



# MAGAZINE

JANUARY 2025

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*“Increasingly, by choice  
or by accident, this is  
the role our nation has  
taken: the role of those  
who make peaceful  
resolution impossible ...”*

*-Martin Luther King Jr.*



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# Defending Society Against MAGA Tyranny: A Prospectus for Action

Jeremy Brecher

*Z has teamed up with Jeremy Brecher and the Labor Network for Sustainability to kick off 2025 with a new pamphlet dedicated to understanding what lies ahead, analyzing useful precedents, and developing unified yet diverse strategies of social self-defense guided by liberatory vision.*

## Prologue: Social Self-Defense Has Begun

The resistance to the MAGA juggernaut has already begun at community, city, and state levels.

- The governors of Illinois and Colorado announced a new coalition called Governors Safeguarding Democracy, designed to protect state-level institutions against the threat of authoritarianism. It's reported that more than 20 states are involved.
- Governor Gavin Newsom called a special session of the California legislature to fund the state's civil rights, climate action, LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, disaster funding, and protections shielding undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children. It's been referred to as "Trump-proofing" California.
- Less than a week after the election, 100,000 people registered for a call hosted by more than 200 organizations, including the Working Families Party, MoveOn, and Indivisible.
- More than 40,000 people joined a call announcing a new version of the Indivisible Guide, which played a crucial role in mobilizing the first Trump Resistance.
- Denver mayor Mike Johnston announced he will encourage people to protest mass immigrant deportations and that he would be willing to go to jail if necessary.
- The Los Angeles city council passed a "sanctuary city" ordinance to bar using local resources to help federal immigration authorities. In emergency resolutions the city's public school system reaffirmed itself as a "sanctuary" for undocumented immigrants and LGBTQ students. Denver, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and other cities have also passed sanctuary ordinances.
- The organizers of the largest one-day demonstration in US history, the 2017 Women's March, along with many other groups such as Planned Parenthood and the ACLU, are organizing a feminist People's March for January 18, shortly before Trump's inauguration.
- Chicago officials have instituted community trainings designed to teach people how to spot and respond to immigration enforcement actions. A local training in mid-November drew nearly 600 people.
- San Diego county supervisors voted to prohibit its sheriff's department from working with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice) on the federal agency's enforcement of civil immigration laws, including those that allow for deportations.
- The ACLU laid out a program to help cities and states become a "Firewall for Freedom," blocking federal efforts to access private data, limiting cooperation with federal immigration authorities, banning federalization of state National Guard units, and funding abortion care and travel to get it.
- The watchdog nonprofit the Congressional Integrity Project initiated a "Civic Defense Project" as a rapid response "war room" to debunk baseless attacks and defend those unfairly targeted.

Some predict this resistance will fizzle. Others expect it to burgeon. Neither of these predictions can be counted on. What happens with the resistance to the MAGA juggernaut will depend on what people decide to do and whether they create means for action that can accomplish their ends. The purpose of this Prospectus is to contribute to the search for those means of action.

## Introduction: What Is Social Self-Defense?

Donald Trump and his MAGA supporters will soon control the presidency, the Congress, the administrative agencies of government, the Supreme Court, and the U.S. military, intelligence, and security apparatus. He will be able to call on support from a wide swath of the public and from a cadre of armed vigilantes and groups organized for violence and intimidation. He dominates much of the media and is in a position to intimidate much of the rest. He has the support of a large sector of corporations and the wealthy. He has a demonstrated willingness and ability to use not just the legal instruments of government but also violence and intimidation, criminal methods, and coups. The official opposition to him within the electoral arena is in many cases weak, feckless, and discredited. So how is it possible that his domination can ever be overcome? This prospectus tries to answer that question.

As we saw in the Prologue, there is a movement emerging in response to the MAGA threat. But is it even possible for this emerging movement to develop the power it will need to counter a Trump tyranny?

Gandhi once wrote, “Even the most powerful cannot rule without the cooperation of the ruled.” A Trump tyranny will not be able to continue without the support and acquiescence of those whose lives and future it is destroying. It will only be able to pursue its destructive course if they enable or acquiesce in it. A movement can overcome the most powerful regime if it can withdraw that cooperation.

But how can that power be concretely realized?

There are several ways that resistance to Trump’s MAGA regime can exercise significant power:

- **Constituent power:** the ability of a mobilized electorate to influence leaders whose own power depends on election.
- **Protest power:** the ability of masses of people to demonstrate the large numbers and willingness to act of those who share their views.
- **Disruptive power:** the ability to exact costs on powerful institutions by disrupting their functioning through civil disobedience, strikes, and other forms of direct action.
- **Social strikes:** the mobilization of an entire society to withdraw support from a regime in order to bring it to an end through a nonviolent uprising or “people power.”

There are no guarantees that such power can be mobilized in a way that will contain the Trumpian onslaught, let alone bring it to an end. Trump and his coterie appear to be committed to permanent rule by their followers and their ideology. To accomplish that they need to destroy all possible barriers to their domination. They must break down the institutions of democracy that might stand in their way, for example by restricting the right to vote. They need to eviscerate the institutions of law, medicine, civil service, journalism, and other relatively independent bases of potential opposition. They have to prevent economic actors, including corporations and unions, from pursuing their own self-interest rather than conforming to the regime’s demands. They need to intimidate and silence those who might expose their lies and abuses. They must demolish political obstacles, not only from within the Democratic Party, but within the Republican Party as well. They need to paralyze the population with fear and entice it with the promise of a better life, or at least with bread and circuses.

While this program for MAGA domination promises enormous power, it also presents enormous risks to its perpetrators. By making almost every individual and constituency a potential victim of its onslaught, it is also likely to generate a vast, diverse, and potentially unified opposition. Its program is



an attack not just on one or another group, but on society as a whole – on the very practices and relationships that allow us to live together in a peaceful and constructive way. They are undermining the foundations of a free and ordered society. They are dismantling the basic practices that make life something other than a war of all against all. And they are hell-bent on destroying the natural conditions on which our life on earth depends.

The MAGA regime threatens immigrants, African Americans, Muslims, workers, women, children, the elderly, the disabled, LGBTQ+ people, all who depend on government for their health and wellbeing, and the environment on which we all depend for our very existence. Indeed, it threatens all that holds us together as a society. The resistance to that onslaught is therefore not just the defense of one or another group, but a defense of society, indeed of the very possibility of society. We the people – society — need to defend ourselves against this threat and bring it to an end. We need what resisters to authoritarian regimes elsewhere have called “Social Self-Defense.”

The term “Social Self-Defense” is borrowed from the struggle against the authoritarian regime in Poland forty years ago. In the midst of harsh repression, Polish activists formed a loose network to provide financial, legal, medical, and other help to people who had been persecuted by the police

or unjustly dismissed from their work. Calling themselves the Committee for Social Self-Defense (KOR), they aimed to “fight political, religious and ideological persecution”; to “oppose breaches of the law”; to “provide help for the persecuted”; to “safeguard civil liberties”; and to defend “human and civil rights.” KOR organized free trade unions to defend the rights of workers and citizens. Its members, who insisted on operating openly in public, were soon blacklisted, beaten, and imprisoned. They nonetheless persisted, and nurtured many of the networks, strategies, and ideas that came to fruition in Solidarity – and ultimately in the dissolution of repressive regimes in Poland and many other countries.

Social Self-Defense is the protection of that which makes our life together on earth possible. It includes the protection of the human rights of all people; protection of the conditions of our earth and its climate that make our life possible; the constitutional principle that government must be accountable to law; and global cooperation to provide a secure future for people and planet.

In the face of MAGA assault, protecting individuals, groups, and society as a whole go hand in hand. The attacks on individuals and groups are a threat not only to those directly targeted, but to our ability to live together in our communities, our country, and our world. It is a threat to all of us as members

of society. Protecting those specific constituencies who are most threatened is essential for protecting our common interests as people. Social Self-Defense means defending those who are threatened as a way both to defend them from injustice and to defend our common interest as people – as members of society. Social Self-Defense means we've got each other's backs.

Historians emphasize that there were great political divisions among the KOR activists who first developed the idea of Social Self-Defense. But they were able to act together around the agenda of resisting the Polish regime's attacks on workers and society as a whole. The individuals and groups who oppose the Trump agenda are as diverse as the targets that agenda threatens. Trump and his supporters have the potential capacity to play them off against each other and to make deals with them one by one. There will be enormous pressures on advocacy organizations, movements, parties, and even activists themselves to sell each other out.

Social Self-Defense is a means to unify ourselves around mutual aid and around our common interests. It defines Trumpism not only as a series of separate threats to different sectors, constituencies, and policy agendas, but also as a unified – and therefore unifying — common threat. It allows us to use each action and campaign against one or another Trumpite abuse as a way to strike a blow against the MAGA project as a whole. Social Self-Defense does not annul but does transcend the rivalries of Democrats vs. Republicans and of Left vs. Right. It is a frame that can help unify those who should be acting in common to overcome the MAGA juggernaut.

It thereby provides a basis for solidarity.

This prospectus draws on a range of historical experiences to explore possible modes of action for overcoming the MAGA assault on society – ways of implementing Social Self-Defense:

1. The Prologue, Social Self-Defense Has Begun, describes the initial stages of Social Self-Defense in the MAGA era.
2. This Introduction, What is Social Self-Defense?, presents an overview of Social Self-Defense against the coming Trump autocracy.
3. What We Must Prepare For describes some unpredictable but threatening possibilities for Trump's rule.
4. Social Self-Defense in the First Trump Regime recounts the history of the first Trump Resistance and draws some positive and negative lessons for the future.
5. Strategy for Social Self-Defense lays out a strategic assessment and strategic guidelines for resisting and overcoming MAGA.
6. Electoral Opposition analyzes the opportunities for utilizing the remaining institutions of democracy for Social Self-Defense.
7. Non-Electoral Opposition explores the potentials for an opposition based in civil society that goes beyond the limited and sometimes ineffectual opposition that is likely to be provided in the electoral arena.
8. The Social Strike examines the role of and possibilities for civil resistance through "people power" to MAGA coups and other direct threats to democracy.
9. A Constructive Program for Social Self-Defense suggests the role that the Green New Deal from Below and other constructive programs at the grassroots can play in building Social Self-Defense and providing inspiration for defeating tyranny through social transformation.
10. What Social Self-Defense Is Defending lays out the fundamental principles that must be defended if our life together is to be anything but nasty, brutish, and short.

The future course of the MAGA juggernaut and the response to it are highly unpredictable. Strategies to address it must evolve rapidly to meet changing realities. They will be the work of many hands. This prospectus offers gleanings from historical experience that may be helpful for people doing that work.

