

# The Power Politics behind the Islamic State (ISIS/Daesh), the Refugee Crisis and the “Trade” Agreements

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Global Research, December 29, 2015

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)  
Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Terrorism](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

*The protracted conflicts in Syria and many parts of West Asia have been a fertile ground for the rise of extreme militants professing their own barbaric distortion of the Islamic Faith. The involvement of two major powers in what can only be described as a cold war of attrition against these militants further highlights the complexity of the issue and the many secret hands that are exploiting the conflict in Syria in particular as a means to their own ends.*

*Whichever side of the fence one may be aligned to, it cannot be denied that these issues are in many ways connected, and even crafted.*

From the rising trend of Islamophobia that has blighted the Western world through many burgeoning right -wing groups, to the aforementioned war in Syria that has sparked one of the most catastrophic human tragedies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these issues are all connected in some form or another, weaving a tale of a perpetual conflict reflective of a grand strategy which seeks to dominate the world through the exercise of power and hegemonic influence.

## **Daesh and Geopolitics.**

Daesh, also known as IS or ISIS or ISIL, has risen to become the new face of terrorism in the modern world, outshining Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

While the group claims to be Islamic, their practice and rhetoric strikingly resembles the caricatures of Islam in medieval Europe to the point that it is almost cartoonish in nature, perfectly fitting the bill of the stereotypical evil Muslim bogeyman.

Daesh has struck with remarkable efficiency in many corners of West Asia and North Africa (WANA). Libya, Iraq and Syria have seen swathes of their territories fall under its occupation, and the group, having established a sophisticated media network, training camps and even administrative structures, continues to exert authority and control. From a military standpoint, the terrorist group has been able to hold on to its conquest — though it has in recent weeks lost some land to the US led coalition bombarding the areas it controls in Iraq and Syria.

However, the real challenge to Daesh particularly in Syria is not from the US but Russia. The effective air-cover afforded by the Russian air force since September 2015 has enabled the Syrian army of Bashar Al-Assad and its ally, Lebanon’s Hezbollah to regain control over

significant parts of Homs, Latakia and parts of Aleppo from Daesh and other terrorist outfits closely linked to either Saudi Arabia, or Turkey or Israel or the US and other Western powers. It is because outfits linked to them are losing control of parts of Syria that some Western and Turkish leaders have launched a massive propaganda war against Russia. The downing of the Russian military plane in Syrian airspace by the Turkish air force in November 2015 should be viewed in this context.

Indeed, the battle-lines are clearly drawn now with Syria as the battlefield in a new confrontation between the US, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. In a sense, this is the first major conflict between the two protagonists of the 40 year Cold War that ended in 1989. On the side of the US are other Western powers such as Britain and France, backed by their regional allies such as Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. On the side of Russia, is of course the Syrian government, Iran, the Hezbollah and increasingly, the Iraqi government in Baghdad which feels that Russia is more sincere in fighting the terrorism that threatens Iraq and the region than the US or Turkey.

The conflict involving these two sides, which unfortunately also exhibits a Sunni-Shia dimension, could potentially engulf the whole of WANA and indeed the world in a huge conflagration leading to even a world war. For the time being that danger has been checked by the UN Security Council Resolution on a Syria Peace Plan adopted unanimously by the Council in December 2015. Resolution 2254 (2015) not only calls for a ceasefire and negotiations between the Syrian government and the opposition but also expresses its support for free and fair elections within the framework of a sovereign, independent, and territorially united Syrian nation.

If it is implemented successfully, the death and destruction that has been Syria's fate for the last four years may come to an end. It will certainly bring to an end the tragic sight of thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing hearth and home, trying to reach safer shores in Europe.

From another perspective, it is this refugee crisis which also includes Iraqis, Libyans, Afghanis, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, apart from Somalis, Malians and Nigerians, among others, that is now impacting upon politics in Europe and the United States.

### **The Refugee crisis, Right Wing Politics and Donald Trump**

In the initial stages Germany was the most open among European countries to the refugees from WANA and other parts of Asia and Africa. Chancellor Merkel garnered much praise among the international community for Germany's "Willkommenskultur" (Open Door Policy). This charitable endeavour was short lived however. Almost overnight, border control measures were implemented, train services to Germany were temporarily halted, and tens of thousands of refugees found themselves stranded in other European countries.

