

# Global Warming Adds to Mideast Hot Zone

**Exclusive:** Official Washington's neocons hope they will finally get their wish to bomb Syria's government, but the crisis of the Mideast – made worse by drastic climate change – won't be solved by more war, explains Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

While Washington decision-makers debate whether to launch U.S. military strikes against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, as if Syria suffers from a shortage of war and foreign intervention, the United States continues to ignore underlying issues that have helped trigger recent conflicts in the Middle East and threaten to create much bigger upheavals in decades to come.

Taking the long view, our number one enemy should not be Assad, or even ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, but climate change. Predictions by climate scientists that the Middle East will become nearly uninhabitable by the end of the century – barring decisive global action to curb carbon pollution – put all current conflicts into much-needed perspective.

Experts have been warning for years about the social and political implications of environmental stresses. Consider these cautionary words from the International Institute for Sustainable Development in 2009:

“Already the Middle East as a whole is the world's most dependent region on wheat imports. . . . If climate change begins to reduce agricultural yields at the same time as international food prices rise, . . . food insecurity, both perceived and real, will increase. . . . This, in turn, could alter the economic and strategic balance in every country in the region . . . As Canadian security analyst and journalist Gwynne Dyer notes, ‘Eating regularly is a non-negotiable activity, and countries that cannot feed their people are unlikely to be ‘reasonable’ about it.’”

One year later, a “perfect storm” made that warning come true. Record rainfall cut the wheat harvest in Canada – the world's second largest wheat exporter – by almost a quarter. Severe drought and wildfires wiped out nearly 40 percent of Russia's potential wheat harvest. Extreme weather in late 2010 also devastated crops in the United States and Argentina. A once-in-a-century drought led China, usually the world's largest wheat producer, to begin buying up grain on the international market.

**Spreading Chaos**

As a result, global wheat prices doubled from the summer of 2010 to February 2011, reaching an all-time high. The spike hit the Middle East – home to the world’s nine top per capita wheat importers – like a plague of locusts. Protesters in Tunisia, the birthplace of the “Arab Spring,” waved baguettes to signal their anger over food prices.

Similar demonstrations struck Yemen and Jordan. In Egypt, where 40 percent of personal income is spent on food, and bread accounts for a third of the typical consumer’s calories, the food crisis fed popular discontent that spilled over into mass anti-government demonstrations on Tahrir Square that spring.

In Africa’s impoverished Sahel, drought and desertification drove hundreds of thousands of desperate migrants to Libya in recent years. The clash between indigenous Arabs and sub-Saharan black Africans helped trigger the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi. His opponents fueled the revolt by accusing black immigrants of taking jobs and becoming mercenaries to keep Gaddafi in power. As a result, Western-backed rebels brutally abused and slaughtered thousands of darker-skinned migrants.

In Syria, the worst four-year drought in its history drove hundreds of thousands of hungry families off their farms from 2006 to 2010. The mass migration overwhelmed the Assad government, which was already stressed by foreign economic sanctions and a huge influx of refugees from the U.S.-led war in Iraq. The tinder was laid for a revolt sparked by internal dissent, fanned by the regime’s overreactions, and stoked by foreign intervention [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Exploiting Global Warming for Geo-Politics.”]

Four years ago, the United Nations predicted that Egypt could become water scarce by 2025, in part due to population growth and upstream diversions of water from the Nile. Climate change has accelerated the timetable.

According to recent reports, “Drinking water shortages have left parts of Egypt going thirsty for up to two weeks in the run-up to Ramadan, with popular frustration over the failure of authorities to tackle the crisis spilling onto the streets. . . The water shortages have exacerbated an already difficult Ramadan in Egypt which saw food prices increase by 12.7 percent in April compared to the same month last year . . . The cost of rice, an Egyptian staple, has more than doubled compared to last year’s Ramadan.”

### **Pummeling Iraq**

Climate change is battering war-torn Iraq as well. As three experts warned in *Foreign Affairs* magazine last year, “The Tigris-Euphrates river basin, which feeds Syria and Iraq, is rapidly drying up. This vast area already struggles to

support at least ten million conflict-displaced people. And things could soon get worse; Iraq is reaching a crisis point. . . In Karbala, Iraq, farmers are in despair and are reportedly considering abandoning their land. In Baghdad, the poorest neighborhoods rely on the Red Cross for drinking water.”

Further south, Iraq’s famous marshes are drying up. What a recent report on NBC News called “a catastrophe in the making for one of the world’s most important wetlands,” is evolving into a human emergency. Besides wiping out the livelihood of herders and fishermen, it has contributed to a sharp rise in the frequency and intensity of sand and dust storms, extending deep into Iran and Kuwait. Many inhabitants report severe respiratory problems as a result.

