

Syria: The New “Terra Nullius”

By [Maximilian Forte](#)

Global Research, November 04, 2018

[Zero Anthropology](#) 6 October 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

Syria, seat of an Islamic Caliphate. Syria, site of the Middle East’s newest liberal democracy. Syria, socialist paradise. Syria, a corrupt and murderous dictatorship that practices genocide. Syria, a failed state. Syria a state that is too strong. Syria, soon to be partitioned into ethnic enclaves. Syria, a pawn of Iran. Syria, a tool of Russia. Syria, a haven for terrorists that threaten our friends and way of life. Syria, where Saddam sent his fabled WMDs. In other words: Syria is whatever you want it to be. Syria, if it exists, apparently only exists to satisfy your desires, where you get to freely confuse where you think the world ought to go, with where it is going.

Syria, if you take at face-value any of the many authoritative North American and European pronouncements about “[what needs to be done](#),” has seemingly joined the list of “disappeared” nation-states. It was a country made to vanish into thin air, like Libya, Iraq, and Yugoslavia before it. Anything goes when it comes to Syria: it can be whatever we imagine it to be. It was as if “Syria” was just a name for a template. We speak and behave as if it were first a *tabula rasa*—a clean slate—or more accurately, *terra nullius*—a land belonging to no one. It is land that belongs to no one, that is, [until we arrive on the scene](#) and forge our models for a new Syria. Syrians are not allowed to have their Syria until we first get a say on what Syria will be.

Syria Not For Syrians

Over the past seven years we have seen in virtually every side to the foreign debate about Syria’s present and future(s) an immense amount of apparently self-gratifying wishful thinking. We have witnessed the very real danger involved in the ideological mode of thinking, especially when the ideologies are backed by real material power and conveyed as action on the ground. Whenever we have the rare chance to hear any Syrians, they are instantly dismissed and disqualified by one side or another. We are happier dealing with a “Syria” that is a figment of our political imaginations, a projection of the discontents we have with our own domestic politics, a method for beating up all “enemies, foreign and domestic”. “Syria” is the plaything of those who are equal to any of our hedge fund managers: we pick a side, and bet on it. More than that even, “Syria” is a meeting ground for [fantasy](#) and political economy, and it’s a sign of just how ugly is the recolonization effort wrought by neoliberal globalization.

And it most definitely is the case that what we are dealing with here is globalization’s destruction of sovereignty, of national self-determination. How do we know that? Watch this: while there was no real debate about the US sending troops to Syria (where they can [cancel out Syria’s sovereignty](#)), there was instead massive, urgent, melodramatic panic about the US sending troops [to its own border](#), where they could affirm US sovereignty. If a nation can send its troops to another continent, but not to its own border (i.e., stay at home),

something is really wrong. Some must have wondered what US troops were doing on the US border, as if they naturally belonged in Syria instead. The [jarring juxtaposition](#) of the two contrasting stances came out in a single question by a reporter at a White House press briefing—a reporter who nevertheless failed to note the contrast:

“there seems to be a perception that, at times, the President makes announcements and then the White House has to come up with policy to match what the President said. Like with the talk about the military at the border, there weren’t really a lot of details about that at first. And with the issue with Syria, and him saying he wanted to, kind of, pull all the troops back”.

In another White House press briefing, [reporters once again failed to notice the absurd contradiction](#) between their thinly veiled criticisms of Trump’s desire to pull US troops back from Syria, while apparently complaining about the decision to send troops to the US border. The only way one can reconcile these two apparently contradictory positions is to recognize that they both reduce to a common denominator: the destruction of nations as viable entities. Any and all nations, everywhere, have been the target. Some were surprised to learn that this included the US itself.

Syria, likewise, is denied the right to defend itself. It has no right to its own territory. [Israel is free to bomb at will](#), as are a range of NATO members, and the US can freely decide to make a presence for itself, to [create “interests” on Syrian soil](#) (which in principle, does not exist). When other nations send forces at the request of the Syrian government, then *those* nations suddenly have no right to be there. Why not? Because they are there precisely as a result of decisions made *by the Syrian government*, and Syria can have no government because it also has no soil. Who decided on this arrangement?