You can read or download the full 55 page pamphlet "Defending Society Against MAGA Tyranny: A Prospectus for Action" [here](#).

# A Global Minimum Wage Would Reduce Poverty and Corporate Power

**Lawrence S. Wittner**

In today's world of widespread poverty and unprecedented wealth, how about raising the wages of the most poorly paid workers?

This October, the World Bank reported that “8.5 percent of the global population - almost 700 million people - live today on less than \$2.15 per day,” while “44 percent of the global population - around 3.5 billion people - live today on less than \$6.85 per day.” Meanwhile, “global poverty reduction has slowed to a near standstill.”

In early 2024, the charity group Oxfam International noted that, since 2020, “148 top corporations made \$1.8 trillion in profit, 52 percent up on 3-year average, and dished out huge payouts to rich shareholders.” During this same period, the world's five wealthiest men “more than doubled their fortunes from \$405 billion to \$869 billion,” an increase of \$14 million per hour. As corporate elites gathered in Davos for a chat about the world economy, 10 corporations alone were worth \$10.2 trillion, more than the GDPs of all the countries in Africa and Latin America combined.

The world's vast economic inequality “is no accident,” concluded a top Oxfam official. “The billionaire class is ensuring corporations deliver more wealth to them at the expense of everyone else.”

Although inequalities in income and wealth have existed throughout much of human history, they have been softened somewhat by a variety of factors, including labor unions and, in modern times, minimum wage laws. Designed to provide workers with a basic standard of living, these laws create a floor below which wages are not allowed to sink. In 1894, New Zealand became the first nation to enact a minimum wage law, and - pressured by the labor movement and public opinion - other countries (including the United States in 1938) followed its lead. Today, more than 90

percent of the world's nations have some kind of minimum wage law in effect.

These minimum wage laws have had very positive effects upon the lives of workers. Most notably, they lifted large numbers of wage earners out of poverty. In addition, they undermined the business practice of slashing wages (and thus reducing production costs) to increase profit margins or to cut prices and grab a larger share of the market.

Even so, the growth of multinational corporations provided businesses with opportunities to slip past these national laws and dramatically reduce their labor costs by moving production of goods and services to low-wage nations. This corporate offshoring of jobs and infrastructure gathered steam in the mid-20th century. Initially, multinational corporations focused on outsourcing low-skilled or unskilled manufacturing jobs, which had a negative impact on employment and wages in advanced industrial nations. In the 21st century, however, the outsourcing of skilled jobs, particularly in financial management and IT operations, rose dramatically. After all, from the standpoint of enhancing corporate profits, it made good sense to replace an American IT worker with an Indian IT worker at 13 percent the cost. The result was an accelerating race to the bottom.

In the United States, this export of formerly good-paying jobs to low-wage, impoverished countries - combined with “free trade” agreements, a corporate and government assault on unions, and conservative obstruction of any raise in the pathetically low federal minimum wage (\$7.25 per hour) produced a disaster. The share of private sector goods-producing jobs at high wages shrank, since the 1960s, from 42 to 17 percent. Increasingly, U.S. jobs were located in the low-paid service sector. Not surprisingly, by 2023 an estimated 43 million Americans lived in poverty, while



Photo by: Fibonacci Blue

another 49 million lived just above the official poverty line. Little wonder that, in this nation and many others caught up in corporate globalization, there was an alarming rise of rightwing demagogues playing on economic grievances, popular hatreds, and fears.

If, therefore, wages in underdeveloped nations and in advanced industrial nations are not keeping pace with the vast accumulation of capital by the world's wealthiest people and their corporations, one way to counter this situation is to move beyond the disintegrating patchwork of wage floor efforts by individual nations and develop a global minimum wage.

Such a wage could take a variety of forms. The most egalitarian involves a minimum wage level that would be the same in all nations. Unfortunately, though, given the vast variation among countries in wealth and current wages, this does not seem practical. In Luxembourg, for example, the average yearly per capita purchasing power is 316 times that of South Sudan. But other options are more viable, including basing the minimum wage on a percentage of the national median wage or on a more complex measurement accounting for the cost of living and national living standards.

Over the past decade and more, prominent economists and other specialists have made the case for a global minimum wage, as have a variety of organi-

zations. For an appropriate entity to establish it, they have usually pointed to the International Labour Organization, a UN agency that has long worked to set international labor standards.

The advantages of a global minimum wage are clear.

It would lift billions of people out of poverty, thus enabling them to lead far better lives.

It would reduce the corporate incentive for offshoring by limiting the ability of multinational corporations to obtain cheap labor abroad.

By keeping jobs in the home country, it would aid unions in wealthy nations to retain their memberships and provide protection against "corporate blackmail", the management demand that unions either accept contract concessions or get ready for the shift of corporate jobs and production overseas.

By raising wages in impoverished countries, it would reduce the poverty-driven mass migration from these nations and, thereby, deprive rightwing demagogues in wealthier countries of one of their most potent issues.

Of course, higher labor costs at home and abroad would reduce corporate profits and limit the growth of billionaires' wealth and power. But wouldn't these also be positive developments?

# By Any Means Necessary?!

Michael Albert

Trump is a pestilence, an abomination. Really. He is. No more debate. It is as evident as a cloud of locusts. It is as undeniable as his pronouncements, appointments, and Project 2025. What name should we give all that? Call it anything you like. But by any other name fascism is still fascist.

Whether from day one in an avalanche of proclamations that seek to bury all opposition in a shock and awe flash, or, less apocalyptically and more strategically, over many months in a careful slow boil that burns a bit at a time until we are all cooked, Trump and his minions mean to impose horror on all but themselves. They are preparing a carpet bombing of vile policies that range from massive anti-human deportations to incendiary anti-economic tariffs, and from suicidal drill baby drill for oil billionaires to unlimited repressive incarceration to stifle effective disobedience. That is already a whole lot, but don't overlook the long term. Trump and his minions also mean to transform government agencies and political institutions to ensure persistent one-thug rule. Goodbye guard-rails. Hello holocaust.

So, be against Trump? Of course. But how? Once mobilized, I don't think it is rocket science. Mass movements that raise costs for elites are what can win change. Organize to generate ever-widening solidarity and understanding. Provide sanctuary to protect allies and block incarcerations. Educate to awaken ever-broader circles of resistance. Rally, boycott, occupy, and strike to block and to simultaneously develop capacity to resist further. Volunteer for or join movement organizations. Each person decide to join the collective fight, or not—and then find entry and welcome. That is the hard part, not once aligned, once prepared, what to do. That will have many answers, yes, to be sure, but only one of the plausible answers will be widely daunting and confusing.



And to address that, have you recently heard the phrase “by any means necessary.” I have. Indeed, I believe in it. But I also think many people hear that phrase only partially. Inadequately. The recent killing of an insurance industry CEO has spurred attention to the sentiment. But that attention is now, as it has often been in the past, a sometimes too narrow attention.

The “by any means” aspect of the featured phrase attracts thought. It gets attention. And what does the word “any” mean? It means violent. So the phrase tends to say to people, “it is time to get violent.” The phrase is heard to say, “if the target is sufficiently vile, the remedy can and even must be violence, including even murder. “Gear up or shut up” say some of the phrase’s advocates.

Indeed, when I was a youngster that was how the phrase “by any means necessary” reverberated

through the minds of many outraged young mates of mine, and me too. When suffering is bad enough, violence is justified. So let's get on with the "any."

But hold on just a second. What about the word "necessary"? In the passion of the times, to notice that word, necessary, proves hard for some people. They mull the option to hurt human targets or not to hurt human targets. They hear "by any means necessary" and for them that is the question, hurt humans or not hurt humans? They spend virtually no time asking "what qualifies as necessary"?

Well, once you do attend to the "necessary" aspect of the tactical entreaty "by any means necessary," one thing is undeniable. Acts that would fail to reduce the immense suffering at play, much less acts that what would instead reduce the prospects of reducing that suffering, certainly aren't necessary.

Let me put that a little more specifically. Trump is indeed an abomination. When the predictable consequences of his preferred policies, much less of his intention to ensure a persistently fascist future, fully enter one's mind, when the devastating consequences fully form in our mind's understanding and then contour our feelings, the consequences rightfully tell us violence is in no way ruled out. Like an insurance company working overtime to figure countless ways to reject claims recently provoked more than enough fear, pain, and outrage to surface the possibility of taking violent steps, so too will Trump's agenda surface that possibility.

Truth be told, for some of us, myself included, the way our minds perceive reality, the disgusting consequences of social and economic injustice have long since and persistently surfaced the possibility of getting violent in response. Okay, but then a question needs to arise. Does shooting a CEO stop or even contribute to stopping pharmaceutical violence against the public? Thinking about "any," some begin to say "Give me a gun, or some dynamite." But what happened to the word "necessary"? Gearing up, focussed on the word "any," some forget to consider the word "necessary."

You may stay up at night wakefully dreaming up acts of violence. Or you may endlessly contemplate and debate some philosophical or historical analogies and hypotheticals, trying to resolve some absolute warrant for or against punching, shooting, or exploding. Your focus may become how extreme is the injustice but not how effective is the proposed response to it. Your focus may be the "any" and not the "necessary."

On that path, not much helpful happens. A couple or three bathrooms may get blown to bits. Maybe someone gets shot. Meanwhile, a subset of capable, caring, courageous people divert themselves from what can win change to what can't win change and what will even make winning change harder. They divert themselves from the need to organize to generate ever widening solidarity and understanding. They divert themselves from the need to provide sanctuary to protect and block. From the need to educate to awaken ever broader circles of resistance. From need to rally, boycott, occupy, and strike to block and to develop capacity to resist further. From the need to decide to join the collective fight and to then find entry and welcome. They divert themselves from all that to instead engage in useless and pointless contemplation of choices that would not only be unnecessary but would even counter productive.

Yes, I know, this essay speaks mostly to a small circle of folks. But when I was young, in school, round about 1968, I mulled joining Weatherman's advocates of violence. Luckily for me a guy named Noam advised me otherwise. He said they will blow up something here or there. Some folks will likely die. But they will contribute nothing useful to the people of Vietnam, nothing useful to the cause of justice here in the U.S. Instead they will make the real work of serious resistance more difficult. I listened.

So, for those who may be thinking about guns and bombs, I guess I am just trying to "pay it forward," from Noam, via me, to you.

# How Mass Deportation Harms All Working People

Andrew Moss

Donald Trump vowed to begin deporting undocumented migrants “on day one” of his administration, and day one is rapidly approaching.

