

# COMMENTARY

No.440

Monday, 11 September 2017

## **Syria:**

### **A Testament to International Moral Bankruptcy**

**Alon Ben-Meir**

**New York University**

**M**uch has been written about Syria's civil war which has engulfed the country for the past six years, but sadly the mounting death and destruction in Syria has long since become mere statistics. The international community grew comfortably numb to the horror, the likes of which we have not seen since World War II. Both internal and external players have been nurturing their vested interests by prolonging the deadly conflict, hoping to improve their position to serve their long-term objectives. The irony is that none of the external main players—Russia, Iran, US, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia—and the domestic actors (the Assad regime, Sunnis, and Kurds) will end up with such lasting gains that outweigh the horrifying losses that have been inflicted on the country and its citizens.

What happened to the sentiment of “never again” that was universally embraced in the wake of World War II to prevent calamities such as this from occurring? How low will the moral bar of the international community sink before we awake to the unfolding catastrophe?

How many more men, women, and children must die, and how much ruin can the country further sustain before we act to stop this madness that seems to infect every party involved, when nothing else matters but their criminal self-interest?

‘Crimes against humanity’ became a mere slogan, shaming every domestic and foreign party that could have stopped the slaughter but did nothing. They immunized themselves, assumed no responsibility, and discharged their moral culpability while the blood of innocent Syrian people continues to stream, marring what is left of their conscience.

While Syrian men and women suffered untold losses, pain, agony, and deprivation, the children—yes, millions of children—have suffered beyond the pale of wrenching ache and anguish, quietly despairing for they remain helpless and destitute.

According to World Vision International, “millions of children under five are now more vulnerable than ever to physical trauma, injuries, communicable diseases, and malnutrition.” At least 8.2 million children inside Syria and across the region are now experiencing displacement, shattered health systems, and food insecurity, while over 2 million are growing up as refugees.

Nearly three million under the age of five have grown up knowing only war. One in four children is at risk of severe mental health disorders, with potentially lifelong consequences. Attacks on hospitals have left 43 per cent of Syrian hospitals functional, while half of Syria’s doctors have fled the country.

As many as 80,000 children in Syria are believed to be infected with polio, which was eradicated in Syria in 1995. The on-going bombing and shelling is the main cause behind the children’s psychological trauma that will leave indelible emotional scars from which they will suffer throughout their adult lives. During the five-year span of the conflict, life expectancy at birth has dropped by 15 years, and to top it all, tens of thousands of children were killed.

And if this is not enough, just think about the damage that has been inflicted on these children, who have been deprived of basic education with one in every four schools damaged, destroyed, or used for displaced people. There were 400,000 more children out of school in 2015 than 2014, as more than 4,000 attacks against schools have made these educational institutions financially insolvent.

These are not mere numbers. We are talking about a catastrophe in the making for all to see. Just imagine, two generations have been lost; never again will they know normalcy but only anguish and uncertainty, while the world watches with complacency.

No one is talking about a solution that could bring this calamitous war to a conclusion. The UNSC has been inept at best. Russia’s veto-wielding power has and continues to prevent the passage of any solution that does not meet its total requirements. President Putin will continue to support Assad and spare no effort to maintain Russia’s presence in Syria as a springboard to enhance its regional influence.

Iran, who is fighting for regional hegemony, will continue to support Assad’s regime until the last Syrian soldier. The mullahs do so in the ‘name of the almighty,’ which gives them the ‘moral

authority' to ravage the country for as long as it takes to secure their hegemonic ambitions from the Mediterranean to the Gulf.

Turkey's President Erdogan, who wishes to spread his wings throughout the Middle East, is fighting to secure a foot-hold in Syria. He is indiscriminately bombing the Syrian Kurdish fortifications, accusing them of supporting the PKK to prevent them from establishing their own autonomous rule, which can only further destabilize Syria.

The US was the only country that could have spared this horror, under the Obama administration. Sadly, Obama sat on his hands, allowing Russia and Iran to continue to pillage the country and consolidate their gains. President Trump, with all his boasting, has yet to lift a finger other than ineffectively bombing a Syrian air field in response to Assad's use of chemical weapons only to show his bravado, while shamefully stopping the training of anti-Assad rebels and rendering them vulnerable to the merciless attacks by Syrian, Russian, and Iranian forces.

Saudi Arabia continues to provide money and materials to the rebels only to serve its interests as it continues to wage a proxy war against Shiite Iran for regional dominance, making Syria the battleground between the two sects while the Syrian people pay the price.

Leave it of course to Assad to rampage the country only to stay in power. Many dictators have treated their people with ruthlessness and cruelty to maintain their grip on power, but no despot in recent years has inflicted so much devastation, desolation, and despair on his own country like Assad has, while doing Russia's and Iran's biddings.

Take a look at the monstrosity that Assad has committed—that would squeeze the heart of any normal person with the capacity to feel. Nearly 500,000 Syrians have been killed since the beginning of the civil war in 2011. An estimated 13.5 million people, including over 6 million children, are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection; 6.3 million people are internally displaced and nearly five million Syrians have fled the country and become refugees.

In addition to the staggering human toll, the cost of the conflict in Syria to date is estimated at \$275 billion, and there is no end in sight to the astronomical losses. One would think that at a minimum the international community would respond to the human crisis by providing the necessary funding, but unsurprisingly in this area too, the international community falls appallingly short. The United Nations has requested a record amount of \$8 billion in aid this year for Syria, and 65 per cent of UNICEF's appeal is underfunded, while over \$1 trillion is spent collectively on the military by the five permanent members of the UNSC.

The dismal failures of all the governments and institutions involved directly and indirectly in the Syrian calamity leaves us nowhere but to appeal to the masses. People of conscience, regardless of their country of residence and irrespective of their religious, cultural, or ideological orientation, you must rise now and make your voices heard. Speak up for the voiceless Syrian people who have been betrayed by corrupt head of states and condemned to dispersion, destruction, and death, which is a dreadfully sad testament to the international community's moral bankruptcy.

**Note:** This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/syria-testament-international-moral-bankruptcy/>

**Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: [alon@alonben-meir.com](mailto:alon@alonben-meir.com)**

---

**As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy****