

The Mass Killing in San Bernardino, California

By [Joseph Kishore](#)

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The population of the United States and the world watched in horror as news of another mass shooting emerged Wednesday afternoon. A total of 14 people are confirmed dead and 21 injured in the massacre at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California. When one includes the families and friends of the dead and injured, who will be permanently scarred by the tragedy, the victims number in the thousands.

As of this writing, it is not clear what precisely motivated the two shooters, Syed Farook, 28, and his wife Tashfeen Malik, 27. Farook, who was born in the United States, worked as an environmental inspector at the center, which provides services for people with disabilities. He reportedly got into an argument while attending a holiday party at the facility, left, and returned, heavily armed, with his wife. Both were killed yesterday evening following a car chase and a shootout with the police.

The killings were evidently planned in advance, as the pair were armed with two assault rifles and semiautomatic handguns, dressed in masks, and wearing body armor and cameras. They also reportedly brought explosives that were not detonated. After the shootout, police found 1,600 rounds of ammunition in their SUV, with thousands more rounds discovered at their house in Redlands.

On Thursday afternoon, FBI officials announced they were treating the massacre as a terrorism case, citing the extensive preparations for the crime, a previous communication with an individual being monitored by the state, and the travels of Farook to Saudi Arabia, where he met his wife in 2014.

If it does turn out that Farook and Malik were influenced at least in part by Islamic fundamentalism, it is significant that the ties are to Saudi Arabia, Washington's principal Arab ally in the Middle East and the source of much of the financing and support for what the US claims to be fighting in the "war on terror." However, such connections at this point remain speculative.

Whether or not the perpetrators were tied to Islamist political organizations, the mass killing in San Bernardino is hardly an isolated episode. Explanations based on terrorist sympathies are not required and are, in fact, an evasion to avoid examining the social roots of the repeated manifestations of homicidal violence in the United States.

So far this year, there have been at least 353 mass shootings in the United States, with at least 461 dead and 1,309 injured. Wednesday's massacre is the deadliest mass killing since Sandy Hook Elementary School, when 20-year-old Adam Lanza killed 20 children and six staff members.

In virtually every case, the victims are mowed down indiscriminately. The killers are not striking out at any particular individual. Their actions express extreme alienation from other people and indifference to human life—the lives of others as well as their own. In the San Bernardino tragedy, the two perpetrators had a six-month-old baby, whom they reportedly left with relatives the morning of the killings.

There is a particular horror in the targeting of a facility dedicated to providing aid for the disabled.

Whatever the specific individual motives for each such act, their frequency demands a deeper explanation. The answer is to be found not in individual, but in social pathology. While only an infinitesimal minority of people commit such crimes, those who do are taking to an extreme dysfunctional and diseased tendencies in American society as whole.

From the political establishment and media, no explanation is forthcoming. The Obama administration responded with its standard platitudes. In a statement Thursday, President Obama acknowledged the “prevalence of these types of mass shootings in this country.”

He added that it was not yet known whether the attack was “workplace-related” or “terrorist-related,” and repeated his call to limit access to guns. “When individuals decide they want to do somebody harm [we need] to make it a little harder for them to do it,” he said. While the prevalence of guns may explain how the killers got access to the weapons they used, it says nothing about the origins of the crime.

What is most notable about the endless media commentary that follows each mass killing is the failure to relate these crimes to specific circumstances in American society. This is because such events are a damning indictment of the state of American capitalism and its products—endless war abroad and deep social crisis within the United States.

The US has been in a state of perpetual war unprecedented in American history—going back a quarter century to the first Gulf War in 1990-1991. Someone like Farook, born in 1987, has grown up under conditions of non-stop war. For 15 years, war has been carried out under the banner of the “war on terror,” which has been used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the second invasion of Iraq in 2003, the bombing of Libya in 2011 and the escalating war in Syria and Iraq today. The toll in human life from these wars is well over a million, with millions more turned into refugees, their lives destroyed.

On a daily basis, the US military is engaged in bombings, drone strikes and “targeted assassinations.” The “war on terror” has been used to justify torture, concentration camps, the horror of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. The Obama administration has gone further than any other government in routinizing state-sponsored murder and devaluing human life. The political establishment and the media in the US would have the American people believe that endless violence and killing internationally have no domestic consequences.

The state of perpetual war seeps into every aspect of social life in the United States. The “war on terror” has been accompanied by a continual whipping up of an atmosphere of fear and repression at home. Violence abroad is increasingly brought back into daily life in America.

The police are armed to the teeth with military weaponry and carry out killings at a rate of more than 1,000 people a year. On the same day as the San Bernardino killing, video was

released showing police in San Francisco, California claiming another victim. This follows the release of video of the blatant police murder of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald in Chicago last year.

State violence for plunder and repression intersects with the immense social crisis. It is notable that San Bernardino is known as the “Detroit of California.” In the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, the city has been plunged into bankruptcy, mass unemployment and poverty. These conditions are mirrored in different forms throughout the country.

There is an acute level of social alienation that is felt by millions of people, with, at present, no progressive outlet. There are countless grievances that find no redress. Political life in the United States is deeply toxic, with the most backward and malignant conceptions fostered by the establishment and promoted by the media. In this confused environment, people snap and do monstrous things. With no mechanism for the legitimate expression of social and personal grievances, they take instead a maniacal form.

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Articles by: **[Joseph Kishore](#)**

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