

War, Climate Change, and Migration

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Climate Refugees

Although the U.S. news today, as it so often is these days, is lost in a miasma of administration wife beaters, porn star pay-offs, mafia-like corruption, and other topics more appropriate to reality entertainment shows than news, there is beneath this toxic cloud what I believe has become the defining political issue of the day, even if it is not much discussed in its global context? I am speaking here of the vast movement of people that is occurring; a migration that is creating immense misery among the migrants and the rise of a virulent form of nativistic racism in segments of the population in the nations where these moving populations end up. This trend has created stresses that are literally tearing cultures apart.

In Europe and the Americas it is changing governments; it led to BREXIT and elected Donald Trump. Yet, except for a small community of scientists who study these issues, few seem to comprehend that as disruptive as these migrations already are we are just at the beginning of a

trend that will overwhelm us unless we awaken to what is happening and why, and make preparations.

Most nations make a distinction between refugees and immigrants. An immigrant is someone who chooses to leave their country or region of origin to settle elsewhere. The United Nations Sustainable Development project says: “The number of international migrants—persons living in a country other than where they were born—reached 244 million in 2015 for the world as a whole, a 41% increase compared to 2000.”¹

A significant percentage of immigrants plan their move and come to their new areas with varying levels of preparation, full of hope, anxious to contribute, and succeed. In the United States, The Partnership for a New American Economy in 2011 tracked the actual data about these immigrants and “found more than 40% of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children. Eighteen per cent (or 90) of the Fortune 500 companies had immigrant founders. The children of immigrants started another 114 companies. That's 204 companies, 41% per cent of the Fortune 500. How many jobs do you think those immigrants and their children created?”²

In spite of the enormous contribution immigrants make, as the daily news in the United States, Europe, and Great Britain makes clear, for a percentage of the population these new arrivals are seen as “the other” and bitterly resented. Violence and identitarian politics inevitably follow. I recently published here *The White Supremacy Crisis*,³ in which I discussed immigration and race, so I want to focus this time on the tidal wave of people; and I want to focus specifically on refugees.

In contrast to immigrants, refugees are people who because of violence or persecution or climate change had, or felt they had, no choice but to leave; there is nothing voluntary about it. These people come with the clothes on their backs, a few things they can carry, and nothing else. They basically have no resources with which to begin again.

The UN’s Refugee Agency says, “Global forced displacement has increased in 2015, with record-high numbers. By the end of the year, 65.3 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. This is 5.8 million more than the previous year (59.5 million).”⁴

Camila Domonoske, of National Public Radio, gives us the correct perspective, I think, when she says, “One in every 113 people on Earth has now been driven from their home by persecution, conflict and violence or human rights violations... Each minute, 24 people around the world flee their home because of violence or persecution. And if the world’s displaced people were their own nation, it would be larger than the United Kingdom.”⁵

Day after day news stories appear about the suffering and death of refugees, 55% of whom in 2016, the last year from which we have full data, came from just three countries: Syria 5.5 million, Afghanistan 2.5 million, and South Sudan 1.4 million.

As of February 2018 more than half of the Syrian population are refugees either in their own country, in bordering nations, or abroad, and their numbers are growing. In the second half of 2016 alone, the South Sudan refugee population grew by 64%, from 854,000 to 1.4 million.

Other major refugee populations come from the Lake Chad Basin, 2.2 million, and Somalia, 1 million, Democratic Republic of the Congo 541,500, Central African Republic 471,100, Myanmar 451,800, and Eritrea 411,300.

Unless it is immediately happening in your life, in your community, it is hard to comprehend numbers like that and the impact this movement of peoples has on cities, towns, and villages where they end up, or where camps are located.

To give a more granular sense of scale, consider this report about just one Greek island, Lesbos, population 85,000, with its little towns and villages. On the 29th of January 2018, as the Greek media reported, “Over 200 refugees and migrants... arrived on the Greek island of Lesbos in 24 h.”⁶ This was not the first time boatloads of people landed on the island’s shores, but such arrivals are never predictable as to when they are coming, nor how many will show up, and there is a limit to what a small island can do about being prepared to receive them, and even when preparations are in place they are often not nearly enough.

According to the *Human Rights Watch Annual Report*, “The Greek authorities’ failure to properly identify vulnerable asylum seekers for transfer to the mainland, impeded their access to proper care and services? The report blames the policies, conditions, uncertainty “and the slow pace of decision-making in Greece for the refugees’ deteriorating health conditions and the eruption of violence against them.”⁷

“It is dramatic and it is the most vulnerable of the vulnerable coming in,” said Elias Pavlopoulos, who heads Médecins sans Frontières in Greece. “There are whole families fleeing war zones in Syria and Iraq. In the last few months our clinics have seen more people who have suffered violence, who are victims of rape, who have been tortured, than ever before.”⁸

In September 2015 Greece pledged to the other EU states to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers—including 106,000 from Greece and Italy. A mere 29,000 have been moved to other European countries so far. The 28-nation EU bloc has dramatically failed to live up to its own plan.

I want to be clear here, I use Greece as an illustration of the processes at work. It is anything but unique.