If Trump’s working-class voters believed that deporting 13.3 million people will somehow improve their economic lives, many will soon learn that mass deportation harms all working people, not only migrants, and will help exacerbate a growing, oppressive inequality.

Consider first the anticipated labor shocks in agriculture and construction. Almost three-quarters of agricultural workers are immigrants, and 40 percent

of them are undocumented. About one-fifth of workers in construction are undocumented. Because these undocumented immigrants make up such a significant proportion of workers in these key industries, deporting them will lead to critical labor shortages that will likely drive up food prices and hinder efforts to increase the housing supply.

Consider, too, anticipated losses of tax revenues and contributions to Medicare and Social Security. Because undocumented workers pay taxes and pay into Medicare and Social Security, their expulsion will mean the loss of billions in local, state, and federal tax revenues (e.g. \$76.1 billion paid in 2022



alone) and the loss of billions more in contributions to Medicare and Social Security (\$28.3 billion annually).

A large-scale deportation will cost taxpayers immense sums to cover the expense of rounding up, detaining, and deporting 13.3 million people: \$88 billion a year if one million people are deported annually, or \$315 billion if all 13.3 million were deported in a single year, according to estimates of the American Immigration Council. (As noted by the Council, the former sum, spread over 10 years, could be better spent on building 2.9 million new homes or on other kinds of much-needed social investments).

Someone will have to pay for deporting millions of people, and if Republican lawmakers have their way, it won't be the billionaires and multimillionaires who've cast their lot with Trump. Donald Trump has committed to making permanent the individual tax cuts that, like the corporate and individual cuts he signed in 2017, favor the wealthiest individuals in the nation. Since extending these cuts would add \$4.6 trillion to the federal deficit over several years, according to Congressional Budget Office projections, the immense cost of a mass deportation requires that something be cut in order to pay for it – and the burden will undoubtedly fall on lower-income Americans.

Elon Musk (net worth: \$416.8 billion) and Vivek Ramaswamy (net worth: \$800 million-\$1 billion) have been enlisted by Trump to find ways of cutting the federal budget, and these two men say that \$500 billion can be slashed. One can only wonder at the financial juggling needed to fund an immensely expensive deportation effort while cutting hundreds of billions in tax revenues.

There's nothing illusory, however, in the proposed cuts to Medicaid, the nation's largest single source of health coverage, serving primarily low-income Americans. Advanced by House Republicans and by the Heritage Foundation in its Project 2025, these proposed cuts, which could range from \$459 billion to \$742 billion over several years, would

severely underfund or cut entirely health services for many people (Medicaid serves 72 million people overall).

When you connect all the dots – the immense financial costs of mass deportation, the losses of revenue from the expulsion of millions of earners and from tax cuts favoring the wealthy, plus the proposed cuts to vital social and health services – you begin to see the enormous damage that deportation will inflict on all working people, and on the nation as a whole.

In large measure, the damage is driven by racially based scapegoating, a powerful divide-and-rule strategy. Setting person against person, group against group, it corrupts inasmuch as it mainstreams cruelty toward the most vulnerable populations in the society. And it carries force for a simple reason: fear sells.

But fear and financial figures don't constitute the whole picture. In addition to advocacy groups and sanctuary jurisdictions (cities, counties, states) that uphold and advance immigrants' rights, there's the powerful role that unions play in affirming the solidarity of all workers, no matter what their immigration status may be. In my home city of Los Angeles, where immigrants constitute a high percentage of the workforce, visionary and courageous union leaders in the 1990's saw that immigrants' rights and workers' rights were one and the same. They began organizing on that fundamental premise, changing the political landscape of the city and, eventually, the national immigration policies of the AFL-CIO.

We're now on the threshold of a very large-scale, renewed struggle for the dignity, rights, and well-being of all working people in this country. So much will depend on the creativity, energy, and discipline injected into the struggle – and on success in sharing a common vision of solidarity and mutual support among all workers, whatever their background or status.

# Time for Truthful Narratives on Immigration

**Sonali Kolhatkar**

A quiet panic has broken out within immigrant communities across the United States ahead of Donald Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2025. Mixed-status families are expecting to be separated, DACA recipients foresee their status being revoked, those with Temporary Protected Status are pessimistic about the program remaining valid, and asylum seekers fear the worst. Indeed, if Project 2025's anti-immigrant agenda is fully enacted, the horrors of family separation that the nation witnessed in 2018 under Trump's first term will pale in comparison to what's coming.

And yet, Trump might claim that this time, he's merely following the public's desires. The prevailing story of the 2024 presidential election is that voters were so fed up with immigration upending their lives that they picked a leader who promised to do something about it. Headlines such as this New York Times piece on Election Day claimed, "Voters Were Fed Up Over Immigration. They Voted for Trump." Indeed, polls showed likely voters ranking immigration as either the top issue, or second only to the economy.

What has gone unsaid about public discontent over immigration and Trump's coming assault on immigrant rights is that the Biden administration paved the way for it, manufacturing a "migrant crisis" and volleying it right into Trump's hands so he could lob it all the way to the White House. What's needed are not just better policies but a rewriting of the narratives about immigration and immigrants so that vulnerable human beings are no longer political scapegoats every four years.

Gallup polls show that national anxiety over immigration significantly increased over the four years that Joe Biden was president. The fraction of

Americans wanting lower levels of immigration had been slightly decreasing for years, landing at around 30 percent. In 2020 that number began rising, and by 2024, it had jumped to 55 percent.

It's tempting to conclude that this trend is merely a matter of perception, the result of successful propaganda, of Trump's constant drumbeat that Biden opened the floodgates at the border, rolling out the welcome mat for millions of people with no papers. Indeed, far too many people hold false views of immigrants in the U.S., from assuming they are more prone to committing violent crimes—not true—to the idea that they are stealing jobs from native-born Americans and longtime residents—also not true. The adoption of such falsehoods is clearly Trump's doing.

However, there are plenty of credible reports across the country, in small-town America and in urban centers, that demonstrate a real struggle with absorbing tens of thousands of newly resettled people from foreign nations. Such dynamics reinforced the notion that immigration is out of control and gave credence to Trump's lies about immigrants.

What's going unsaid is that migrants from non-white nations in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia are being deliberately dumped into towns and cities with no plan for orderly absorption and assimilation—in direct contrast to how well the Biden administration welcomed Ukrainian refugees. A February 2024 in-depth report by Jerusalem Demsas in the Atlantic is one of the few analyses that explored what happened and why.

"Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine brought a



Photo credit: Bill Lackey

separate influx of displaced people into U.S. cities that quietly assimilated most of them,” explained Demsas. The numbers of Ukrainian refugees and nonwhite immigrants in many towns and cities have been comparable, but the ways in which they were resettled have sometimes been starkly different. Based on interviews with mayors and municipal leaders, Demsas realized there were “two major differences in federal policy” that explained the contrast.

One policy difference was that Ukrainian refugees were allowed to work as soon as they arrived in

the U.S., while subsequent waves of migrants were prohibited from working and then demonized for using government aid.

The other difference was that the Biden administration carefully coordinated Ukrainian arrivals with local officials to ensure their proper assimilation. And it chose not to do so with groups arriving from across the Southern border. This meant that those local leaders who could politicize migrants did so by pointing to the chaos their presence seemed to provoke and by adopting policies that deliberately worsened the optics of immigration.

“To call this moment a ‘migrant crisis’ is to let elected federal officials off the hook,” concluded Demsas. If the federal government had treated nonwhite Latin American, Caribbean, African, and Asian migrants the same way it treated Ukrainian refugees, voters would likely not have been as swayed by Trump’s lies as they were.

A similar scenario played out with asylum seekers at the border. Rather than allowing those seeking asylum to make their case in an orderly way, the first Trump administration tried to break the entire system, creating chaos in order to blame asylees. Joe Biden’s administration blithely allowed the restrictions to remain in place, breaking his campaign promise.

The reality is that the undocumented immigrant population in the U.S. increased by only 800,000 people between 2019 and 2022 and remains below 2007 levels. In a nation of 335 million people, this is less than a quarter of a percent of the population. How can such a tiny fraction of people be the source of so many problems as Trump claims?

Americans are not anti-immigrant. In fact, they are pro-immigration. A new Pew Research poll released on November 22, 2024, finds that nearly two-thirds of Americans are happy to have undocumented immigrants remain in the nation with legal protections provided certain conditions are met, such as security checks and lawful employment.

The reason it appears as though Americans are anti-immigrant is because they’re being told that hordes of people are breaking the rules, side-stepping order, and forcing their way in to cause chaos, commit crimes, and steal jobs. This is both Trump’s fault, and Biden’s.

Migration is a large-scale phenomenon of vulnerable populations fleeing war, poverty, persecution, climate change, and more. When given accessible procedures to enter another nation legally, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers will do everything possible to follow the rules. Because, why

not? Why would they deliberately jeopardize their own long-term security when given the chance? It turns out, the system has been deliberately broken in order to manufacture a crisis and help gutless politicians claim they are being “tough on immigration.”

The U.S. desperately needs immigrant workers. This is true not only in low-wage industries but in such highly skilled fields as medicine where immigrants are disproportionately represented.

For example, the Migration Policy Institute found that “[w]hile immigrants represent 14 percent of the Illinois population, they make up 37 percent of its physicians and 19 percent of its registered nurses.” There is a nationwide shortage of medical workers—physicians, nurses, technicians, and home health aides—a gap that could be filled by skilled new immigrants.

As the U.S.’s elder population continues to live longer, needing more care, and as the national birth rate falls, immigrants have stepped in to provide care and pay taxes to fund services they aren’t even allowed to access. Indeed, many nations in the Global South are struggling with the “brain drain” of their most talented workers leaving to work in the U.S. and other Western nations.

The stories we are telling about immigrants are fueling misplaced panic in the U.S. We cannot rely on Trump to fix what he sought to break. In the coming months and years, the devastation the incoming president will wreak on vulnerable populations will test our collective morality.

What’s needed before the next election are truthful narratives about immigrants, including the fact that the migrant crisis has been manufactured and the legal immigration system deliberately broken for political gain, forcing most people into untenable situations.

Most importantly, we need to be clear that our nation needs immigrants just as, if not more than, immigrants need the U.S.

# The West Bank's Men of the CIA – Why Is the PA Killing Palestinians in Jenin?

**Ramzy Baroud**

Following a ten-day siege, the Palestinian Authority began, on December 14, a violent raid on the Jenin refugee camp in the northern West Bank.

The PA security forces used similar tactics as used by the Israeli occupation forces in their routine attacks on the area.

The camp, which is a mere half a square kilometer in size, hosts an ever-growing population of 24 thousand refugees, mostly the descendants of Palestinians ethnically cleansed by Zionist militias during the great catastrophe, or Nakba, of 1948.