Competition over fresh water supplies is aggravating conflicts within the region. Turkey, which lies upstream from Syria and Iraq, has radically reduced water flows to those neighbors since 1975 to serve its urban and farm needs and is building new dams to take even more, in the face of international protests and even threats of military action from its neighbors.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, the Kurdish regional government has threatened to withhold irrigation water as part of its power struggle with Baghdad. And ISIS, which controls major dams in the country, last year put farmers in four predominantly Shiite Iraqi provinces at risk by cutting flows down the Euphrates River.

The social, economic, and political challenges to the region of coping with heat, drought and related ills are certain to grow. As one climate scientist at Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory said recently, “The Mediterranean is one of the areas that is unanimously projected [in climate models] as going to dry in the future [due to man-made climate change].”

The World Bank estimated last month that future water shortages could slash the region’s GDP by 14 percent by the middle of this century unless countries in the Middle East undertake major investments and radically improve their water management practices to cope with drought. Such dry statistics likely portend further political upheavals, civil wars, and refugee migrations.

As President Obama said in 2014, “If you look at world history, whenever people are desperate, when people start lacking food, when people are not able to take make a living or take care of their families, that’s when ideologies arise that are dangerous.” Scientific studies prove him right.

### **More War Is Not an Answer**

If we take his common-sense insight seriously, then sending more anti-tank rockets to insurgent rebels and bombing a continuously shifting array of opponents from Iraq to Yemen is unlikely to provide lasting solutions for the

region. Washington should instead be providing technical assistance, aid to strengthen critical infrastructure, and encouragement for regional collaboration.

As two researchers at the Center for American Progress declared in 2013, “Given the shape of these challenges, a new approach is necessary. The United States, its allies, and the global community must de-emphasize traditional notions of hard security more suited to the Cold War, and should focus on more appropriate concepts such as human security, livelihood protection, and sustainable development.”

That lesson, of course, will apply increasingly around the world as droughts imperil food and power production, as rising sea levels swamp island nations and coastal cities, and as increasing heat spreads disease vectors.

If the United States want to act like an “indispensable” nation, it’s time for Washington to demonstrate greater leadership on combating climate change and helping other nations cope with the enormous stress it brings.

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were “Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions”; “The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”; “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War”; and “Israel Covets Golan’s Water and Now Oil.”]

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## Neocons Scheme for More ‘Regime Change’

**Exclusive:** The neocons are back on the warpath, seeking to bomb the Syrian government and scheming to destabilize nuclear-armed Russia en route to another “regime change” – while ignoring the grave dangers, says James W Carden.

By James W Carden

In 1985, the diplomat and historian George F. Kennan published a seminal essay in *Foreign Affairs* magazine in which he took on the topic of “Morality and Foreign Policy.” Objecting to the habit of American policymakers to link foreign policy objectives to specific desired outcomes within the borders of sovereign nations, Kennan struck a blow for the Westphalian interstate system which had been the cornerstone of international life since 1648.

Standing against the neocon tide yelling “stop!”, Kennan decried what he called

the “histrionics of moralism” that guided American policymakers into believing they were responsible – and worse still, had it in their power – to right every wrong in every corner of the globe.

The self-declared mission to remake the world in America’s image has only become more entrenched since Kennan’s essay appeared three decades ago. In fact today’s neocons – positively high on self-righteous indignation, particularly when it comes to Russia and Syria – are perhaps even worse than their ideological forbearers who at least understood the all-too-real dangers of a nuclear conflagration between the U.S. and Soviet Union.

Today’s neocons – comfortably ensconced in U.S. government- and NATO-funded think tanks, major newspapers and magazines, issue forth groundless denunciations of the Russian government; eagerly cheer on the destruction of a modern European state, Ukraine; cheer on NATO’s latest adventures on the Russian frontier; and earnestly hope that a secular Syrian government be replaced by a band of Sunni religious fanatics, all the while smugly shrugging off the possibility of a nuclear confrontation between Russia and the West. Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad, you see, are “bad guys”: end of discussion.

And this brings us to the neocons who, unlike the scores of Christopher Hitchens acolytes in the Washington media world, actually wield some power. On June 7, testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland seemed pleased to report that the U.S. has already spent \$600 million on “security assistance” in Ukraine, while \$787 million has been requested for FY2017.

Meanwhile, efforts to undermine the legitimacy of the sovereign government of Russia, with an eye towards another “regime change,” continue apace. Nuland, in a remarkably candid response to a question from perhaps the Senate’s leading advocate of “regime change,” Sen. Ben Cardin, D-Maryland, said the State Department not only works with the Soros-funded Open Russia, it works side-by-side with Russian “journalists who have fled” Russia.