For globalization to work, it required a policeman. After all, neoliberals believe that states are still useful as law enforcers. This introduced a fatal flaw into the globalist agenda, which was pushed and enforced by states: not all states are equal in power, and thus the only reliable global policeman was the US. The US, some would argue, has no right to determine who crosses its borders, yet retains the right to decide on [who is allowed across Syrian borders](#). That such arrangements are subject to a backlash in the US itself, the power core of globalization, is the main reason that globalization is in such extreme jeopardy.

For the globalists, Syria and the US are nonetheless alike in one key respect: they both belong to the rest of the world. What they are not allowed to belong to is themselves. The world the globalists tried to invent out of thin air was one of forced associations, unwanted encounters, and false dependencies. No wonder that the reactions have in some cases been so scathing, so filled with spite. If such reactions are deemed a problem, and if one wanted to avoid such reactions, then logically you would cease creating the causes of the problem. But the world imagined by globalists was never inhabited by real people; it was a world where everyone was subject to [“learned helplessness”](#) and like a repeatedly abused dog learned to “just take it”—a world that was unreal, inhumane, and was therefore never sustainable.

Terra Nullius

This is how [Sven Lindqvist](#) explains the idea of [“terra nullius”](#) in his [book](#), published in English in 2007:

“Terra nullius. From the Latin terra, earth, ground, land, and nullius, no one’s.

“Thus: no one’s land, land not belonging to anybody. Or at any rate, not to anybody that counts.

“Originally: land not belonging to the Roman Empire.

“In the Middle Ages: land not belonging to any Christian ruler.

“Later: land to which no European state as yet lays claim. Land that justly falls to the first European state to invade the territory.

“Empty land. Uninhabited land. Land that will soon be uninhabited because it is populated by inferior races, condemned by the laws of nature to die out. Land where the original inhabitants are, or can soon be rendered, so few in number as to be negligible.

“The legal fictions summed up as terra nullius were used to justify the European occupation of large parts of the global land surface”. (Lindqvist, 2007, pp. 3-4)

Syria was land not belonging to the Roman Empire, until it was. It is also land not belonging to the American Empire, and powerful interests in the US would obviously like to change that. Outside of the high echelons of the military-industrial-complex, other US interests have also vested themselves in Syria. A loose coalition has formed, ranging from generals in the Pentagon right across to establishment media, freelance “journalists,” self-appointed [humanitarian activists](#), and university-based anarchists and some Marxist academics. They all agree on one fundamental point: Syria can no longer belong to Syria alone; Syrian decision-making, and the right to make decisions about citizens on Syrian territory, is to be subject to some sort of veto wielded by foreigners, backed by US firepower.

For this mission of foreign ideological occupation to work, Syria first has to be symbolically and politically emptied. Only an empty zone can be so liberally filled with fantasy and spectral assaults: [fabricated gas attacks](#); mysterious missile strikes in the dead of night; cities in ruins suggesting they were once occupied by a settled, peaceful civilization that has long disappeared; and even [mystery adversaries](#) jamming US communications. *The Onion*, interestingly, had it right when in playing to the propaganda that has become the norm, it portrayed Syria as a land being trampled on by legendary monsters and super-human beasts, ruled by fears that “bombed-out buildings and blast craters could be harboring bands of angry scorpions, komodo dragons, mace-wielding cavaliers in full chain mail, or, as children recently swimming off the country’s coast discovered, giant piranhas”.

Chemical weapons, the weapons of the new barbarians, are an essential feature of the kinds of [made-up tales](#) that are made to prevail in a frontier zone of projected fantasies of monsters. In the land of make-believe [“evil,” Sadistic Arab “dictators”](#) unleash troops [powered by Viagra](#) to engage in systematic rape, rip babies from incubators, threaten to massacre entire cities, and then wipe out communities with poison gas. Accusations we would never tolerate against our own, let alone treat credibly, are instead freely plastered on others. It’s amazing that in the new, fastidious and prickly racism-consciousness that prevails in North American media and academia, such routine colonial racism is instead still perpetuated, as much as the incessant myth-making.