The raid began with a tight siege, followed by an attack from multiple directions that resulted in the killing of an unarmed youth, Rebhi al-Shalabi, 19, then a 13-year-old child, Muhammad al-Amer.

The PA forces also killed Yazid Ja'ayseh, the commander of the Jenin Brigades, who had evaded Israeli assassination attempts for his leadership role in unifying all Palestinian Resistance fighters under the umbrella of a single group.

Expectedly, Israel is largely pleased with the PA's action against the Palestinian Resistance, though it expects more. "The Palestinian Authority has been acting resolutely against the Hamas and Islamic Jihad fighters over the past several weeks, army and Shin Bet sources said, but the Israeli officials expressed the hope that their effectiveness could be enhanced," Haaretz reported.

Indeed, Israel had attempted to subdue Jenin 80 times in the last year alone, killing more than 220 people, Al Jazeera reported, citing Palestinian Ministry of Health sources.

By attacking Jenin, the PA is helping the Israeli army in more than one way: it is killing and detaining anti-Israeli occupation Resistance fighters, consuming the energy and resources of the Resistance, allowing Israel to spare thousands of soldiers so that they may carry on with the genocide in Gaza, and more.

For many, especially supporters of Palestine around the world, the PA's action is confusing, to say the least. Those surprised by the anti-Resistance policies of Mahmoud Abbas and his Authority, however, are driven by the erroneous assumption that the PA is a legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and that it behaves in ways consistent with the collective aspirations of all Palestinians.

Nothing could be further from the truth. For many years, the PA has ceased playing any role that deviates from the interests of a small clique of pro-US and pro-Israeli wealthy elite who have enriched themselves, while millions of Palestinians continue to suffer an Israeli genocide in Gaza, and a violent system of apartheid and military occupation in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The most telling and recent example is that, a short distance away from Jenin, illegal and violent Israeli Jewish settlers have burned the Bir Al-Walidin Mosque in the town of Murda, near Salfit – less than 70 kilometers from Jenin. Neither in this case, nor in any of the hundreds of settlers' pogroms carried out against Palestinians in the West Bank in the last year – or before – did the PA security carry out any action to confront the armed Jewish militias, nor, of course, the occupation army.

But how did the PA turn from a supposed national project – at least in theory – to another branch of the Israeli occupation?

It could be argued that the PA was structured since its establishment in 1994 as a body whose existence catered to benefit the Israeli occupation. There is much evidence that substantiates this claim, including the arrests, torture and killing of dissenting Palestinians soon after the creation of the PA.

The CIA became directly involved in supporting the PA from the very start, expanding its role as early as 1996 following a series of Palestinian retaliatory attacks on Israeli targets in major cities. It was then that CIA director George Tenet became an important player in shaping the policies of the PA security forces, preparing it for massive crackdowns on Palestinian Resistance groups.

This involvement was a direct condition for US financial support under the Bill Clinton Administration – the kind of support that sowed the seeds of the Fatah-Hamas conflict, which reached its zenith in the summer of 2007.

The involvement of the US – and other armed forces of US client regimes in the region – became even more apparent under the leadership of US Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, who helped train, prepare and equip the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (NSF), producing several battalions of young recruits (between 20 and 22 years old) to fight fellow Palestinians in the name of restoring law and order.

That supposed restoration of the law began in earnest as early as 2005 and continues until this day. Interestingly, this is the same language that the PA is currently using to justify its war on the Jenin refugee camp.

A spokesman for the PA security forces, Anwar Rajab recently told Al Jazeera that the objective of the raid on Jenin is to “pursue criminals” and law-breakers, and to “prevent the camp from becoming a battleground like Gaza.”

Equating Resistance fighters with criminals and linking that supposed criminality to the Gaza Resistance is the typical PA discourse on resistance, a discourse that took the US and Israel years to craft

and perfect – making the PA arguably the greatest achievement of Israel and the US in recent decades.

This behavior and language can be traced to a famous statement by General Dayton himself, who in a 2009 speech celebrated the US’s greatest creation in Palestine:

*And what we have created – and I say this in humility – what we have created are new men ... upon the return of these new men of Palestine, they have shown motivation, discipline and professionalism, and they have made such a difference.*

Indeed, the ‘new men of Palestine’ are making all the difference required by the US and Israel: they are fighting the very Palestinian Resistance that is defending Jenin against the Israeli onslaught, Nablus against the pogroms of armed settlers and Gaza against genocide.

None of these ‘new men’ – whose numbers are counted in the tens of thousands – have lifted a finger to help their brethren as they continue to starve to death in the Gaza Strip, tortured and raped en masse, burned alive in Jabaliya and Khan Yunis, and yet continue to fight and die in their thousands – alone.

To say that the PA has betrayed Palestinians, however, is an inaccurate statement. The PA was never set up, financed and armed by the US and Israel as a force of liberation, but as an obstacle to Palestinian freedom. We are witnessing the final proof of this claim. It is taking place in Jenin now; in fact, throughout the West Bank.

Of course, the PA will not be able to crush the Palestinian Resistance, which the supposedly mighty Israeli army has failed to subdue over the course of years. But the question remains: how long will the PA be allowed to serve the role of the enforcers of the Israeli occupation and the protector of settlers, while still promoting itself as the guardian of Palestinian rights, freedom and statehood?

# How U.S. Media Hide Truths About the Gaza War

**Norman Solomon**

A few days before the end of 2024, the independent magazine +972 reported that “Israeli army forces stormed the Kamal Adwan Hospital compound in Beit Lahiya, culminating a nearly week-long siege of the last functioning hospital in northern Gaza.” While fire spread through the hospital, its staff issued a statement saying that “surgical departments, laboratory, maintenance, and emergency units have been completely burned,” and patients were “at risk of dying at any moment.”

The magazine explained that “the assault on medical facilities in Beit Lahiya is the latest escalation in Israel’s brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing in northern Gaza, which over the last three months forcibly displaced the vast majority of Palestinians living in the area.” The journalism from +972 — in sharp contrast to the dominant coverage of the Gaza war from U.S. media — has provided clarity about real-time events, putting them in overall context rather than episodic snippets.

+972 Magazine is the work of Palestinian and Israeli journalists who describe their core values as “a commitment to equity, justice, and freedom of information” — which necessarily means “accurate and fair journalism that spotlights the people and communities working to oppose occupation and apartheid.” But the operative values of mainstream U.S. news outlets have been very different.

Key aspects of how the U.S. establishment has narrated the “war on terror” for more than two decades were standard in American media and politics from the beginning of the Gaza war in October 2023. For instance:

- Routine discourse avoided voices condemning the U.S. government for its role in the slaughter of civilians.
- The U.S. ally usually eluded accountability for its high-tech atrocities committed from the air.
- Civilian deaths in Gaza were habitually portrayed as unintended.
- Claims that Israel was aiming to minimize civilian casualties were normally taken at face value.
- Media coverage and political rhetoric stayed away from acknowledging that Israel’s actions might fit into such categories as “mass murder” or “terrorism.”
- Overall, news media and U.S. government officials emitted a mindset that Israeli lives really mattered a lot more than Palestinian lives.

The Gaza war has received a vast amount of U.S. media attention, but how much it actually communicated about the human realities was a whole other matter. The belief or unconscious notion that news media were conveying war’s realities ended up obscuring those realities all the more. And journalism’s inherent limitations were compounded by media biases.

During the first five months of the war, the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Post applied the word “brutal” or its variants far more often to Palestinians (77 percent) than to Israelis (23 percent). The findings, in a study by Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), pointed to an imbalance that occurred “even though Israeli violence was responsible for more



*"Whoever stays until the end, will tell the story. We did what we could. Remember us."*

These words were written by Dr. Mahmoud Abu Nujaila on October 20th 2023, on a whiteboard normally used for planning surgeries. He was killed by a strike on Al Awda Hospital on November 21st.

than 20 times as much loss of life." News articles and opinion pieces were remarkably in the same groove; "the lopsided rate at which 'brutal' was used in op-eds to characterize Palestinians over Israelis was exactly the same as the supposedly straight news stories."

Despite exceptional coverage at times, what was most profoundly important about war in Gaza — what it was like to be terrorized, massacred, maimed and traumatized — remained almost entirely out of view. Gradually, surface accounts reaching the American public came to seem repetitious and normal. As death numbers kept rising and months went by, the Gaza war diminished as a news topic, while most talk shows seldom discussed it.

As with the slaughter via bombardment, the Israeli-U.S. alliance treated the increasing onset of starvation, dehydration, and fatal disease as a public-relations problem. Along the way, official

pronouncements — and the policies they tried to justify — were deeply anchored in the unspoken premise that some lives really matter and some really don't.

The propaganda approach was foreshadowed on October 8, 2023, with Israel in shock from the atrocities that Hamas had committed the previous day. "This is Israel's 9/11," the Israeli ambassador to the United Nations told reporters in New York, and he repeated: "This is Israel's 9/11." Meanwhile, in a PBS News Weekend interview, Israel's ambassador to the United States declared: "This is, as someone said, our 9/11."

What was sinister about proclaiming "Israel's 9/11" was what happened after America's 9/11. Wearing the cloak of victim, the United States proceeded to use the horrible tragedy that occurred inside its borders as an open-ended reason to kill in the name of retaliation, self-protection, and, of course, the "war on terror."

As Israel's war on Gaza persisted, the explanations often echoed the post-9/11 rationales for the "war on terror" from the U.S. government: authorizing future crimes against humanity as necessary in the light of certain prior events. Reverberation was in the air from late 2001, when the Pentagon's leader Donald Rumsfeld asserted that "responsibility for every single casualty in this war, whether they're innocent Afghans or innocent Americans, rests at the feet of the al Qaeda and the Taliban." After five weeks of massacring Palestinian people, Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that "any civilian loss is a tragedy" — and quickly added that "the blame should be placed squarely on Hamas."

The licenses to kill were self-justifying. And they had no expiration date.

*This article is adapted from the afterword in the paperback edition of Norman Solomon's latest book, *War Made Invisible: How America Hides the Human Toll of Its Military Machine* (The New Press).*

# Multipolar Mythmaking, Mixing Western Degeneracy and BRICS Expansion Chaos

**Patrick Bond**

Early 2025 is already a tough time for those expecting the consolidation of a multipolar alternative to polycrisis-riddled, Western-dominated, neoliberal multilateralism. It was especially dispiriting given the hype – or at least hope – invested by many geopolitical dissidents in the fast-growing BRICS grouping. What began as Brazil-Russia-India-China in 2006, added South Africa in 2010 and four other members in 2023 – Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates – and then over the past two weeks, another full-fledged member, Indonesia, and also eight ‘partners.’