In 2016 Germany had 745,000 men, women and children apply for asylum; that is almost 100,000 more people than the entire population of Frankfurt am Main, Germany’s fifth largest city. Of that number 256,136 were granted refugee status.⁹

In far away Sweden there were 71,576 asylum seekers, and so it goes throughout Europe, and the political effects have been transformative.¹⁰

These refugees are not just going to Europe, either. In the United States, “Of the 84,995 refugees admitted to the United States in fiscal year 2016, the largest numbers came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Burma (Myanmar), and Iraq.”¹¹

The problem with listing numbers like this is that they give no sense of what is involved, so try this thought experiment: Imagine that over the course of the next few months 3500 desperate people descended on your town or your city. What would you do? Where would these people all

sleep? On your lawn, in your parks, in the gyms of your schools? For how long? How prepared would your local government be to feed these people? Provide sanitation for them? How will they get healthcare? What do you think the Federal government would be ready to do?

As you think about this consider the situation in Puerto Rico seven months after hurricanes Irma and Maria. As of February 2018 nearly a third, over 29%, of the island population is still without power.¹² How would you and your spouse and kids handle seven months without electricity? Or consider Houston which still has neighborhoods that are destroyed, and nearby areas are even worse. In Port Aransas a few miles along the coast from Houston, the general sentiment is, “Our government has failed us. It’s really sad that we’ve been overlooked and forgotten. Our mayor has done what he can as well as our city manager. We started out strong ... and as time went by things changed.”¹³

Or the American Virgin Islands where months after Hurricanes Irma and Maria healthcare remains a parlous state. As reported at the beginning of February 2018 on National Public Radio, “The only hospital on St. Thomas, the Schneider Regional Medical Center, serves some 55,000 residents between the islands of St. Thomas and St. John. Schneider's facilities suffered major structural damage, forcing a decrease in its range of services, mass transfers of its patients, staff departures... Only about one-third of the beds are currently available for patient care.”¹⁴

All three of these situations are the result of failures by government above the local level to provide adequate disaster relief. Based on these examples, how competently and at what speed do you think you could expect Federal aid to arrive in your town if there was an influx of refugees or a climate event?

If you are a physician, nurse you know that in any large number of people a percentage of them are sick, injured, or dying. How prepared would your town be to provide medical care in a climate disaster or a refugee crisis? How would you handle the dead bodies? What would happen if an epidemic broke out?

Whether it was climate change or war, thousands of the refugees would be little children, often orphans. Who in your town would be prepared to take care of them, feed and clothe them?

How prepared would your village, or town, or city be to keep order, without becoming racist and draconian?

The usual answer to refugees is refugee centers and camps, hastily and flimsily assembled villages. How would your town handle the sanitation and water issues? How long would your local government be prepared to maintain them? There are Palestinians still living in refugee camps established over half a century ago, and Ugandan AID widows and war refugees have been living in the Kampala, Uganda municipal dump for three decades.

To get some understanding of the moral stress migration causes host countries consider Israel. As reported in the *Atlantic*, “roughly 40,000 African migrants... have been stuck in limbo in Israel for years. Many crossed into Israel through the Sinai desert between 2006 and 2012, according to Israel’s African Refugee Development Center, fleeing the harsh political conditions in Eritrea or genocide and war in Sudan. The Israeli government has argued that these migrants are simply in Israel looking for work.

“Human-rights organizations, however, claim that most or all are here out of fear of persecution in their home countries. Of more than 13,000 people who had applied for asylum as of last summer, only 10 have been recognized as refugees, according to the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants, an Israeli human-rights organization.”¹⁵

As I write this, the Israeli government is offering sub-Sahara Africans a plane ticket and \$3500, and giving them 2 months to leave the country or face incarceration.¹⁶ In the classic way in which such people are characterized, the government calls them “infiltrators.” This policy of the Netanyahu government is tearing the country apart.

Over 850 rabbis, cantors, and religious students and scholars from the various branches of Judaism signed a petition imploring the government not to pursue such a policy saying, “As a country founded by refugees, and whose early leaders helped to craft the 1951 International Convention on the Status of Refugees, Israel must not deport those seeking asylum within its borders. We Jews know far too well what happens when the world closes its doors to those forced to flee their homes.

“Our own experience of slavery and liberation, and our own experience as refugees, compel us to act with mercy and justice toward those seeking refuge among us. Please affirm these Jewish values, as well as Israel’s international commitments, by stopping the deportations.”¹⁷

And the migration trend is getting more acute every year. Senior U.S. military and security experts have told the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) that the number of climate refugees will dwarf those that have fled the Syrian conflict, bringing huge challenges to Europe, and the U.S.¹⁸

“If Europe thinks they have a problem with migration today ... wait 20 years,” said retired U.S. military corps brigadier general Stephen Cheney. “See what happens when climate change drives people out of Africa—the Sahel [sub-Saharan area] especially—and we’re talking now not just one or two million, but 10 or 20 [million]. They are not going to south Africa, they are going across the Mediterranean.”¹⁸

