Saliba

I was born in Lebanon to a Lebanese father and a Syrian mother. While we lived in Lebanon, we would go to Syria frequently to visit my mother's family. We took the trip by car crossing a politically and historically fraught border that was created after the First World War by the colonial powers of the time, Britain and France. They divided the region into several states in such a way as to serve their own imperial interests, imposing these new borders and a new map on the people of the region. Even though I'm speaking of something halfway across the world, I think this border reality is not unfamiliar to many in San Antonio and South Texas.

One of the consequences of dividing the Middle East¹ was the creation of the colonial settler state of Israel on the ruins of the indigenous Palestinian society. I bring up this issue because I will eventually talk about parallels between Israel-Palestine and the US-Mexico border. Western colonial and imperial powers enabled the creation of Israel in order to serve as an outpost of Western imperialism in a region that is vital for their political and economic hegemony.

The Middle East (ME) has historically been coveted by Western imperialist powers, including the United States, due to its geo-strategic location and its oil-rich resources. The

discovery of oil in the region propelled it into the center of international politics, given the importance of this resource to the growth and development of capitalist industrialized states. Control over the ME and its resources has guaranteed the United States continued military and economic supremacy.

Western powers, including the US, have used a variety of methods to maintain and expand their control over the region, from undermining and overthrowing independent regimes to supporting and protecting client regimes to using military intervention to prop up their allies and protect their imperialist interests.

The people of the ME however resent US support for many of the tyrannical regimes that rule over them, blocking their economic development and their democratic aspirations, in an effort to control their resources. US wars, invasions and bombings have devastated many countries, intensifying regional frustration as people live under extremely stressful condi-

tions with no prospects for positive change.

While US militarism has been a key reactionary factor in global politics, we can not downplay the reactionary nature of other—perhaps lesser—imperialist powers, such as Russia. Especially as we look at the Russian role in Syria, the site of the most murderous war in the ME since the 2003 US inva-

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1 Even though I use the term "Middle East" in my presentation, I want to acknowledge its problematic nature. It is a eurocentric term coined in the 19th century by Westerners who divided the "Orient" into three regions - Near East, Middle East

and Far East - based on each region's position relative to Europe. But as the most commonly used term in Western media and therefore the most recognizable in public discourse, I will continue to use it.

sion and occupation of Iraq. The Russian military has engaged in brutal bombing campaigns against Syrian communities in support of the genocidal Syrian regime that has waged an all out war against the Syrian people in order to maintain its grip on power. One of many horrifying results of the Syrian war has been turning millions of Syrians into refugees.

The Syrian refugee crisis has had repercussions on political developments across the world. The specter of the Syrian refugee—or terrorist in the eyes of the Islamophobes—has helped transform domestic politics from Europe to the US. An anti-refugee and anti-immigrant sentiment has been used by right-wing extremists to make electoral gains across Europe. And these far right movements have been promoted by Russian president, Vladimir Putin.

In the US, this trend was on display in the rise of Donald Trump. His racist rhetoric as a presidential candidate against Mexicans and Muslims has translated into policies under his administration targeting immigrant communities and banning people from Muslim-majority countries, foremost among them are Syrian refugees. We have seen the rise of right-wing populist movements and authoritarian-leaning politicians across the world. These are symptoms of what Syrian dissident writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh call the Syrianization of the world. It is waking up in San Antonio to the headline “Border agents now removing children from their immigrant parents.” It is the escalation of state violence against the most vulnerable segments of society, it is normalizing shocking cruelty against the unprotected.

We have seen in recent years alarming developments on a global scale, from the sad fate of the Arab uprisings against repressive regimes, to the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), to the unprecedented numbers of refugees across the globe, to the resurgence of the European far right and the rise of Donald Trump and white supremacist groups in the US. All of this in the midst of a global crisis of capitalism. The recession ushered in by the financial crisis in 2008 came after decades of neoliberal policies that had reversed the promise of economic security made by liberal democracies after WWII. This destabilization of global economic conditions have fed into xenophobic rhetoric against immigrants.

Trump’s language about border security has sought to frame immigration as some sort of military invasion, claiming that migrants, “like an invasion,” are trying to “violently overrun” the border. In arguing in favor of building a wall, he has repeatedly drawn comparisons with the walls that Israel has built. Indeed, Israeli companies have been instrumental in building the wall along the US-Mexico border and providing the technology for border control. Elbit Systems won a contract to provide electronic detections system and its unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) have patrolled the US-Mexico border. This Israeli technology was developed for use against Palestinians and it is marketed with a “battle-proven” stamp on its promotional brochure. Elbit’s US-traded stock shot up by 6% during Israel’s war on Gaza in 2014. Another Israeli company NICE Systems founded by former Israeli military and intelligence personnel provided surveillance technology for Sheriff Arpaio’s Maricopa County jail system in Arizona.

These borderlands, whether in Israel-Palestine or US-Mexico serve today as laboratories for tech companies to develop, test and showcase surveillance and “security” technology as border security is becoming a global industry. In their article “Gaza in Arizona: How Israeli High-Tech Firms Will Up-Armor the US-Mexican Border,” journalists Todd Miller and Gabriel Schivone point out that the homeland Security market will grow from an annual business of \$51 billion dollars in 2012 to \$81 billion by 2020 in the US alone, and \$544 billion worldwide by 2018.

The business of border control—from building the wall to running privatized for-profit prisons and everything in between—is a multi-billion dollar market. It is also a stage for racist policies seeking to keep out the other, whether Palestinians, undocumented immigrants from Latin America or indigenous people.

What gives one hope is a growing recognition of “the spirit of indivisibility of Justice,” as Angela Davis put it recently after a decision to honor her with a civil rights award was rescinded due to her activism on behalf of Palestinian rights. It is the recognition that the fight for social justice and against racism, xenophobia, wars and imperialist policies are inseparable.

Donald Trump who visited El Paso on Monday night, February 11, 2019 to push for the border wall was met with counter protests against the wall.