Yet it's utter chaos when it comes to BRICS composition, and it won't be easier to meld the 18 governments which Brazilian President Lula Ignacio da Silva inherits as he chairs the bloc in 2025. And this condition of undirected chaos is also rampant at the global scale, witnessed in repeatedly-failing multilateral institutions always in need of (rarely-specified) ‘reform.’

The most important fail was at the Baku United Nations climate summit in late November, an event that will be remembered most for the furious walk-out protest by the most vulnerable countries – without any BRICS solidarity, even from impoverished Ethiopia. From non-Western and BRICS elites, there was near-universal disgust expressed about the final outcome. (Without a pause, South Africa's ultra-neoliberal environment minister – a white, former apartheid soldier and later Member of Parliament representing Johannesburg's financial district – predictably ‘welcomed’ the catastrophe).

That was just one indication of the urgent need for imaginative, visionary alternatives to forcefully address world crises. And on climate, Lula will again attempt to pick up the pieces when hosting

the next UN climate summit in December, deep in the fast-decaying Amazon, in Belem.

Moreover, even a cursory examination of how the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organisation, United Nations Security Council and other international regulatory bodies continue to conduct themselves, confirms that global-scale crisis management remains weak, incompetent and often malevolent.

Baku was preceded by the November 5 Trump election victory and an inconsequential G20 Rio de Janeiro summit on November 18-19, also hosted by Lula. In early December, accompanied by robust self-backslapping, South Africa's rightward-moving Government of National Unity then took the G20 hosting reigns from Brazil. The G20 site then shifts to the U.S. in 2026.

The other core BRICS have also played host to the G20: India in 2023, China in 2016 and Russia in 2013 – and Indonesia did in 2022. So within the last dozen years, all five original BRICS – and six of the current ten members (not including invitee Saudi Arabia which in 2020 during Covid-19 was the virtual chair) – have hosted the G20.

But all the world's problems have been amplified since then, with nary a word to suggest progress via the imperial-subimperial G20 alliance. Two war zones remain brutally hot, with the daily murder of hundreds of working-class and poor Ukrainians and Palestinians, and as a result of their illegal invasions of neighbours, the leaders of both Russia and Israel facing International Criminal Court arrest warrants for war crimes. Both Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu dismiss these warrants, although their travel plans have been severely curtailed.

And after Bashar Al-Assad's Damascus regime collapsed on December 8, a moment celebrated by the apparent vast majority of long-oppressed Syrian citizens, there came next the predictable resumption of U.S., Turkish and Israeli opportunism. Benjamin Netanyahu land-grabbed further into the Golan Heights, backed by the Western Axis of Genocide and accompanied by Tel Aviv's carpet bombing of ex-dictator Al-Assad's military equipment.

The West is at least consistent here, at the cost of permanent reputational damage to their claims of liberal internationalism, human rights and rule-of-law values. In contrast, the BRICS – especially South Africa – talk left about Israel halting genocide, but walk right when it comes to greed: nine

out of ten of the 2024 BRICS have leading corporations now enjoying lucrative trade, investment and privatization management deals with the genocidaires.

The new full member, Indonesia – the world's most populous Islamic society – profits from palm oil exports to Israel and has imported Tel Aviv weaponry. President Prabowo Subianto has played a central role in normalization talks with the Netanyahu regime from 2021 when he was still defense minister. After he won the presidency, Israeli sources offered support for Jakarta's membership in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development so long as those negotiations resumed.



Photo by Mohd Fazlin Mohd Effendy Ooi

Back in Syria, regime change was also praised by Hamas, perhaps due to what Palestinian writer Jamal Kanj termed “Al-Assad’s abandonment of the Resistance in Gaza and Lebanon. Since October 8, Assad has behaved more like other impotent Arab dictators as mere observers of the genocide in Gaza and the war in Lebanon.”

The main foreign losers of Syria’s regime change are Iran and Russia, but since November 2023, there has been no specific BRICS meeting to address the crisis, illustrating the bloc’s worsening internal incoherence when it comes to West Asian geopolitics.

### Trump’s degenerate disruptions

Trump, meanwhile, felt sufficiently empowered in December to threaten the sovereignties of Panama, Mexico, Canada and Greenland, using as a weapon his regularly-threatened tariff increases on imports. (He did the same to the BRICS in the event they offer a currency alternative, which is worth exploring in more detail on another occasion, to expose de-dollarisation hypocrisies.) If major tariffs are activated by Trump’s team, that will denude the World Trade Organisation of any self-respect.

Internal U.S. resistance to a proto-fascist government will need to be as creative as Jeremy Brecher has outlined so well, but is expected to be quashed by executive orders against ‘terrorist-supporting’ activists (e.g. in solidarity with Palestine) and climate defenders, plus a compliant Republican Congress and Supreme Court.

Calls for Boycott Divestment Sanctions against U.S. state and capitalist institutions are sure to follow, when Trump pulls out of UN climate negotiations (as he did in 2017) or commits other major human rights abuses such as mass deportations or the promised McCarthyism: “We pledge to you that we will root out the communists, Marxists, fascists, and the radical left thugs that live like vermin within the confines of our country.”

On the other side of the class struggle, there may be fractions of U.S. capital which arise in brief dissent

to what could be open fascism. Some businesses had cohered with Clinton-era neo-liberalism, others to Bush-era neo-conservatism, others to the Obama-era neo-con/neo-lib fusion, and still others to Biden’s promised Inflation Reduction Act with a green-Keynesian ideology.

But among those whose needs extend beyond expected corporate tax cuts, Big Data stands out for its leaders’ recent groveling to Trump, identifying sufficiently fluid opportunities, and welcoming the techno-feudal surveillance, social-control potentials, and AI-dystopias that will inevitably emerge. These corporates will thrive, whether through the dominant neo-cons and neo-libs, or via aspiring paleo-conservative forces. Trump will continue to insist that they find a way to fuse, even if the H-1B visa controversy illustrated how quickly the Tech-MAGA alliance would be strained. Elsewhere, unprecedented financial and ideological outreach to the European hard right by the likes of Elon Musk and Steve Bannon ensures the cancer will spread, e.g. in Germany’s February 23 election.

Hence against obvious Western degeneracy and Trump’s insane belligerence, the BRICS bloc will continue to attract interest and even a kind of perverse admiration, especially given the group’s rapid expansion since mid-2023.

### An expanding club without coherent entry rules

Still, extreme caution is needed, when reminded of how poorly the group’s onboarding process is managed. In mid-October, the Russian-hosted Kazan summit unfolded with some discomfit among diplomats, following an ‘impasse’ at a session of new BRICS foreign ministers the month before, on the sidelines of the annual UN leaders’ summit.

There, the two new African members from Cairo and Addis Ababa objected to the way the UN Security Council’s half-hearted expansion of permanent members appeared to exclude them, instead implying that South Africa and Nigeria would be the (non-veto-power) invitees. That BRICS session

ended bitterly, called off early without an anticipated formal statement. (But the problem is likely to be disappear, now that Trump will sabotage any loosening of U.S. reigns, in the Security Council or anywhere else.)

That incident would have influenced the first-generation BRICS not to immediately expand full membership – but instead offer ‘partner’ status. The BRICS now has ten members given Indonesia’s surprising promotion last week from partner, a category that now includes eight countries: Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Uzbekistan, Thailand and Uganda. Their leaders were invited into this new status – similar to a NATO ‘aspiring member’ – at the 2024 Kazan summit, and may attend meetings this year hosted by Brazil (with the leaders’ summit in Rio in July).

Not all countries which applied are following the BRICS process through. The Russian meetings included one extremely recalcitrant member-invitee, Saudi Arabia. And four partner-invitees are, at the time of writing, still deciding whether to accept: Turkiye, Vietnam, Algeria and Nigeria.

The difference between 18 and 23 is crucial given the weight of these last five in terms of geopolitics, population and fossil fuel supply. It appears Western political pressure – as well as bruised egos – are to blame for the chaos of who’s in, who’s not and who’s fence-sitting.

For as one journalist reported on the world’s fourth-most populous country, “Indonesia’s candidacy was first approved by BRICS leaders at the Johannesburg Summit in August 2023. However, as Indonesia was preparing for general elections in February 2024, the nation formally communicated its intent to join the bloc only after the new government was formed.”

But if so, why was Indonesia first called a partner-invitee last October? Already in mid-2023 it was apparent that the thuggish Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto would win the presidency. Amnesty International had warned of Prabowo’s past:

“As a general during the country’s occupation of East Timor in the 1980s and 1990s, Prabowo organized gangs of hooded killers to terrorize and subdue civilians associated with the independence movement. And he allegedly participated in one of the bloodiest events of the Timor war: the Krakas massacre, in which 300 Timorese – mostly civilians – were hunted down and killed by Kopassus units.”

Moreover, BBC reported, Prabowo’s military “unit tortured several democracy activists during the dying days of the Suharto regime in the late 1990s. Of the 23, some survived, one died and 13 remain missing.” Prabowo was “banned from entering the US and Australia at this point, on a blacklist for his human rights record. That ban was lifted only in recent years.” Prabowo “was fired from the army following this and went into self-exile in Jordan in the 2000s. But he returned to Indonesia a few years later, building up his wealth in palm oil and mining before making the jump to politics.”

The tendency among multipolar advocates (e.g. the Geopolitical Economy Report) is to uncritically celebrate Indonesia’s ascent into the BRICS without any acknowledgement of Prabowo’s history of repression – in a context of rapidly decaying civil rights – and his pro-Israel orientation, not to mention the country’s status as the world’s largest supplier of coal and ecologically-destructive palm oil.

Pepe Escobar was characteristically ebullient that Indonesia was

“admitted as a full BRICS member. What does that mean? You have southeast Asia barking at the heart of BRICS. Without even a pit stop they went straight to the top. Now one of us... one of the biggest economies of the 21st century by PPP, the seventh economy, soon it’s going to be the fifth, it’s going to overtake other Europeans. The powerhouse of Southeast Asia. Good relations with China. Good relations with Russia. Good relations with India.”

Um, also great relations with U.S. militarism, as Prabowo bragged to Trump while congratulating him on November 11: “All my training is American, sir.”

## Angst in Algiers and Caracas

And then there are the mysterious Algeria and hapless Venezuela. In the latter case, the Maduro regime’s foreign ministry expressed fury back in October: “The Venezuelan people feel indignation and shame at this inexplicable and immoral aggression.” The cause: a BRICS membership-veto by Lula, who stayed in Brasilia instead of going to Kazan due to a head injury and instead participated via video feed (the way Putin did to avoid arrest in Johannesburg in August 2023).

