Ducking the Issue of ‘Perpetual War’

During last week’s Democratic presidential debate, Sen. Bernie Sanders had an opening to reshape the campaign by offering a thoughtful critique of “perpetual war” and its consequences, but like the other major candidates of both parties ducked this crucial issue, writes Sam Husseini.

By Sam Husseini

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, some of us tried to raise questions about how U.S. foreign policy was a contributing factor. I got my mic cut off on Bill O’Reilly’s show. Others got far worse – a friend basically felt he had to move out of his neighborhood because he was so reviled for criticizing U.S. militarism.

So, the root causes of the 9/11 attacks were hardly discussed – unless it was televangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell blaming gay folks and getting derided for such nonsense. With minimal debate, the United States rushed off to war and hundreds of thousands of people got killed in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere without solving the problem of terrorism.

Today, even as the violence spreads, there’s no meaningful peace movement. Partly as a result of that, we’re not having the serious discussion that we should about what to do after the Paris attacks, including a serious assessment of how U.S. – and Western – foreign policy manifests the hatred that contributes to these homicidal suicide attacks.

In the case of the Paris terror attacks, one might have thought that an intelligent discussion would have been possible – the target, after all, was not the U.S. though it could be next on the list. But, still, there was some breathing room that might have allowed for a measure of serious examination and reflection about the effects of perpetual war.

But the two-party establishment with no significant exceptions agrees on the need for perpetual war. So there is almost no serious critique. For instance, top Democrats and Republicans show virtually no remorse for having pushed for “regime change” in Syria and Libya. Nor do they see a connection between those policies and the enormous human suffering that followed.

If there is criticism, it is aimed mostly at President Barack Obama for not doing more militarily. He’s called weak and feckless although he’s bombed country after country.

So, amid a broad pro-war consensus on the campaign trail, the major policy
debate has turned to Syrian refugees and whether they should be allowed into the United States, a point where there is more disagreement. The trouble is that sometimes what the two sides agree on (perpetual war) is what causes the point that they disagree on (what to do with refugees that perpetual war creates).

Democratic Party politicos talk about the humanity of Syrian refugees and the ideal of the U.S. offering them sanctuary. Republican politicos talk about alleged security concerns from letting refugees in. (While I personally think we should let in more than a mere 10,000 refugees, which is what the Obama administration is talking about, I don’t think that’s the issue we really need to be addressing.)

The real issue is the results of perpetual war and the continued backing for it among those politicians. The Democratic Party participates in perpetual war policies that lead to Syrians becoming refugees and the Republican Party participates in perpetual war policies that lead to greater insecurity for people in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the refugee issue is made into a wedge issue that keeps the Democratic base and the Republican base shouting at each other rather than examining the underlying cause: perpetual war and the problematic “allies” that U.S. officials have embraced in the Mideast. For instance, there is a conspiracy of silence about causal factors, such as the U.S. government’s backing of the authoritarian Saudi regime that has fostered Wahhabism, an extremist form of Islam used by Al Qaeda and ISIS.

Even the most progressive Democrats are silent on this touchy topic. Just this week, Rep. Barbara Lee — possibly the most left-wing member of Congress — was asked on “Democracy Now” about U.S. arms to Saudi Arabia. She didn’t condemn it.

In the presidential race, Sen. Bernie Sanders, the progressive alternative to hawkish former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, can bring a lump to every throat in the hall when talking about economic inequality, but his solution to the threat from Al Qaeda and ISIS is for the Saudis to “get their hands dirty.”

Sorry, Bernie, but the Saudis hands are dirty enough. The Saudis fostered jihadis like ISIS and Al Qaeda to tear apart Syria, and the Saudis are now bombing Yemen as part of their sectarian war against “the Shiite crescent” slaughtering large numbers of Yemeni civilians (while enabling Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen to capture more territory)

At the CBS-sponsored Democratic debate the day after the Paris attacks, Sanders didn’t even want to talk about foreign policy. It was tragic really. He could have laid into the misguided foreign policy that Clinton has embraced and has
helped shape. Sanders could have noted that by backing the Saudis the U.S. has worsened the threat from such groups as ISIS in the Middle East and now Europe and possibly America in the near future. He could have jolted the campaign and sparked a meaningful public debate.

But he didn’t. The most he did was criticize the invasion of Iraq, which is valid, but that was a dozen years ago. In my view, no one who voted for the Iraq War (including Hillary Clinton) is qualified to hold any official position let alone President of the United States, but Sanders flinched at the need for a more substantive critique of what’s happened since the Iraq War.

He relied on his nonsensical and counterproductive talking point about the supposed need for the Saudis and other rich Gulf states to intervene more aggressively in regional conflicts, which in real terms would mean more weapons and money going to their paramilitary proxies: Al Qaeda, ISIS and other jihadists. The Saudis are a big part of the problem, not the solution.

Whatever Sanders has to say about the economy and the need to invest heavily in American infrastructure, education and health care those plans are not feasible unless Sanders also can articulate a path out of perpetual war.

The Vietnam War helped undermine the war on poverty, as Martin Luther King Jr. noted, calling it a “demonic suction tube” diverting tax dollars from programs to alleviate suffering in the United State to inflict suffering in Indochina. Today’s perpetual war is gobbling up so much money that there won’t be any left for building infrastructure and financing other plans that Sanders may have.

Plus, if you don’t explain how and why you would end perpetual war, the voters are going to pick someone who vows to continue perpetual war, only do it better. And there will be no end in sight. Perpetual war will mean more generations of Muslim youth driven to madness against the U.S. and the West.

Beyond the fiscal cost, perpetual war will mean an even more militarized police force at home and a more repressive security state. Perpetual war will mean more refugees who will be treated as the newest scapegoats so the U.S. public will never focus on the U.S. war policies themselves.

Plus, perpetual war will make nuclear war more likely. Even now, we’re hearing cavalier talk on the campaign trail with presidential candidates eager to challenge Russian planes over Syria, including Clinton’s scheme for a “no-fly zone.”

Yet, there’s a hunger among many Americans for another course and a revulsion against what the U.S. foreign policy establishment has been selling. The Republican candidates leading in the polls are those who – whatever their other
faults — are viewed as being the furthest away from this establishment.

Grassroots groups, like *Come Home America*, have tried to bring the left and right together against never-ending imperial wars. But elections undercut such movements, with people constantly pushed to focus on symptoms of policies gone wrong, like the Syrian refugee crisis, without looking at the underlying disease, perpetual war.

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