### **Endless ‘Regime Change’**

This points to what is the *de facto* policy towards not only Russia, but towards any government which finds itself in America’s crosshairs: work relentlessly to undermine the legitimacy of that government, with the ultimate aim of overthrowing it.

Can there be any doubt this is so in light of the “dissent memo” which was sent by 51 State Department officials this week? According to the *New York Times*, the memo urged Secretary of State John Kerry and President Barack Obama “to carry

out military strikes against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.”

What these American *diplomats* are, in effect, calling for is a policy which would lead to a war with Russia, would kill greater numbers of civilians, would sunder the Geneva peace process, and would result in greater gains for the radical Sunnis “rebels” who are the principal opponents of the Assad regime.

But these diplomats, heedless of the costs or likely ramifications of their preferred policy, feel the U.S. simply must unleash the dogs of war so that they can feel better about themselves for having done “something.”

The dual policies of isolating and provoking Russia and endless war in the Near East is the predictable yet natural outgrowth of American foreign policy as it has been pursued since 1950.

Searching for a post-World War Two rationale on which to base American policy in the aftermath of perceived Soviet aggression in Greece and Turkey, President Harry Truman’s National Security Council issued NSC-68. The brainchild of former Wall Street wunderkind turned uber-hawkish policy adviser Paul Nitze, NSC-68 might correctly be viewed at the original sin of the America’s postwar foreign policy.

According to the policy directive, the U.S. must “foster a fundamental change in the nature of the Soviet system ... foster the seeds of destruction within the Soviet system ... with a view to fomenting and supporting unrest and revolution in selected strategic satellite countries” all with an eye toward reducing “the power and influence in the Kremlin inside the Soviet Union.”

Sound familiar? Substitute the word “Soviet” with “Russia” or even “Syria” and we have the template for America’s more recent imperial adventures. Worryingly, as we approach the November presidential elections, there seems not an ounce of interest inside the Washington establishment for a new approach.

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## Dissent for Peace, Not More War

Fifty-one mid-level U.S. diplomats signed a “dissent cable” calling for the U.S. military to launch air strikes against the Syrian military to tilt the civil war

back in favor of the rebels, a mistake, writes ex-U.S. diplomat Ann Wright.

By Ann Wright

I served 16 years as a U.S. diplomat. But, in late February 2003, I wrote a dissent cable to Secretary of State Colin Powell expressing my strong concerns about the Bush administration's hot rhetoric about the need for regime change in Iraq and predicted the chaos that a U.S. invasion and occupation would have.

My dissent had no effect on the Bush administration and three weeks later on the eve of the beginning of the war on Iraq, I sent Colin Powell another cable – this time with my resignation.

I was OPPOSING the use of military force for “regime change” that was couched in the terminology of allegations of weapons of mass destruction. These 51 U.S. diplomats are now lobbying FOR military action essentially for “regime change” couched in the words of “bring Assad to the negotiating table.”

None of us condone the Assad's government dropping horrific “barrel bombs” on anyone, but after seeing the chaos of Iraq and Libya after their leaders were removed by U.S. military action, I fail to understand how removing Bashar al-Assad by U.S. military force will have any other result than increasing chaos and violence in Syria and giving an opening for groups to gain control that may perpetrate even worse violence on the people of Syria.

Although I don't know the names or history of the diplomats who signed the dissent cable, as mid-level officers they probably have worked in the State Department 10 to 15 years and have known nothing but U.S. wars since 2001, that is 15 years of war.

War is now the U.S. government's norm and their viewpoints seem to be coming from that perspective, despite some resounding non-violent successes to address political disagreements in Cuba and Iran.

The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were the matches that lit the fires in Libya and Syria, brought thousands of international mercenary fighters to the region and precipitated the terrible attacks in Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino and possibly Orlando.

Sadly and dangerously, the diplomats who signed this letter either do not recognize or do not care that attempting to bomb Assad for “regime change” may satisfy Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, our “allies” in blood, but would create an even stronger anti-American blaze in the region and around the world that could be uncontrollable.

Ann Wright served 29 years in the US Army/Army Reserves and retired as a Colonel. She also served 16 years as a U.S. diplomat in U.S. Embassies in Nicaragua, Grenada, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sierra Leone, Micronesia, Afghanistan and Mongolia. After sending a dissent cable on the pending Iraq war, she resigned from the U.S. Department of State in March, 2003. She is the co-author of *Dissent: Voices of Conscience*.

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