Caracas specifically attacked Lula’s long-standing foreign policy adviser, Celso Amorim, who explained the veto on BRICS membership: Maduro had “breached the trust” of the Latin American left by not releasing detailed vote records after the unsatisfactory 2024 election. So according to Venezuelan diplomats, Amorim was “acting more like a messenger for North American imperialism.” The country’s genuine socialist activists know all too well this talk-left walk-right dance move.

As for Algeria, last September the manager of the Algiers nationalist newspaper *El Moudjahid*, Brahim Takheroubte, reported his country’s BRICS application fiasco in a jilted-lover tone of voice:

“When, in August 2023, the Johannesburg summit concluded with the accession of six new members (Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia and Iran), absolutely no plausible argument was put forward to justify the elimination of Algeria. To everyone’s surprise, the Algeria file was withdrawn at the last minute. There is a blatant inconsistency, both in substance and form. This organization, which is supposed to challenge an established world order represented by the IMF and the World Bank, should act with a more inclusive approach. Yet it adopts an absurd selection logic, limiting both its impact and its reach. Instead

of casting a wide net and providing global solutions, it takes a restrictive approach. Doesn’t this contradiction weaken its credibility?”

After the rant against BRICS hypocrisy, came Takheroubte’s juvenile sniping from a very different direction:

“Indeed, how can we be in any doubt about its true intentions when we know that Algeria is far better off than several of the countries admitted to the organization of this famous summit. A country with no foreign debt, the largest land area in Africa and abundant mineral and energy resources, Algeria’s infrastructure is the envy of the entire continent. Even more surprisingly, the IMF and the World Bank, usually stingy with compliments, have publicly hailed Algeria’s economic performance, going so far as to call it a ‘model of success’. Yet, ironically, it was the BRICS, the self-proclaimed champions of the global economic alternative, who chose to ignore such a feat.”

The final grievance was blaming the UAE for bullying another BRICS member – likely South Africa – into vetoing Algeria’s mid-2023 application:

“But there’s nothing mysterious about this blindness; in fact, it’s an open secret. The truth is that a BRICS member country, obeying petty interests far removed from economic rigor, has vetoed Algeria’s membership with almost theatrical insistence. And to top it all off, this country is acting, not out of conviction, but under the orders of a modest Gulf emirate, which is orchestrating behind the scenes pressure as devious as it is ‘strategic’ on the rest of the members, ensuring that Algeria is eliminated. This just goes to show that, behind the scenes at the BRICS, geopolitics is a well-oiled comedy. Is there any reason left, just one, to respond to the BRICS’ call to action? The case of Algeria, whose exclusion stems less from economic criteria than from political maneuvering, is a striking example... This incoherence will no doubt eventually reveal the limits of a bloc that claims to be reshaping the world economic order but is in reality itself a prisoner of its own calculations. Beyond the slogans,

BRICS integration is based on logic far removed from economic excellence alone.”

Yet at Kazan, Algeria was still invited to be a partner. What has become of that invitation, remains a mystery. And there’s more confusion about similar reluctance to accept partner status from Türkiye, Vietnam and Nigeria, where leaders also appear to be stuck between Western pressure points and their BRICS partner invitations – and are scared to issue any decisive official statement, just as was the case over the past year in Saudi Arabia.

### A rebuff from Riyadh

The hype that the Saudi Arabian ruling class would leave the U.S. orbit, ditch half-century-old Petro-dollar arrangements (mainly pricing oil in the U.S. currency) and do more deals with China and Iran has risen and fallen dramatically over the past few years. As a residual example, Escobar argued this week that Trump “doesn’t understand that now, for instance, Iran and Saudi Arabia are sitting at the same table inside BRICS and they discuss geopolitics as well.”

Nor have Russian state media outlets Pravda and TASS processed, or even figured out, Saudi Arabia’s status, for in recent days both incorrectly claimed, “On January 1, 2024, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, became its full-fledged members.” Yet in late December, there was actually a ‘freeze’ of Riyadh’s role in the BRICS, according to Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Yuri Ushakov.

A typical interpretation of Riyadh’s reluctance, on Firstpost, was this cause: “Trump’s 100% tariff threat” in early December. But the illogicality there is that vast Saudi Arabian exports to the U.S., amounting to \$24 billion in 2022, were made up of 70% crude oil, 20% refined oil and 2% fertilizers, with 8% other miscellaneous products. Trump simply cannot put a painful 100% tariff on imported goods from Saudi Arabia, given the status of oil in the world economy and inflationary fears in his electoral base.

So what’s really at play in the Saudi retreat from BRICS? Consider four choices from various spin-doctors across the spectrum. First, the view from geopolitical pragmatists Oliver Stuenkel and Margot Treadwell at the Carnegie Council in November:

“Saudi Arabia has chosen a tricky balancing act of an ambiguous approach to BRICS that leaves it room to adapt to changing global conditions, including the coming U.S. leadership change. Although Saudi Arabia’s strategy represents an extreme approach to hedging, such a balancing act is not unique to Saudi Arabia. In the context of BRICS alone, analysts have focused on the balancing acts of Brazil, India, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye, among others – reflecting the growing concern around the world about how to navigate an increasingly multipolar and unpredictable global environment.”

Second, from the neo-con perspective, the National Interest is one of the main U.S. outlets, and hence gleeful whenever there’s successful divide and conquer traced to U.S. manipulation. So on December 28, unaware of Russia’s confirmation of Riyadh’s retreat five days earlier, Rimon Hossain surmised,

“the recent inclusion of Middle Eastern states like Iran, Egypt, and the UAE after the 2023 BRICS Summit raises questions about BRICS cohesion, given the regional rivalry such a big tent would now inherit. Saudi Arabia’s recent inclusion also draws doubt, given its ongoing endemic security rivalry with Iran. Riyadh made this point clear during the 2024 BRICS Summit in Kazan, where the Saudi foreign minister only attended the last day, making clear that it is hedging its commitment to a club it perceives as a hedging club for middle powers.”

But that stage is now well past, and no doubt at some stage after Trump takes office, the Saudis will move forward with an official normalisation of relations with the genocidaires, as appeared imminent in early October 2023.

For a third version of spin-doctoring, the pro-BRICS multipolarists appear reduced to silence, as their preferred narrative-of-retreat, aside from Escobar who has been drawn much further down the three predictable stages of geopolitricks-psychosis – from hype to hope to helplessness – in the particular case of mighty Saudi Arabia joining the mighty BRICS.

There's still hope, as Escobar put it in Sputnik on January 9: "Imagine China-India-Russia-Iran-Indonesia-South Africa-Brazil-Egypt-Saudi Arabia as the transcontinental pearls of the emerging multi-nodal world. Huge populations; massive natural resources and industrial might; myriad development possibilities."

But helplessness also sets in, because not only are contradictions extreme, with "Iran, UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia (when the Saudis show up for meetings) struggling to reach consensus on the same table." And after all, "Saudi Arabia, wary of its wealth parked in London and New York financial markets, is still cautiously hedging its bets: theoretically Riyadh is a BRICS member, but in practice not really."

Moreover, there is a "war against the BRICS," Escobar insists, because:

"In the absence of long-term strategic vision, and amidst the progressive imperial expulsion from Eurasia, all that's left for the Hegemon is to unleash chaos from West Asia to Europe and parts of Latin America – a concerted attempt to Divide and Rule BRICS and thwart their collective drive affirming sovereignty and the primacy of national interests... US Think Tank had already floated a year and a half ago the notion of swing states. Not the parochial American electoral version, but its transposition to geopolitics. All six candidates at the time were BRICS members (Brazil, India, South Africa), or potential BRICS members or partners (Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye). The code for 'swing states' was unmistakable: all these are targets for destabilization – as in if you do not abide by the 'rules-based international order,' you're going down."

A fourth narrative would logically be to celebrate that a regime appearing impervious to humane and ecologically-sustainable values does not further degrade the subimperial power bloc, one that it will take many years for social, labour and environmental movements to clear out as it is.

As argued in a new essay by Janine Walter of Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's Johannesburg office, it's obvious that the BRICS bloc "does not represent an anti-capitalist alternative. It is much more a matter of seeking to secure more influence within the capitalist world-system: 'neoliberalism with a Southern Face,' as it were. Progressive forces ought instead to concentrate on identifying — and also making use of — strategic spaces for alternative political approaches."

And were Saudi Arabia a member, MBS would certainly contribute to closing down such spaces; he didn't get the nickname Mr Bone Saw for nothing.

For others, the Saudi membership-invitation quagmire continues, with odd new claims about Riyadh and the BRICS, e.g. that the world's most surreal city – NEOM, whose extreme-luxury tourist island was recently launched with full-on hedonism and which is seen as a model for collaboration with Israel's high tech sector – is a model for a sustainable, diversified economy. BRICS myth-making in this case comes from Murad Sadygzade, President of the Middle East Studies Center:

"Saudi Arabia has taken a pause in the process of becoming a full BRICS member, reportedly due to having to complete unspecified 'internal procedures.' The kingdom participates in the group's activities that are of interest to Riyadh, but refrains from taking part in drawing up joint documents or decision-making... The Kingdom actively invests in large-scale infrastructure and technological projects, such as NEOM and various innovation hubs under the 'Vision 2030' program. These projects are aimed at building a sustainable, diversified economy less reliant on oil, which aligns well with the goals of BRICS nations to develop high-tech and environmentally sustainable industries. Saudi

investments could support the economic modernization of countries like Brazil and South Africa, which also seek to strengthen their industrial and technological capacities. For BRICS, this opens a unique opportunity to create an integrated economic space capable of attracting new capital flows and accelerating the shift to green energy and digital technologies.”

Hope springs eternal, but it merges with surreal hype like this far too often within multipolarism to be taken seriously, given that BRICS members, partners and invitees include the world’s leading CO2 annual emitters in 2022 (the last available consistent data): #1 China (10.5 Gigatons), #3 India (2.3Gt), #4 Russia (1.5Gt), #6 Iran (0.73Gt), #7 Indonesia (0.59Gt), #12 Saudi Arabia (0.47Gt), #13 South Africa (0.44Gt) and #14 Brazil (0.41Gt).

Moreover, additional ‘Scope 3’ emissions come from fossil fuel exports of coal, gas and oil burned elsewhere but nevertheless are vital to factor in as ‘national’ interests for these BRICS economies: Russia (1.7Gt in 2021), Indonesia (1Gt), United Arab Emirates (UAE) (0.3Gt), and Brazil, Iran and South Africa (0.2Gt). Saudi Arabia would have added much more for decades to come (0.9Gt). New BRICS partner-invitees include other major fossil-fuel exporters, including Kazakhstan, Nigeria and Algeria. But as witnessed in Baku, these countries’ ruling elites have certainly not joined – and won’t in future – a lobby to ‘shift to green energy.’

