



# OUR FUTURE AS CLIMATE REFUGEES

*By Amanda Tapp*

*Journalist Dahr Jamail discusses the impact of climate change on the Middle East and calls for immediate collaborative action*

**A**s one of the few independent journalists reporting on the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, journalist and writer Dahr Jamail was in a unique setting to document the devastation of that war in his first book, *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq*. His second book, *The Will to Resist: Soldiers who Refused to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan*, presents a comprehensive study on dissent within the U.S. military.

Since then, this Texas native has focused on anthropogenic climate disruption and the environment. His latest book, *End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Disruption*, chronicles the accelerating pace of climate catastrophes. Jamail says he is committed to educating others on the plight of the planet, and how climate devastation will continue to have a cascading impact on the earth and humanity itself.

As a writer covering diverse issues, Jamail has been a reporter for Truthout, has written for Al Jazeera, appeared on the BBC and NPR, and is a recurring guest on Democracy Now. Among other awards, he jointly won the Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism in 2008 and an Izzy Award of the Park Center for Independent Media in 2018.

*Cairo Review's* Amanda Tapp recently spoke with Jamail about his forecast for a world running out of time to deal with climate change.



*CR: In your latest book, you discuss your mountaineering adventures and the climate disasters you've witnessed. What would you say were the most alarming things you witnessed?*

**DJ:** Things were happening so much faster than I had thought they were and than a lot of the science was telling us. One area that shook me up particularly was going to the Great Barrier Reef, the largest coral reef on the planet, and going to what was supposed to be one of the most pristine parts of that reef and seeing it largely bleached out and just swimming over meters and meters of bleached or already dead coral. It's one thing to hear the scientists in Australia say the Great Barrier Reef is already in a terminal stage, but it's another thing to snorkel there and see that. The loss of it right in front of my face was utterly shocking.

*CR: How did looking at all these changes in the Great Barrier Reef change your ideas about our options, as a species, for dealing with climate disruption today?*

**DJ:** I think the most important thing I got from that experience and that I hope to impart to the readers is that there's no more future tense about the crisis. The self-reinforcement feedback loops have already kicked in. Dozens of them have, in fact, and those are irreversible. So, the idea that we can stop the crisis is not based in reality. Even the idea at this point of mitigating it to any substantial degree, given what that would take with the coordination of global governments abandoning a global fossil fuel-based economy, et cetera, seems impossible now. All that said, I think then it really leaves each

*△ Dahr Jamail, summit of Mount Olympus, Olympic National Park, May 7, 2018. Photograph by John Fleming*

of us individually at a point where we get to decide how we are going to live.

*CR: How would this show specifically in the Middle East and in the Gulf countries? Would there be a true Arab union or more conflict?*

**DJ:** Unfortunately, it's hard to see more conflict not happening. We've already seen the impacts. Look at the water issues all around the Middle East. From Turkey to Iran to Iraq to Israel/Palestine, water issues are massive and have become more intense as this goes forward. As sea levels rise again, think of all the villages and cities along the coast everywhere across the Middle East. All of those people, where are they going to go? And then what happens if you lose all that infrastructure that's in those cities? That's going to be a massive crisis. Refugee crises—we're already seeing that—the setting, in the Middle East, people moving, running up against borders, trying to get into different countries, trying to get out of other countries; this is going to intensify, and this is all based on UN reports that have been warning about this for quite some time.

Just this summer in France alone, a recent report showed that 1,500 people died from the heat waves. And that's in a place that largely has infrastructure in better shape than so many of these war-torn areas in the Middle East. So, imagine how that kind of thing will continue to play out and intensify across the Middle East.

*CR: Looking at refugee patterns in the Middle East with climate catastrophe accelerating at an alarming pace, do you think the region will see more of*

*an influx of refugees or an exodus?*

**DJ:** It seems hard to imagine that there would be an influx. What happens to an entire country when they're largely free of water? Where are those people going to go? It sounds like an external science-fiction kind of scenario, but unfortunately, if you look at the climate projections and what's already happening now, and how far ahead of the worst-case future projections for this time we are now than when they were made twenty or thirty years ago ... we're in so far with how extreme this has become that I think unfortunately people across the Middle East need to really bind together.