Fantasy is useful in other ways: by dismissing the value of evidence, and replacing facts

with *belief*, any accusations can be given the weight of “credibility”—but only if enough people have been successfully trained to mistake credibility for truth. What the US has developed, for example, is a [fact-free, faith-based approach](#) in its foreign policy rhetoric, one that is used to justify permanent US intervention. Why? Because there is no objective argument one can make for one country to occupy another. It’s not a matter of logic and rationality; it’s a matter of ideology and a thirst for power.

Having projected onto Syria an absence of “civilization,” this creates wide open space for demonization. Demonization is a valued part of Western myth-making structures, especially in justifying imperial domination. Demonization turns very human opponents into monsters (and they are referred to as such, as monsters, animals, and of course “evil”). Adversaries of the West are played up as villains in a morality tale, that always allocates to us—by default—the role of saviours and victors, if we will have our victory (as the late Charles Krauthammer put it, “The choice is ours. To impiously paraphrase Benjamin Franklin: [History has given you an empire, if you will keep it](#)”). We thus have these endless moral crusades on our part, where morality is used to mask politics.

Moral crusaders love it when in the distance they make out the outline of a new terra nullius on the horizon. Places Shores like Syria offer the opportunity for adventure, to go out and exercise yourself, to use Syria as part of your own personal self-fulfillment, an object of your ambition and desire. Eurocentric missionary aspirations flourish in such contexts, robed as “[humanitarian interventionism](#),” “internationalism,” “solidarity,” “civil society activism,” “democracy-building,” “conflict resolution,” “peace-building,” or just plain [regime-change](#).

The paradox of foreign intervention is that [it empties everyone](#), not just Syria. [Britain and France](#) earlier this year saw their [foreign policy being taken over by the US](#), restricting any domestic parliamentary debate about the decision to militarily strike Syria, until well after the fact. The US was no exception: the decision to attack Syria in April of this year was done [without Congressional approval](#). The process had been emptied of political representation by those elected and legally appointed to (dis)approve war-making, as dictated by the respective constitutions, which for a moment vanished. War, in violation of both international and domestic laws, [damaged democracy](#) in the US, UK, and France. This is what imperialism in the globalist age looks like, even when one of the key actors sometimes likes to sound like an angry anti-globalist.

The key themes of this renewed terra nullius are thus:

- land without a legitimate state to own it;
- civilization vs. barbarism (along with civilized vs. barbaric forms of violence, for example, Tomahawk missiles vs. nerve gas);
- demonization and dehumanization;
- a nation-state reduced to a “regime” which is reduced to one person who is reduced to a monster/animal; and,
- a fertile site for imposed models.

One question readers might ask is: *why*? Why should “terra nullius” or anything resembling the idea be in use here? One simple theory is that any society works with a finite set of cultural materials. These cultural materials can be reproduced, amended, extended, or reworded. We end up with multiple translations of a small set of original sources. Imagine that centuries after European colonialism began, we are still speaking of “civilization” vs. “barbarism,” in the very same terms. A second theory, that goes with the first, is that

except for cataclysmic situations (which are extremely rare—the exception), real cultural change occurs only very slowly, at an almost glacial pace. Changes to our basic cultural materials do take place in our lifetimes, but often more in form and application than a change in the original “code”.

Moral Imperialist Economy

Whenever members of a society imagine the rest of the world as a mass of “problems,” and imagine themselves as possessing the “solutions” to those problems, what we have then is the structure for a relationship that involves a transfer of capital. The producers of problems (in the periphery) owe a permanent debt to us in the centre, the exporters of solutions—ideally. Reality is different of course: this structural relationship of extraction needs to be maintained, and sometimes the maintenance costs exceed the profits. First, let’s look at some of the basic elements of the moral imperialist economy. Ideologically transforming Syria into a new terra nullius is a form of creative destruction (paralleled by real, military destruction), and as we should know, crisis always creates opportunity, and opportunity attracts opportunists.