Fossil fuel emissions measurements: domestic (2022) and exported (2021)

### BRICS seen with scorn – for bad and good reasons

All these narratives continue to float around, waiting to land upon some version of reality. The same problem of sustained confusion exists in Western ruling elite circuits, as illustrated by the imperialist-whispering agenda of Tony Carroll (from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), recently interviewed by a conservative South African business ezine, National Security News:

“South Africa’s in trouble... The Trump Administration are going to be more critical about South Africa for many of the same things that have been for many of those things that have been cited in the past: its relationships with Russia, its stance on Ukraine, its leadership in the BRICS agreement, its relationship with China and most pointedly I think the issue of the International Criminal Court (ICC) case in Gaza, which is the one that I think drove most of those signatures in Congress... South Africa is a large issue that I think transfers across all of our national relationships I think that the issue on the ICC case in Gaza is the one that specifically has gotten the interest of those signatures in Congress, and the incoming people that will be populating both the trade and the diplomatic teams within Congress and the White House... Mr Trump has signaled also that you know he’s very much, the BRICS movement is in his crosshairs. I think South Africa waving the flag and recruiting other countries to join the BRICS agreement is not going to play well. And I think that’s a threat or fear that I would take on board.”

Striking fear – in this case, potential denial of Africa Growth and Opportunity Act ‘benefits’ (which in any case mainly accrue to multinational smelters and car companies) – is one part of the corporate agenda.

Another is dismissal of the BRICS as a force worth taking seriously, as witnessed in a new essay by Joseph Nye, one of the most influential political scientists in history, a Democratic Party neoliberal. Most of Nye’s brief analysis of the BRICS provides banal, conventional wisdom; but here are two examples of the negativity one hears all too often, not from the BRICS’ leftist critics, but from the imperialist right, annoyed at the new pretenders to the throne of U.S. Empire:

“Rather than making the BRICS stronger, the admission of new members merely imports more rivalries. Egypt and Ethiopia are locked in a dispute over a dam that Ethiopia is building on the Nile River, and Iran has long-standing disputes with the UAE and prospective member Saudi Arabia. Far

from making the BRICS more effective, these new intra-organizational rivalries will hamper its efforts... the group's stated intention of avoiding the dollar and clearing more of its members' bilateral trade in their own currencies has made only limited headway. Any serious attempt to replace the dollar as a global reserve currency would require China to back the renminbi with deep, flexible capital markets and the rule of law – and those conditions are nowhere close to being met.”

True enough, these are serious problems, it's fair to admit – while continuing a debate someone like Nye would avoid like the plague: aren't the BRICS actually subimperial amplifiers of Western imperialism, and if so, why not advocate resumption of Barack Obama's strategy of assimilation, e.g. through the G20? It's revealing that Nye has no such agenda in mind, what with an incoming paleo-con Trump regime expected to tear down not fatten up imperialist multilateral institutions.

Another prominent ruling-class site – the mirror opposite of the Council on Foreign Relations which Nye has chaired – is Russia's Valdai Club. Its Programme Director Oleg Barabanov has recently analysed all the UN votes of old BRICS, new BRICS and new partners, to see whether General Assembly resolutions against Russia and Iran gained support from the various members. It's a hodgepodge of results, with very few clear patterns aside from an evolution from early resolutions against Putin's Ukraine invasion which were characterised by more abstentions, evolving towards an increasing anti-Russia bias in voting, in contrast to steadier solidarity with Iran. In the first case,

“Russia is supported, first of all, by two countries: these are Belarus and Cuba. Then there is a group of countries that abstain in most cases, but sometimes can support Russia. These are Algeria, Bolivia, Vietnam, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Uganda has always abstained. The next group of countries opposed Russia in about a third of cases. These are Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria and

Thailand. Turkey stands out here, having voted for all 10 anti-Russian resolutions. Moreover, Turkey was the only country here that spoke out for the resolution after being invited to become a BRICS partner.”

Barabanov's second case is Iran:

“None of the 13 countries voted for anti-Iranian resolutions during the same period of 2022-24. Six countries have always supported Iran (Belarus, Bolivia, Vietnam, Cuba, Indonesia, Uzbekistan). Two countries (Algeria and Kazakhstan) either supported Iran or abstained. Five countries (Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda) always abstained or did not vote. This situation correlates to a sufficient degree with the results of voting on these resolutions by BRICS members. With regard to anti-Russian resolutions, there was also a difference in approaches. And with regard to Iran, there was also more open solidarity with this state on the part of the 'old' BRICS members.”

Again, this cursory consideration of intra-BRICS diplomacy suggests utter intra-subimperial chaos. Barabanov's summary, sounding like Nye, is that:

“If there is no internal unity based on 'all for one and one for all', then all prospects for strengthening the BRICS as a new pole of world politics will remain unfulfilled. One of the most obvious, albeit not the most important, indicators of this internal political consolidation is the example of voting in the UN General Assembly... The level of internal consolidation of a particular structure is also determined by a unified approach to voting on international platforms. This is clearly seen in the example of NATO and the EU, whose member countries in the UN General Assembly, as a rule, vote in the same way.”

Chaos or not, the trajectory is again clear when it comes to BRICS operating as a geopolitical bloc: from hype to hope to helplessness.

## To Brazil, with trepidation

What, then, does Lula inherit when hosting the BRICS leaders in Rio in July? In *Modern Diplomacy*, Kester Komegah writes,

“Now awakening from its slumber to the global development realities, BRICS+ together with its partner states, as an informal non-western association, ultimately seeks to participate actively in the economic system and reduce the influence of uni-polarity, the dominance of the United States.”

That’s a generous way to say that simply, BRICS elites want a bigger seat at the existing table, eating the same pie, cooked the same way, and not an alternative to imperialism. That was precisely what has been learned for at least 15 years – since Copenhagen in 2009 – when Barack Obama barged in to a private room at the UN climate summit, to thrash out a pathetic deal with leaders of Brazil, South Africa, India and China (the ‘BASIC’ bloc).

To illustrate this desire to be subimperialist not anti-imperialist, consider an interview last week with BRICS ‘sherpa’ Eduardo Saboia in *Agencia-Brazil*:

“Brazil will also be hosting the 30th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30) in Belém, Pará state, this year. How can we take advantage of the BRICS presidency to build an understanding that can help make COP30 a success? The BRICS countries play a central role when it comes to energy, which is the main source of greenhouse gas emissions.”

The ‘success’ the BRICS elites have shown they want since 2009 is that Lula change nothing in the UN climate-negotiations alliance. This is especially poignant after climate catastrophe hit Porto Alegre extremely hard last May, with floods killing more than 200 and displacing 430 000. Lula has subsequently given the notoriously corrupt parastatal oil corporation Petrobras thumbs up to:

- drill for oil at the confluence of the Amazon River and Atlantic Ocean, and
- in the spirit of intra-BRICS collaboration with the West, allowing Petrobras to explore offshore the western coast of South Africa near where the Orange River hits the Atlantic Ocean, allied with filthy-corrupt TotalEnergies of Paris.

That says it all: that central role for energy dashing hopes for those who believe BRICS will offer an alternative to the climate-fouling Western imperialists.

And what to expect may arise from the chaos of BRICS expansion in 2025? The official Russian hope is a proliferation of new partner-applicants to be announced six months from now in Rio: Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Chad, Colombia, Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Honduras, Laos, Kuwait, Myanmar, Morocco, Nicaragua, Senegal, Pakistan, Palestine, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.

Dictatorships are prolific on this list. Multipolarists aiming for a genuinely progressive BRICS may notice the names Colombia, Senegal and Sri Lanka, whose new leaders do come from the left – but Nicaragua, Venezuela and Zimbabwe certainly no longer qualify.

All this expansion myth-making reminds of what the imperialist West and subimperial BRICS have in common: wars, violations of sovereignty, worsening inequality, poverty, exploitation, unemployment, pandemic mismanagement, looting of poor countries’ resources, extreme contributions to climate change and ecocide, violence against women, abusive high technology, censorship, surveillance, austerity, neoliberalism, false ‘de-dollarisation’, human rights abuses, LGBTQI+ repression, venal corruption and tyrannies.

Can we not add to the unipolar and multipolar options a third, a non-polar, anti-imperialist and anti-subimperialist politics – given the chaos overwhelming both Empire and the BRICS?

# Dr. Martin Luther King's Prophetic Warning, Denouncing the Merchants of Death

**Kathy Kelly**

Over the past three years, a collective of volunteer researchers, lawyers, and commentators created The Merchants of Death War Crimes Tribunal, dedicated to holding accountable four weapon manufacturing corporations based in the U.S. Their tribunal amassed copious evidence to prove that Boeing, Lockheed Martin, RTX (formerly Raytheon) and General Atomics (a company which manufactures weaponized drones) are guilty of committing war crimes. On January 15, 2025, as the world marks the birth of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, a press conference will announce the Tribunal's verdicts and release the report of ten international jurors who have weighed the evidence submitted to them.

Of necessity, the evidence was culled from examining a limited range of devastatingly criminal U.S. "forever wars," of brutal and needless wars of choice. The Tribunal focused on specific U.S. war crimes and crimes against humanity in the invasions, occupations and aerial assaults which followed the "9/11" attacks in 2001.

What if we could enlarge the Tribunal, bringing before it war crimes occurring right now, the U.S.-assisted massacres we watch in real time on our phone and computer screens?

Certainly, one witness we would beg to appear for testimony would be Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya, who was the director of Gaza's Kamal Adwan Hospital when such a place existed. The Tribunal would wish to amplify his testimony on the harrowing weeks of siege during which Israel subjected his hospital to artillery and aerial bombardment. They would help to record his story of witnessing assassinations targeting medical staff, field executions of people clutching white flags in an attempt to surrender, the hospital's

forced evacuation with at-gunpoint humiliation stripping of women and girls. The initial attacks disabled the hospital's operational capacities by targeting power generators and oxygen production equipment, but now an iconic photo shows Dr. Abu Safiya walking towards an Israeli tank through collapsed buildings and rubble. The Tribunal would like to interview him, but he is being held without charge by Israel's military.

Our tribunal would surely turn to three of the world's most crucial international human rights groups for testimony.

On December 5, 2024, Amnesty International concluded that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. Its research documents how, during its military offensive launched in the wake of the deadly Hamas-led attacks in southern Israel on 7 October 2023, "Israel has unleashed hell and destruction on Palestinians in Gaza brazenly, continuously and with total impunity."

