

US Presidential Race: Giving Peace Very Little Chance

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After nearly 15 years of Mideast war – with those conflicts growing ever grimmer – you might expect that peace would be a major topic of the 2016 presidential race. Instead, there has been a mix of warmongering bluster from most candidates and some confused mutterings against endless war from a few.

No one, it seems, wants to risk offending Official Washington's neocon-dominated foreign policy establishment that is ready to castigate any candidate who suggests that there are other strategies – besides more and more “regime changes” – that might extricate the United States from the Middle East quicksand.

Late in Thursday's Democratic [debate](#) – when the topic of war finally came up – former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton continued toeing the neocon line, calling Iran the chief sponsor of terrorism in the world, when that title might objectively go to U.S. “allies,” such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, all of whom have been aiding Sunni jihadists fighting to overthrow Syria's secular regime.

Israel also has provided help to Al Qaeda's Nusra Front, which has been battling Syrian troops and Lebanese Hezbollah fighters near the Golan Heights – and Israel's mistreatment of Palestinians has played a key role in stirring up hatred and violence in the Middle East.



Image: Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Sen. Bernie Sanders. (NBC photo)

But Clinton has fully bought into the neocon narrative, not especially a surprise since she voted for the Iraq War, pushed the disastrous Libyan “regime change” and has sought a limited U.S. military invasion of Syria (to prevent the Syrian army from securing its border with Turkey and reclaiming territory from jihadists and other rebels).

Blasting Iran

In Thursday's debate – coming off her razor-thin victory in the Iowa caucuses – Clinton painted Iran as the big regional threat, putting herself fully in line with the neocon position.

"We have to figure out how to deal with Iran as the principal state sponsor of terrorism in the world," Clinton said.

"They are destabilizing governments in the region. They continue to support Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon against Israel. ...

"If we were to normalize relations right now [with Iran], we would remove one of the biggest pieces of leverage we have to try to influence and change Iranian behavior. ... I believe we have to take this step by step to try to rein in Iranian aggression, their support for terrorism and the other bad behavior that can come back and haunt us."

Iran, of course, has been a longtime neocon target for "regime change" along with Syria (and before that Iraq). Many neocons were disappointed when President Barack Obama negotiated an agreement to ensure that Iran's nuclear program remained peaceful (an accord reached after John Kerry replaced Clinton as Secretary of State). The neocons had been hoping that the U.S. military would join Israel in an air war to "bomb-bomb-bomb Iran" — as Sen. John McCain once famously declared.

Yet, there were other distortions in Clinton's statement. While it's true that Iran has aided Hezbollah and Hamas in their resistance to Israel, Clinton ignored other factors, such as Israeli acts of aggression against both Lebanon, where Hezbollah emerged as resistance to an Israeli invasion and occupation in the 1980s, and the Palestinians who have faced Israeli oppression for generations.

Silence on the 'Allies'

In the debate, Clinton also avoided criticism of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey for their military and financial assistance to radical jihadists, including Al Qaeda's Nusra Front and Al Qaeda's spinoff, the Islamic State. At the urging of Clinton, the Obama administration also approved military shipments to Syrian rebels who then either turned over or sold U.S. weapons to the extremists.

Iran's role in Syria has been to help support the internationally recognized government of Bashar al-Assad, whose military remains the principal bulwark protecting Syria's Christian, Alawite, Shiite and other minorities from possible genocide if Al Qaeda-connected jihadists prevailed.

Clinton also ignored her own role in creating a haven for these terror groups across the Middle East because of her support for the Iraq War and her instigation of the 2011 "regime change" in Libya which created another failed state where Islamic State and various extremists have found a home and started chopping of the heads of "infidels."

Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who battled Clinton to a virtual tie in Iowa, took a somewhat less belligerent position at Thursday's debate, repeating his rather naïve idea of having Sunni states lead the fight against Sunni jihadists. On the more reasonable side, he indicated a willingness to work with Russia and other world powers in support of an anti-jihadist coalition.

“It must be Muslim troops on the ground that will destroy ISIS, with the support of a coalition of major powers — U.S., U.K., France, Germany and Russia,” Sanders said.

“So our job is to provide them the military equipment that they need; the air support they need; special forces when appropriate. But at the end of the day for a dozen different reasons ... the combat on the ground must be done by Muslim troops with our support. We must not get involved in perpetual warfare in the Middle East.”

Sanders continued,

“We cannot be the policeman of the world. We are now spending more I believe than the next eight countries on defense. We have got to work in strong coalition with the major powers of the world and with those Muslim countries that are prepared to stand up and take on terrorism. So I would say that the key doctrine of the Sanders administration would be no, we cannot continue to do it alone; we need to work in coalition.”

Sounding Less Hawkish

While Sanders clearly sought to sound less hawkish than Clinton – and did not repeat his earlier talking point about the Saudis and others “getting their hands dirty” – he did not address the reality that many of the Sunni countries that he hopes to enlist in the fight against the jihadists are already engaged – on the side of the jihadists.

Clinton, as she seeks to cut into Sanders’s lead in New Hampshire polls, has been stressing her “progressive” credentials, but many progressive Democrats suspect that Clinton could become a neocon Trojan Horse.