EJF is one of the few organizations that really seems to comprehend where the migration trend is headed, and they say, “Climate change is an existential threat to humanity. As global temperatures continue to hit levels not seen since records begun, extreme weather events continue to cause major disruption and the rising cost of inaction leaves the poorest and most vulnerable people on our planet worst affected.”¹⁹

Seconding that view, Sir David King, former chief scientific adviser to the UK government, said, “What we are talking about here is an existential threat to our civilization in the longer term. In the short term, it carries all sorts of risks as well and it requires a human response on a scale that has never been achieved before.”²⁰

It is not a question of whether this is going to happen, but how we are going to respond to it, and we are about to receive another teaching moment. We are about to see what happens when a modern city runs out of water. Just under four million people live in densely populated Cape Town, capitol city of South Africa, 1520 people per square kilometer. What is being called “Day Zero” as I write this, is scheduled to occur on May 11, 2018.

That's when the water system will cease for everyone but a few select hospitals or similar facilities. The entire city is already under short water rations. As reported by NBC News, "From February 1, Cape Town has told residents they can use no more than 13.2 gallons of drinking water a day in an effort to avoid "Day Zero." To put that in perspective, the average American uses an estimated 80 and 100 gallons of water daily."²¹

How is this going? Not well. According to reports people are even still watering lawns in some neighborhoods. It is clear that preparing a city for a cataclysmic environmental alteration has to overcome the inertia of willful ignorance and indifference, and it does not happen quickly? Cape Town is a living laboratory that every city threatened with drought should be focused on with the closest intention. What will happen if Day Zero comes, and the taps turn off? One thing is sure: many Cape Towners will become refugees. How would this play out in say, Tucson or Phoenix? Where would refugees from those cities go? In the central states as catastrophic weather events like tornadoes are projected to have a massive impact on towns and cities as a result of climate change, where are those internal refugees going to be headed?

This is a world wide problem but its impact is very local. It calls for preparation and pre-planning at a scale not seen since when? I've been thinking about that, and I believe the answer is to be found in the War II period, when much of Europe and large parts of Asia were being reduced to ruins and 11 million former slave laborers, prisoners of war, and concentration camp inmates joined with other millions of homeless people roaming over Europe.²² They were called Displaced Persons.

What made me think of this period was two things: the vast movement of populations in the 1940s, and the fact that the response to this crisis was recognized and planned for years in advance of its occurring. Even as the Second World War was just beginning, world leaders met in London in September 1941 and created the Inter-Allied Committee on Post-War Requirements which came to be known as the Leith-Ross Committee.²³

Less than a year later, on 21 November 1942, this initial effort was ramped up when the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations of the United States Department of State was established.²⁴ A year after that, when the scale of what was coming was beginning to be more clearly understood, a 44-nation conference was held at the White House on November 9, 1943, specifically to create the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. This was 2 years before the United Nations itself came into existence.

"The purpose of UNRRA was to 'plan, co-ordinate, administer or arrange for the administration of measures for the relief of victims of war in any area under the control of any of the United Nations through the provision of food, fuel, clothing, shelter and other basic necessities, medical and other essential services (Agreement, Articles 1 and 2).'"²³

All of this pre-planning would prove its worth, in avoiding a complete social breakdown in Europe, and yet it was still not enough. Two years after WWII ended there were still about 850,000 people, 150,000 of whom were children under the age of six, living in Camps.²² This enormous movement of people during and after World War II, although largely forgotten today because it was handled with such success, was at the time, a defining reality of the post-war world.

I mention briefly its history in order to ask the question: Where is such planning occurring at a similar scale today? Nowhere, is the answer. It is not happening at the government level. This becomes even more alarming when one realizes that the total number of people on the move after World War II while enormous was only a fraction of the number of refugees today, and the present day number is only a fraction of what is projected to be coming.

The scientists who have studied this question in detail report, “Carbon emissions causing 4°C of warming—what business-as-usual points toward today—could lock in enough sea level rise to submerge land currently home to 470-760 million people, with unstoppable rise unfolding over centuries. At the same time, aggressive carbon cuts limiting warming to 2°C could bring the number as low as 130 million people.”²⁵

Speaking as an embarrassed American as one studies this subject, one see a kind of symmetrical karmic irony to it all. These migrations are the direct result of invasive warfare in Islamic third world countries, conducted principally by the United States for good reasons and bad. In the last 17 years we have destroyed the social fabric and economies of Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria. At the same time the climate effects we are now facing arise from willful ignorance and failure to begin serious remediation and end the processes that are destroying the balance of the earth’s meta-systems.

How could anyone not expect there to be millions of people displaced? At some point historians are seriously going to ask, were there other options? Other ways to deal with the social instability and the rise of fundamentalism in the Islamic world. Could we have reacted differently, say back in 1973 when the fuel embargo was happening; when Jimmy Carter a nuclear engineer and the only president to competently understand energy polices put solar panels on the roof of the White House, and tried to move us out of carbon energy?

Could all of this have been handled differently? We are starting very late in the trend, and I think those questions are very important to ask and answer. It is long past time to begin planning and seriously creating the infrastructure to handle the crisis being created by war, climate change, and migration.

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