On December 19, 2024 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, Doctors Without Borders) stated that "repeated Israeli military attacks on Palestinian civilians over the last 14 months, the dismantling of the healthcare system and other essential infrastructure, the suffocating siege, and the systematic denial of humanitarian assistance are destroying the conditions of life in Gaza." The report says there are "clear signs of ethnic cleansing" by Israel as it wages war in Gaza.

Also issued on December 19, 2024 was a report from Human Rights Watch, entitled "Extermination and Acts of Genocide," stating that Israel has killed thousands of Palestinians in Gaza by

denying them clean water which it says legally amounts to acts of genocide and extermination.

Corroborating the testimony of health care workers and human rights advocates in Gaza would be Pope Francis's January 9, 2025, message to international diplomats. Pope Francis denounced Israel's ongoing war in Gaza, calling the humanitarian situation in the Palestinian enclave "very serious and shameful." Pope Francis referenced the deaths of children who froze to death because of Israel's destruction of infrastructure: "We cannot in any way accept the bombing of civilians. We cannot accept that children are freezing to death because hospitals have been destroyed or a country's energy network has been hit."

Recommendations made by jurors in the Merchants of Death War Crimes Tribunal call for major weapon makers to pay reparations for suffering caused. They echo the words of Pope Francis, whose message to the assemblage of diplomats made this appeal: "With the money spent on weapons and other military expenditures, let us establish a global fund that can finally put an end to hunger and favor development in the most impoverished countries, so that their citizens will not resort to violent or illusory solutions, or have to leave their countries in order to seek a more dignified life".

Considering such testimony from so many diverse sources, one might expect that U.S. lawmakers would re-evaluate their murderous, unwavering support of Israel. Instead, on January 9th, 2025, the U.S. House of Representatives voted to sanction the International Criminal Court in protest of its arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defense minister.

Who are the criminals? U.S. news coverage of five former or current presidents gathered for the funeral of President Jimmy Carter never hinted that hideous wars of choice along with massive increases in weapon sales had marked

the administration of each of the five. There was no mention of President Biden's order to send eight billion dollars of weapons to Gaza. This gathering of U.S. presidents is referred to as "The World's Most Exclusive Club." Exclusive indeed. What other club of so few has caused so much suffering to so many?

On April 7, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famously insightful, prophetic speech about another illegal U.S. war of choice – "Beyond Viet Nam: A Time to Break the Silence" – in which Dr. King said: "Increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken: the role of those who make peaceful resolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments."

Dr. King's verdict, in this speech, on the momentous first anniversary of which he was taken from us, was that "This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

The four defendants before our Tribunal certainly did their part to pressure these five other criminals toward their varied crimes, but we all have a choice to hold ourselves accountable in the face of Dr. King's warning that we are approaching spiritual death. One step toward reconciling with wisdom, justice and love would be to demand the release of Dr. Hussam Abu Safiya from an Israeli prison so that we could humbly learn from him about war crimes and reparations.

# The Military to Prison Pipeline

Steve Early, Suzanne Gordon

*Review of Prisoners After War: Veterans in the Age of Mass Incarceration by Jason Higgins (University of Massachusetts Press, 2024).*

Like old soldiers around the country, a group of former service members gathered in Crest Hill, Illinois to remember fallen comrades on Memorial Day, 2024. Several months later, *The Veteran*, a newspaper published by Vietnam Veterans Against the War, ran a photo of the event they attended. It shows a multi-generational group of men—white, Black and Latino—lined up proudly between two flags.

In his dispatch to the newspaper, African-American Navy veteran Robert Maury explained why everyone in the Stateville Veterans Group was wearing government issued clothing of a non-military sort. As Maury wrote, “This was the first time in the history of Stateville, if not the first time in the history of the state of Illinois, that incarcerated veterans were allowed to organize a Memorial Day ceremony in a maximum-security prison.”

There would not be another such event because, late last year, the Illinois Department of Corrections closed this century-old facility. The Veterans Group there was forced to disband; its members dispersed to other prisons around the state where some hoped to plant seeds for future veteran initiated programs at their new addresses.

How did these vets and 180,000 others end up in a U.S. prison population now numbering more than 1.2 million? And what can be done to keep other former service members out of jail in the future? These are questions that Jason Higgins, a Virginia Tech researcher, explores in his new book, *Prisoners After War*, which is particularly timely in light of President Joe Biden’s Dec. 12 pardon of a small group of veterans convicted of non-violent crimes, including long ago drug offenses.

Higgins, along with John Kindler, an associate professor of history from Oklahoma State University, has also produced an edited collection called *Service Denied*. That volume, with multiple contributors, offers a broader historical perspective on post-war mistreatment of former soldiers, including the hundreds of veterans who were born abroad, served in the military, ended up in prison, and then were deported after their release.

## Mass Incarceration

Higgins calls his own study a “social history of veterans in the age of mass incarceration.” It links their experience in foreign wars and related problems transitioning back to civilian life to changes in the criminal justice system that put millions of men and women behind bars during an on-going domestic crackdown on crime.

Fifty years after the official end of U.S. intervention in southeast Asia, “Vietnam vets are still the single largest population of war veterans in prison, illustrating the profound and lasting impact of the ‘war on crime’ on their generation.”

As Higgins reports, the broader U.S. trend of “criminalizing and punishing people with behavioral and social problems”—due to their being non-white, unemployed, unhoused, and/or drug dependent—led to a doubling in the number of vets in prison between the end of that war and 9/11. The author finds, however, that the “history of incarcerated veterans is not exclusively a story of racial injustice.”

In *Prisoners After War*, we learn that white veterans are much more likely to go to prison compared to white civilians, while Black vets are slightly less likely to be jailed than African-Americans who never served. Overall, about one third of all veterans, who number 19 million, report having been arrested and booked into jail at least once in their lives, as com-



pared to less than one-fifth of the rest of the population.

When they end up incarcerated, veterans receive longer sentences than non-veterans, despite the good work of a national network of Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs). As Higgins documents in great detail, this “hybrid drug and mental health treatment system” offers access to counseling services, opportunities for housing, education and job employment, and disability benefits through the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

As a diversion program, VTCs “have the lowest recidivism rates in the nation” and, according to the author, “could serve as a model for greater criminal justice reform.” But the effectiveness of their “reparative justice” approach varies from state to state and is not available to vets charged with violent crimes, which disqualifies many defendants.

### Betrayed and Abandoned

Higgins builds his book around personal stories he collected for the Incarcerated Veterans Oral History Project. He interviewed scores of veterans still imprisoned and out of jail, police officers and judges, and fellow vets who have become VTC volunteers

and helpers. One common theme among those who end up in legal trouble is the feeling of being betrayed and abandoned. That’s because they’ve been denied the services and benefits—or opportunities for citizenship—promised by military recruiters, charged with filling the ranks of an “all-volunteer force” with poor and working-class youth since 1973.

Their exclusion from the few perks of “veteranhood” occurred when pre-existing mental health issues or service-related medical conditions lead to misconduct while in uniform and resulting military discipline. As Higgins notes, punitive discharges first became widespread, during the Vietnam era, even before conscription was suspended.

“Thousands of African-Americans were excessively punished for minor offenses, behavioral issues, acts of resistance and drug use,” he writes. “As the military began to withdraw forces from Vietnam, a disproportionate number of Black soldiers received administrative discharges compared to whites, disqualifying them from VA care, disability compensation, and the GI Bill.”

This left many Black combat veterans—more likely than others to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)—without access to much need-

ed treatment programs and disability pay. As one government study found in 1981, their resulting “readjustment difficulties increased the likelihood of incarceration.”

More than 300,000 veterans, who served at home and abroad, since 9/11 also received less than “honorable” discharges. The Department of Defense (DOD) often made such determinations in the absence of uniform disciplinary standards across military branches or even among individual commanders within the same branch. For the DOD, despite its ample \$884 billion budget, getting rid of soldiers whose performance is adversely affected by PTSD, traumatic brain injuries (TBI), military sexual trauma (MST), drug or alcohol abuse is easier, quicker, and cheaper than treating them.

### The Stigma of “Bad Paper”

Being drummed out of the military in this fashion, without even a court-martial, has lasting consequences. As civilians, “bad paper” holders aren’t eligible for preferential treatment when applying for public sector jobs. The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Disabled American Veterans won’t even let them join. According to Swords to Plowshares, a San Francisco-based advocacy group, vets stigmatized in this fashion are more likely to have mental health conditions and are also twice as likely to commit suicide.

A Syracuse University study found that “minorities and women were disproportionately represented among veterans with bad paper” due to “racial inequities in the military’s criminal justice system and the number of women who struggle with MST.” Those who seek their own discharge upgrade face a long legal fight, which is why, in the waning days of the Obama Administration, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) “called for the outgoing president to issue a full pardon for every veteran with a bad paper discharge.”

Unlike most other veterans’ organizations, the VVA has long distinguished itself not just as an advocate for disabled vets, but for those in prison as well. In

2017, as Higgins reports, VVA helped win passage of the Fairness to Veterans Act, which reformed the individual appeals process for “bad paper veterans diagnosed with PTSD or a TBI.”

Unfortunately, Barack Obama left office without acting on the VVA’s appeal for broader clemency. Seven years later, Biden did pardon a few of the many of the LGBTQ service members court-martialed and kicked out of the military before the DOD’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy was repealed in 2011. (Months after this much publicized action, only 8 had applied.)

So Swords to Plowshares, Minority Veterans of America, the Black Veterans Project, and two veterans’ legal clinics are now trying again with Biden. In a December 6 letter, they reminded him that past “administrative separations and resulting denial of critical veterans’ benefits” are “a life sentence,” that can result in greater risk of substance abuse, joblessness, homelessness, incarceration, and self-harm.

A week later, Biden did grant clemency to 15 military veterans (out of 1,500 other people who got pardons or commutations on the same day). The recipients were mainly officers and NCOs aged 46 to 79, with honorable discharges and military decorations, who committed some lesser offense long ago and then, in the words of the White House, “turned their lives around.”

But time is running out for Biden to erase the stain of “bad paper” from the records of the many veterans who tried to serve honorably but got fired from their jobs in the military with little or no due process but lasting adverse consequences.

Veterans behind bars—like the ones who celebrated Memorial Day in Stateville last May—are even more unlikely to see their names on any additional presidential pardon lists issued before January 20. For them, Biden’s claim last month that America “was built on the promise of possibility and second chances” sounded like the spiel many got from military recruiters who signed them up, as teenagers, and put them on the road from one government-issued uniform to another.