Syria is a free for all for various patrons and clients. These new Wild Wests are a great place for freelancers of all kinds to upgrade their status, for example. Syria has thus been transformed into a Wild West of misinformation, of selective information, of forms of activism and a way to invest political interests in the creation of custom-made propaganda. Inevitably there are patrons for this or that stream of propaganda, whether it’s a news agency, the CIA, a NGO of some sort, or elements of “the crowd” funding one’s work through something like “gofundme”. The result is a kind of wild stock market for values of all kinds.

New commodities are produced by the new information warfare, designed to conduct war on the minds of all media consumers, whether of the established or social media kind (it makes little difference). One of the key new commodities is, of all things, the *baby photo*. Not just any babies though—no, these always have to be dead babies, sometimes mangled, sometimes partly decomposed, sometimes about to die, or those that have barely escaped death but are nonetheless permanently disfigured, burnt, or without limbs. These commodities are avidly traded by all sides.

The open borders/refugee advocates have their photo of a dead Syrian child on a beach; the regime changers have pictures of child gas victims; and even the anti-imperialists have their photo of a little Palestinian boy, seized from a hospital bed, looking helpless moments before being beheaded by beefy bearded jihadists. Printing dead baby photos is like printing money. Such photos call the attention of powerful patrons, supposedly “provoked” to act when the photos are sufficiently publicized. When such patrons intervene, it further raises the value of such photos, virtually creating a demand for more. Now the most conclusive way to make one’s case “credible” is by flashing the appropriate dead baby photo. This commerce is part of the humanitarian trafficking that liberal imperial globalism encourages.

Wildly inflated numbers, numbers that go up, come down, that get divided, are indicative of the existence of this kind of stock market. Thus the debates over the number of civilians “killed by the regime,” and how often the number is inflated to include all the soldiers and civilians killed by those opposed to “the regime”. So everyone who has been killed in Syria was supposedly killed by the Syrian state—that’s convenient, because after all we have the moralistic demon tales that instruct us that “Assad is a monster,” and just like a monster, he

“kills his own people”. (Funny, isn’t it, how easily we always manage to imagine these low-down Third World leaders as sub-humans.)

Status upgrades come easily: take the appropriate moralistic, virtuous stance in front of the right audience—by just saying that you *believe* in X or Y—and lo and behold you have achieved a status upgrade. You are one of the good people, a trusted source, a credible figure, because you said the right things to the right people in the right place at the right time. This internationalized form of virtue signalling is almost as good as printing money, and nearly identical to it in its most basic sense.

Like in the Wild West, betting in the saloon is also common when it comes to Syria. The US State Department under Obama placed all its bets on some entity they invented, which they liked to call “moderate rebels” (why not “respectable terrorists” or “polite criminals”?). They lost. [Numerous left-wing academics signed on to regime change](#) years ago, and because they only pretend to be seasoned analysts for their day jobs, they did not foresee the collapse of the anti-government forces in Syria.

That list included noted “post-colonial” scholars and anthropologists, united in their belief in “democracy promotion” and remaking Syria into something palatable to them, with the right leaders in place. Five years later and [a smaller group](#)—including feminists like Gloria Steinem and Judith Butler, anarchists like Noam Chomsky and the anthropologist David Graeber, the Marxist David Harvey, and advocates of recolonization like Michael Walzer—[placed their bets](#) on socialist Kurdish militias, presumably increasing the value of their bet by the important sign value of their brand name authority.

Ironically, in the process of reimagining legendary Rojava as the site of a second Spanish Civil War, they were openly collaborating with Donald Trump (not naming him directly, since “the US government” was more convenient). These signatories were thus complicit with the very same commander-in-chief of the armed forces they were calling on for support of Syrian Kurds.