Still, the situation in Germany was not as bad as in the rest of Europe. The border control measures of countries like Hungary had left 170,000 refugees stranded, sparking diplomatic tensions with its neighbours, such as Croatia and Slovenia. This had also sparked criticisms from the international community many of them condemning the reprehensible manner in which the Hungarian government had treated the refugees.

Countries like France, on the other hand, had opened their borders to the refugees. Nonetheless, there has been criticism of France's policy seen as discriminatory since it

allegedly favours only the Christian groups who are viewed — wrongly — as being more persecuted than other religious groups.

This discriminatory attitude is obviously directed against Muslim refugees who are in the majority. It is a reflection of the growing anti-immigrant sentiment fuelled by a number of radical right-wing groups in Europe in recent years. There is perhaps a historical root to this. It is embedded in Islamophobia, an irrational fear of Islam, which has been part of the European consciousness for more than a thousand years.

What has exacerbated Islamophobia especially in France is the 13 November terror attack by Muslim extremists in Paris which resulted in the death of 130 innocent civilians. Because it happened on the heels of the refugee crisis, it has also led to renewed fears about Muslim migrants. Politicians and media analysts are now speculating that some of these refugees may be “terrorists”.

Such senseless speculation has only strengthened popular sentiments against Muslims. Unpleasant incidents that target Arab looking males or hijab clad females have become more rife and rampant. It has further widened the chasm between the communities. Right-wing activists are even pushing for a movement to stem the “Islamization of Europe.”

In the US, Islamophobia is having a direct impact upon the presidential elections. The front-runner in the Republican camp has been quite candid about his fears of Muslim immigrants and the threat of Muslim terrorism. He has called for the outright ban of Muslims from entering America, for mosques to be torn down or monitored, and for Muslims in America to have special IDs.

Trump, it is apparent, has an audience. His anti-Muslim rhetoric resonates with a big segment of the middle and lower income White population. Victims of economic and social stagnation in the last two decades, scapegoating “the other” in this manner appeals to these Whites because they feel that once these “threats” are dealt with, “America will be great again”, which is Trump’s slogan, and their own situation will improve tremendously.

Thus we see how the exploitation of domestic fears rooted in the socio-economic situation by politicians seeking high office can actually serve the hegemonic agenda of a superpower. The Trump slogan of making America great again has widespread appeal within the populace since American dominance of the world is accepted as a given, as something good for humanity. Both Republican and Democratic aspirants recite this mantra about America’s leadership of the planet.

### **TPPA and Economic Hegemony**

In what can be considered the other side of the world, there is another event which highlights another part of the grand strategy to assert the hegemonic power of the United States of America.

The controversial Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) is a “trade” agreement among 12 Asia-Pacific countries helmed by the US which has negative ramifications for copyright laws, health care costs, local industries and national sovereignty. The TPPA excludes China, the Asia-Pacific’s most important economic power in every sense. This is why the TPPA is not so much about trade or economics. It is essentially about power and politics. It is a well-orchestrated strategy to contain and curtail the rising power and influence of China within

its own neighbourhood. Two important signatories to the TPPA, Australia and Japan, have recently declared openly that they support the US “pivot to Asia” to contain “China’s aggressive influence and posturing.”

The TPPA may mask itself as a trade deal (and a bad one at that), but it cannot disguise its ulterior geopolitical motive. It is a motive that may subject its signatories, including Malaysia, to external hegemonic agendas that may undermine the interests of our own people.

## Conclusion

The tentacles of the hegemon are spread across two fronts. One, in West Asia and North Africa (WANA) where it is determined to maintain its dominant power and influence. The stakes are high. It is not just oil and gas. It is the only region in the world where three continents meet and where some of the world’s most vital waterways are situated. But most of all, WANA is where Israel is. No other country is as important to the US and the West. The US is prepared to confront a big military power like Russia and a middling regional power like Iran in order to perpetuate its hegemony in the region.

Two, in the Asia-Pacific region where the hegemon seeks to contain and curtail the ascendancy of the world’s most dynamic economic power. For the US, the economic challenge posed by China has political and military significance in the medium and long-term which is why it wants to ensure that its own economic clout in the Asia-Pacific region which is still considerable will remain and expand.

For the hegemon, WANA and the Asia-Pacific are two regions where its right to rule the world has come to the fore. It will not allow anyone to question, let alone challenge, that right.

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