

The Unspoken Causes of Chaos in Syria Today

A Star Tribune editorial of Sept. 25, 2015 suggests that to “fix the migrant crisis” we should address roots of the problem. I agree, but suggest we need go further because some big roots have not been identified.

I’m a specialist in the causes of wars (my book on that topic won a small national award in 1999) so I want to highlight some other powerful forces behind the horrific conditions in Syria that are driving millions of migrants to flee today. Despite extensive coverage of political and religious dimensions, some of these causes are almost never mentioned.

Population pressure is one. Before the chaos began, the birth rate in Syria was about 25 children per thousand per year, and the growth rate was 2.4% per year. At 2.4% growth, a population doubles in less than 30 years. This puts enormous pressure on natural resources including farm land and water.

Climate change is another cause of this war. For four years prior to the beginning of significant protests in Damascus, Syria experienced its worst drought in recorded history. Millions of people (of a country with about 22 million) fled rural areas that could no longer sustain them into cities searching for opportunity. Population growth contributes to climate change by increasing consumption of fossil fuels.

It has become popular recently to blame many things on climate change, but this was not always so. Denial has consequences. For example, I attended a global threats conference at America’s National Intelligence University in September 2005 where I asked a very senior CIA speaker what he thought of this factor. He dissembled. Later I was told privately that they had been forbidden to discuss that subject publicly. This despite a then classified Pentagon “Marshall Report” in 2003 predicting many of the tragedies we witness today.

Other powerful causes of the chaos in Syria today are authoritarian politics and militant religion. It is less taboo to talk about them, so most people know how brutal the regime of Bashar al-Assad became when faced with protests over lack of opportunity for students and those migrants from rural areas. And we know how violent the fanatic backlash in Iraq and Syria called ISIS is, which exemplifies militant religion today. What most people do not know is how these forces interact synergistically.

Combine unsustainable population growth with declines in agriculture due to drought with a corrupt and extremely authoritarian government and militant religion among those who blame all problems on some “other,” and you have a formula for explosive civil conflict. Corruption of governance is another cause of wars about which very little has been written. Yet corruption of governance cripples efforts to solve problems worldwide.

Demagogues thrive on conditions like this. A demagogue is a political or sometimes “religious” leader who blames people’s problems on some easily identified other, often rival politicians or members of some other religious or ethnic group. They focus popular anger on those targets and urge “holy wars” of one kind or another against corrupt elites who are often already despised.

This week world leaders converged at the UN to speak about many problems, and the Catholic Pope Francis concluded a very successful visit to America. He spoke eloquently and often about the need for people to care more about the poor, which I certainly applaud. Pope Francis did not speak about changing his church’s ban on birth control, however, which arguably contributes more to poverty and fighting over scarce resources than the many good works his followers do to reduce such tragedies. I am sure that Francis means well, and that the birth control ban is intended to express respect for human life at all stages. Poverty and violence are unintended consequences, but they are real consequences.

It is a sad but true biological reality that too many people on too little land means that someone suffers desperate poverty. And where poverty is desperate, some will fight over scarce resources. It would help if those who sincerely wish to end suffering in so many parts of our world, like Syria and its neighbors, talked about fundamental causes despite informal, but powerful, taboos on naming many of them.

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