They wanted “the US government,” whose President is Donald Trump, to impose sanctions on Turkey, and to develop a foreign policy that put Kurdish interests at the forefront. You can be sure that, elsewhere, in front of different crowds, they return to “the Resistance” by puffing up their little chests and sounding all “anti-Trump”—but when it came to cheering their favourite band of ethnic anarchists, they could dispense with appearances. Less “prestigious” characters, publishing in a less “prestigious” outlet, [countered the call to “defend Rojava”](#), a call which appropriated “progressive” politics for the cause of imperialism (thus reigniting an old marriage). (David Harvey, author of his volume, *The New Imperialism*, has recently changed his mind: he has decided that imperialism is merely a metaphor, “[rather than anything real](#)”. Out of curiosity, we have to wonder if “capitalism” is also a metaphor, rather than anything real, seeing how Marxists have linked capitalism with imperialism. Perhaps even socialism is a metaphor, rather than anything real.)

Of course activists, academics, and the freelancers that make all the Twitter noise, are just bit players in the drama of their dreams. Some of the really big heavy hitters are the various weapons manufacturers, politely termed “defense contractors,” and their army of lobbyists in Washington, DC. For them, any sniff of a chance for [permanent occupation](#) smells like permanent war, and thus permanent profit, paid for by debt in the present to be paid by future tax-payers. Advocates of [permanent occupation](#) concede only one alternative to occupation: regime change, thus recolonization, which has the same effect as permanent

occupation. Advocates include beneficiaries of status upgrades like Senator Lindsey Graham, converted into the de facto US Secretary of State by his friends at *Fox News* and *CNN*.

For powerful patron states like the US, “chaos” offers valuable opportunities—in the technocrats’ language, this is duplicitously referred to as “preventing chaos”. The official assumption, intended for popular consumption, is that “chaos” *predates* foreign intervention. Remember: other peoples are producers of problems, chaos is thus a permanent and normal state for them. Add to the assumption that chaos predates US intervention the assumption that there is no Syrian government (the officially existing one is not acceptable to the US, so it vanishes), then Syria becomes the name for a wide-open wilderness.

That means the US gets to train and reinforce “local forces”—like the [separatists](#) cheered on by a select group of leftist academics. But this all costs money, what to do? Here comes Trump’s transfer of costs for extracting capital: emphasis is placed on [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [Gulf States](#) to pay for the costs of [US occupation](#) and proxy-training in Syria. This model is essentially one that places the US in the role of an international mercenary. Where such support payments are not forthcoming, then there is the fallback of debt-financed US military spending. The loans are provided by a range of creditors, domestic and foreign, including foreign central banks. Many states thus own US debt, and what we see here is essentially the rest of the planet financing its own domination by a US debt-fuelled warhorse. (This is one of the “secrets” that ought to inform revised and reworked theories of imperialism: empires function best and last longest when the ostensible objects of imperial domination actively collaborate in supporting empire. Theories uninformed by this observation can become trite conspiracy theories of imperialism.)

To maintain the value of US “investment” in Syria, the [US needs to create a need for protection](#), while reducing the value of alternatives (competitors). One way to create a need for protection is to create crises that would seem to beg for it: phony gas attacks, like those happening at the end of a week of public debate that erupted after [Trump announced](#) he wished to [withdraw US forces from Syria](#) soon. Another means for bolstering US intervention in Syria is by invoking the threat of Iran.

As mentioned at the start of this section, the structural relationship of extraction needs to be maintained, and sometimes the maintenance costs exceed the profits. For example, “humanitarian activists” who plead for greater accessibility to refugees, disconnecting the fact of their homelessness from our own military interventions which uprooted those people in the first place, is one way that costs can exceed profits.

Humanitarians need to prove that they are needed, and refugees prove the need. However, the backlash from citizens in receiving countries who realize that refugee entrants, in large enough numbers, will usher in a new wave of de facto austerity measures as health, education, and public housing come under pressure, represents a threat to humanitarians and their careers. With humanitarian profit-seeking threatened, one way to respond is to caricature critics as xenophobic haters, which further inflames opposition to their project—few people accept having their pockets picked *and* being insulted. The result is a generalized closing of doors and the rise of parties that demand an end to foreign occupations.