Arch-neocon Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century, has praised Clinton’s aggressive foreign policy.

Kagan, who was made an adviser to Clinton’s State Department (while his wife Victoria Nuland received big promotions under Clinton), said in 2014: “If she pursues a policy which we think she will pursue ... it’s something that might have been called neocon, but clearly her supporters are not going to call it that; they are going to call it something else.” [For more, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Is Hillary Clinton a Neocon-Lite?](#)”]

Not only did Clinton vote for the Iraq War – and support it until it became a political liability during Campaign 2008 – but she rejoined the neocon/liberal-hawk ranks as President Barack Obama’s Secretary of State. She routinely sided with neocon holdovers, such as Gen. David Petraeus, regarding Mideast wars and Israel’s hardline regime in its hostilities toward the Palestinians and Iran.

In 2011, Clinton pushed for “regime change” in Libya, chortling over Muammar Gaddafi’s torture-murder in October 2011, “We came. We saw. He died.” Since then, Libya has descended into a failed state with the Islamic State and other jihadists claiming more and more territory.

Clinton also favored an outright (though limited) U.S. military invasion of Syria, setting up a “safe zone” or “no-fly zone” that would protect militants fighting to overthrow the secular

Assad government. Over and over again, she has adopted positions virtually identical to what the neocons prescribe.

But Sanders, although he opposed the Iraq War, has hesitated to challenge Clinton too directly on foreign policy, apparently fearing to distract from his focus on income inequality and domestic concerns. He apparently has chosen fuzziness on foreign policy as the better part of political valor.

GOP Neocons Score

On the Republican side, the first week of the presidential delegate-selection process saw two candidates who mildly questioned the neocon conventional wisdom face reversals. Billionaire Donald Trump was upset in the Iowa caucuses and Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul shut down his flailing campaign.

Trump has noted his opposition to the Iraq War and his willingness to cooperate with Russia in the fight against jihadist terror, while Paul pushed a libertarian-style approach that questioned neocon interventionism but not as aggressively as his father did, apparently hoping to avoid Ron Paul's marginalization as "an isolationist."

While Trump and Paul stumbled this week, neocon favorite Marco Rubio surged to a strong third-place finish, catapulting past other establishment candidates who – while largely me-too-ing the neocon orthodoxy on foreign policy – are not as identified with pure neoconservatism as the youthful Florida senator is.

However, even the non-neocons have opted for visceral warmongering. Tea Party favorite and winner of the Republican Iowa caucuses, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, has vowed to "carpet bomb" Islamic State strongholds and promised to see "if sand can glow in the dark," as he [told](#) a Tea Party rally in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The phrase "glow in the dark" popularly refers to the aftermath of a nuclear bomb detonation.

However, as hardline as Cruz is, he still received a tongue-lashing from the neocon-flagship Washington Post for not doing a "full-neocon" when he suggested that the United States should not focus on "regime change" in Syria. Cruz has worried that overthrowing Assad's government might pave the way for a victory by the Islamic State and other Sunni jihadist terrorists.

In a Dec. 31, 2015 editorial, the Post's editors instead hailed neocon favorite Rubio for arguing "forcefully" for Assad's removal and castigated Cruz for saying Assad's ouster was "a distraction at best – and might even empower the jihadist."

A Beloved 'Group Think'

It is one of Official Washington's most beloved "group thinks" that Syrian "regime change" – a neocon goal dating back to the 1990s – must take precedence over the possible creation of a military vacuum that could bring the Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda to power.

After all, it won't be the sons and daughters of well-connected neocons who are sent to invade and occupy Syria to reverse the capture of Damascus by the Islamic State and/or Al Qaeda. So, the Post's editors, who in 2002-03 told the American people as flat fact that Iraq's Saddam Hussein was hiding WMD, engaged in similar exaggerations and lies about Assad in demonizing Cruz for his apostasy.

“Mr. Cruz is arguing for a stridently anti-American and nakedly genocidal dictator who sponsored terrorism against U.S. troops in Iraq and serves as a willing puppet of Iran,” the Post wrote.

That is typical of what a politician can expect if he or she deviates from the neocon line, even if you’re someone as belligerent as Cruz. Any apostasy from neocon orthodoxy is treated most harshly.

There is, by the way, no evidence that Assad is “nakedly genocidal” – his largely secular regime has never targeted any specific ethnic or religious group, indeed his government is the principal protector of Christians, Alawites, Shiites and other minorities that have been targeted by Sunni extremists for death.

Nor did Assad sponsor “terrorism against U.S. troops in Iraq.” By definition, terrorism is political violence against civilians, not against a military occupation force. Assad also sought to collaborate with the Bush-43 administration in its “war on terror,” to the point of handling torture assignments from Washington.

But distortions and falsehoods are now the way of the modern Washington Post. The newspaper will say anything, no matter how dishonest or unfair, to advance the neocon cause.

But the most dangerous outcome from these pressures is that they prevent a serious debate about a most serious topic: what the next president must do to bring the costly, bloody and endless wars to an end.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

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