*CR: Will leaders in the Middle East make this radical change that's needed in order to slow down the effects of climate change?*

**DJ:** I think ultimately things will get so severe that they will, I would hope, be forced to do so. We know the role that the climate crisis played in creating some of the conditions of the Arab Spring, so it's already happening. That's actually several years old. And we're still living in the current fallout from that, and much of that is not resolved and may never be. I think we can expect continued destabilization of governments and regime changes because of it, when things get so extreme that people literally don't have food and water. And that's virtually a potential for every country in the Middle East, some more than others. At some point, the leaders will have to contend with this. They will be forced to toil. I think in countries, not just in the Middle East but in so many places around the world where there's not going to be a whole lot of options left once

cities start going underwater, political destabilization gets to a point where much of the infrastructure becomes paralyzed.

*CR: Your article, “Eventually We Will All Be Climate Refugees,” states that humans are bound to become climate refugees. As this becomes the norm, do you think there will be a kind of breaking point where governments and people are cognizant of this?*

**DJ:** I know that in a country as large, geographically, as the United States, for example, it’s really challenging to see us holding together as a country. I mean maybe it ends up fragmenting and other states come out of it because I think things will break down ultimately to a point where a government won’t be able to hold itself together, like what happened in Iraq after the invasion and occupation. As you know, it’s essentially de facto three states at this point. It’s going to be very interesting to see how this plays out. Having reported from Iraq for a long time, what I saw in war—and I think this is going to be kind of an iteration of that kind of breakdown—was a societal breakdown. Now, here, there is going to be barbarism; there are going to be atrocities and people doing horrible things. But alongside that, what I saw in Iraq was that the majority of people actually behaved very humanely toward each other. I saw some of the most amazing acts of kindness and generosity people were doing with complete strangers: welcoming people into their homes, sharing what meager food they might have, with complete strangers, just because they understood, “Hey, look, we’re all the same people. We’re all in this together.

And let’s see if we can figure out a way we can get through this together.”

*CR: So, there will also be cooperation and positivity coming out of true, dire hardships in the Middle East?*

**DJ:** I think so. I mean I’ve already seen it with my own eyes in some of the most extreme situations, for example when hundreds of thousands of people had to flee Fallujah and I watched people in Baghdad taking them into their homes. The level of humanity superseded those Sunni–Shia fault lines that were in many cases created and exploited by the occupier. So really I saw case after case of humanity winning out over any kind of ideology or attempts from the government to fragment people, and that, I wouldn’t say that gives me hope, but at least I find solace in that.

There was more of humanity and understanding and care for fellow human beings, even more so than in the United States. And so I think in places that have already had a history of having to suffer through dictators, demagoguery, crisis and war and strife, and refugee issues, people already have an understanding of what it takes to get through that. You see things break down rather quickly over here in the United States because of a sense of entitlement, privilege. And when people who may not have had to experience suffering before start to taste that, they’re going to tend to react in a lot more extreme fashion than people who understand, “Well, yeah, that’s happened here and it might happen again and here’s how we’re going to try to get through it this time.”

**CR:** *So, can impoverished and developing countries actually benefit from not being individualistic societies in the face of climate crises?*

**DJ:** I think that absolutely is an advantage. There's a kind of atomization that's happened here [the United States]. It's like the root of corporate capitalism. I look around here and see people so individualized—here's really not a sense of community in any way, shape, or form. And that is a distinct disadvantage when crisis happens. There are little pockets around the United States, and what I realized is that people are essentially trying to emulate much of how so many people already live in parts of the Middle East.

**CR:** *With all the changes in sea levels and droughts in the Middle East, what will happen to Nile Basin countries?*

**DJ:** You have this massive area that's at such a low elevation. All of the agriculture there, all of the people living there, what happens when you add four feet of water to that area? Just think about that. All of that is going to go away. So, that food has to be produced somewhere else. Everyone living there has to go somewhere else. What happens when all those people get there? Is there enough water? Is there enough food? What happens to the economy? Are there jobs? It's also important for them to think of these cascading effects because that's what we're seeing playing out now. We're seeing it right now in real time with the refugee crisis. We see people dying, drowning in boats, trying to get across the Mediterranean Sea. We see them running into nationalism,

into violence in countries where they're trying to land and find security. So, all this comes from a couple of years of drought. All of this comes from a couple of feet of sea level rise. You see where I'm going. These very, very small natural impacts and changes from the climate crisis have massively widespread devastating human impacts.

**CR:** *It's like the butterfly effect.*

**DJ:** Exactly. And it compounds upon itself. I mean, these human impacts themselves become a positive feedback loop, and I've used that term a lot and I should specify for those who might not be as familiar with it. So a feedback loop, the most famous climate feedback loop, is when you melt the Arctic sea ice as the atmosphere warms, and it exposes more blue ocean, which then absorbs more sunlight, which warms the ocean, which then melts the sea ice, and all of that just recycles upon itself.

One scientist shared that really the simplest way to think about a feedback loop is that the more something is happening, the more it happens. So, as the sea level rises, the more seas rise, and then these human impacts unfold as we just discussed. That's going to cause even more problems as those people then go somewhere else, creating a whole new set of crises at that place—even if they're just places high enough where they don't have to deal with sea level-rise issues right now.

**CR:** *You wrote before that global capitalism creates an illusion that all is well, while world climate change continues to accelerate at an*

*alarming place. Could you talk a bit about how it creates this illusion? And when the illusion shatters, what does this look like for you?*

**DJ:** Well, for example, I don't have a television on purpose. And I haven't had one for decades, because the amount of corporate advertising in the United States and in other places around the world is dizzying. It's unreal. It promotes this idea of, "Well if you just buy and consume, everything is going to be okay." It promotes this idea that business as usual can continue and will continue, so buy this new house; buy this new car; go do these things; all of these things that are future-based. It's also extremely distracting, and we have a situation in the United States where after decades and decades to cuts in education across the country alongside a dumbing down of the population, no critical thinking being taught, no real politics understood by the general population, you essentially have a country and a dominant culture—not everyone here—that's a dumbed-down, consuming, distracted population. And they're completely ill-equipped to deal with the crisis that's upon us, let alone decide how to respond to the political crisis here.

It's a culture of distraction. That's the opposite of what we need right now. We really need people sitting quietly and thinking very deeply about what's happening and then making some very, very hard and important decisions about how we're going to be leading our lives. To me that means how we're going to be serving each other and serving the planet. Even if it looks like all is lost, I still see us—myself certainly—as

morally obliged to find deep ways I can take actions to try to help the planet and help protect a small part of the planet where I live, or work with other people doing that kind of work in other places as well. So, I think those are really the important questions and not living in this corporate-generated denialism that everything is going to be okay; the crisis isn't so bad; and we still have time.

**CR:** *What are the factors in the Middle East that led to a lack of action against climate change?*

**DJ:** You have, in so many countries, U.S.-backed dictators over decades that have kept the thumb down on people in a very violent, oppressive way. That's still the case in so many countries there, where you don't have democracy, you don't have a government that's truly representative of the people, and therefore is not acting in the best interests of the people. I don't really know what the solution is in the Middle East, other than people on their own, as best they can, starting to take responsibility. The government is not going to take the right actions. So, looking around at where I live, what can I start doing to take some responsibility to try to figure out where my water and food are going to come from? Who is my community? How can I fortify those relationships and deepen them? And how can we, as people, start to work together to take care of ourselves? Because clearly the government is not going to, and I really don't see governments in the Middle East and certainly not in the United States or some of these Western countries that are going proto-fascist—I would happily stand corrected and happily be proven



wrong here—making an abrupt change to start acting in the best interests of the people that they supposedly represent, because I think they passed the point of doing that a long, long time ago.

**CR:** *And for that change to happen, would some really big disaster have to come first?*

**DJ:** That's right. I think ultimately that reckoning will be forced upon these governments. When you have these larger countries with very, very large populations, the government is simply not going to be able to contain the level of chaos and need that's going to be happening as all of these climate impacts intensify. We are looking into a very dystopian future. When times get really dire and hard, people can go one of two

ways: either descend into a madness and barbarism, which I've seen, or really go the other direction where great acts of love and kindness become paramount. It comes down to how we are going to behave during this time, individually, collectively, and how we're going to treat each other. And so, my hope is that we really keep that in the forefront of our minds—that the time to really be very kind and generous toward one another is very important now, and that we kind of hold on to that as we go on into the future, because it's going to be challenging.

**CR:** *It's an optimistic hope in the face of despair.*

**DJ:** Yes, it is. Ultimately, when it comes down to it, it's really the only thing to do.

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