Finally, I do not mean to imply that all imperialism reduces to economic factors alone. There

are several different types and methods of imperialism, and sometimes military imperialism is decidedly uneconomical, just as economic imperialism can appear totally pacific.

Again, trite conspiracy theories about the presence of oil pipelines, or plans for building them—in other words, that there must always be some wonderfully profitable economic opportunity for imperialism to make sense—are sometimes wrong. What I am suggesting is that all types of imperialism must involve *loss* for the dominated, there is a transfer of values and costs, and a system of extraction, such that every type of imperialism could be analyzed as if it were economic in nature.

Dreaming of Power, Projecting Our Fantasies

No doubt most citizens in places like the US and Canada do not spend much time, or any time, worrying about Syria—and that is probably a good thing. If only their example could be followed by those with much greater power, or those with much louder voices.

One of the striking features of the Syrian war are those individuals outside of Syria who have decided to make Syria their business. This goes well beyond personal curiosity and a desire to learn about a different place—it's instead something which is invested with a thick desire to turn Syria into something which they want and currently lack. Syria is experienced vicariously and voyeuristically. Some are learning what they can because they wish to stop our intervention in Syria, and in the process they are learning a great deal about their own society. Others, however, engage in no such reflection.

For those outsiders who would presume to have a say in Syria's future, Syria is required to put on a pleasing performance. Syria has to perform like a "democracy" before it can be left alone; some on the left instead argue it is already democratic, and see in Syria the salvation of a true liberalism. What unites both is the assumption that Syria is culturally empty: it can create nothing of its own. At best, Syria and other places like it (target nations) are pictured as mere fertile ground ready to be planted with foreign seeds. The only job locals have is to be receivers of imports. Why would a country with a civilization that long predates either Karl Marx or Adam Smith not have a right to develop its own approaches?

[As I wrote about elsewhere earlier this year](#), there is an internal debate among North American leftists as to whether Syria's Ba'athists are "true socialists". As I wrote then,

"does Syria exist to satisfy dogmatic demands in exchange for certification from those US Marxists who have never held power and thus know nothing about actual responsibility?...US Marxists in particular have an overweening sense of their centrality to the world, when they are beyond marginal at home. Perhaps their role as peripheral spectators in domestic politics is what has them casting about overseas for a mission to fulfill their frustrated ambitions".

One would think Syria had submitted an application for a job, and "history" put us in place to act as its judges. If Syria is not a "democracy," or is not "socialist," what then? Does it get destroyed as a result? I would hate to be on the receiving end of such "solidarity" and I would pray that "internationalists" learn the virtues of minding their own business.

"We're not particularly keen to be friends with you. We're not begging you for friendship. We want normal, civilized relations—which you arrogantly refuse, disregarding basic courtesy. You are misguided to think you have friends. Your

so-called friends are just those who can't say no to you. This is your only criteria for friendship".—[Vassily Nebenzia](#), ambassador of Russia to the UN Security Council, responding to US ambassador Nikki Haley on April 9, 2018.

*

Note to readers: please click the share buttons above. Forward this article to your email lists. Crosspost on your blog site, internet forums. etc.

Featured image is from Zero Anthropology.

The original source of this article is [Zero Anthropology](#)
Copyright © [Maximilian Forte](#), [Zero Anthropology](#), 2018

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Maximilian Forte](#)
<http://zeroanthropology.net/>

About the author:

Maximilian C. Forte is a professor of anthropology in Montreal, Canada. He teaches courses in the field of political anthropology dealing with "the new imperialism," Indigenous resistance movements and philosophies, theories and histories of colonialism, and critiques of the mass media. Max is a founding member of Anthropologists for Justice and Peace. Visit him online at <http://openanthropology.org/>

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca

www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca