Fearing Sanders as ‘Closet Realist’

Exclusive: To Washington’s neocons like David Ignatius, Sen. Sanders should be disqualified as a presidential candidate for being a “closet realist.” Sanders seems not to accept their forced “regime change” in Syria, nor their plans for more “nation building” like the neocon handiwork in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

How little Official Washington’s neocon-dominated foreign policy elite has learned from the past couple of decades can be measured by reading the last line of Friday’s Washington Post op-ed by David Ignatius, supposedly one of the deeper thinkers from the American pundit class.

Ignatius writes, regarding the Syrian mess, “It’s never too late for the United States to do the right thing, which is to build, carefully, the political and military framework for a new Syria.”

Reading Ignatius and other neocon-oriented policy prescribers, it’s as if Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya not to mention other failed states following U.S. interventions never happened. Just like Iraq was a cakewalk, Syria will be one of those child puzzles with only 24 pieces, easy to assemble and reassemble.

Though Ignatius doesn’t get into the nitty-gritty of his nation-building scheme, it should be obvious that for President Barack Obama to “do the right thing” in Ignatius’s way of thinking, the U.S. military would first have to invade and occupy Syria, killing any Syrians, Iranians, Russians and others who might get in the way. Then there would be the tricky process of “carefully” putting Syria back together again amid the predictable IEDs, suicide bombings and sectarian strife.

One is tempted to simply dismiss Ignatius as not a serious person, but he is considered part of the crème de la crème of Official Washington’s current foreign-policy establishment. He’s sought after to moderate foreign policy conferences and he pontificates regularly from the well-read pages of The Washington Post.

But he is really just another example of how dangerous it was for the American people to exact no accountability from the hubristic neoconservatives and their “liberal interventionist” sidekicks for their many disastrous miscalculations and war crimes.

If Americans still had pitchforks, they should have chased down this arrogant
elite for inflicting so much pain and bloodshed on both the people of these
tragic countries and on the U.S. soldiers who were dispatched so casually to
make the benighted policies work. There’s also the little issue of the trillions
of dollars in taxpayers’ money wasted.

But the neocons are impervious to criticism from the “little people.” Within the
neocon “bubble,” the Syrian crisis is just the result of President Obama not
intervening earlier and bigger by shipping even more weapons to Syria’s mythical
“moderate” rebels.

No one ever wants to admit that these “moderates” were always dominated by Sunni
jihadists and by 2012 had become essentially their front men for receiving
sophisticated U.S. weapons before passing the hardware on, willingly or not, to
Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front, Islamic State and other extremist groups.

Read, for instance, a remarkable account from veteran foreign affairs writer
Stephen Kinzer, who describes in a Boston Globe op-ed the reign of terror that
the Syrian rebels have inflicted on the people of Aleppo, while the mainstream
U.S. news media painted pretty pictures about these noble insurrectionists.

Kinzer scolds his media colleagues for their malfeasance in reporting on the
Syrian crisis, writing: “Coverage of the Syrian war will be remembered as one of
the most shameful episodes in the history of the American press. Reporting about
carnage in the ancient city of Aleppo is the latest reason why.”

Another inconvenient truth is that the “moderate” rebels of Aleppo operate hand
in glove with Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front. So much so that a proposal for a partial
Syrian cease-fire failed because U.S. diplomats wanted to extend its
protections to Al Qaeda’s forces, also known inside Syria as Jabhat al-Nusra.

As The Washington Post’s Karen DeYoung nonchalantly mentioned deep inside a
story on Saturday, “Jabhat al-Nusra, whose forces are intermingled with moderate
rebel groups in the northwest near the Turkish border, is particularly
problematic. Russia was said to have rejected a U.S. proposal to leave Jabhat
al-Nusra off-limits to bombing as part of the cease-fire, at least temporarily,
until the groups can be sorted out."

In other words, the cease-fire plan is being delayed – and possibly killed –
because the Obama administration doesn’t want the Syrian army and the Russian
air force attacking Al Qaeda.

This strange reality underscores reporting by Mideast expert Gareth Porter who
wrote that “Information from a wide range of sources, including some of those
the United States has been explicitly supporting, makes it clear that every
armed anti-Assad organization unit in those provinces [around Aleppo] is engaged
in a military structure controlled by Nusra militants. All of these rebel groups fight alongside the Nusra Front and coordinate their military activities with it.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Risking Nuclear War for Al Qaeda.”]

Believing in Unicorns

However, to be accepted in Official Washington as a profound thinker, you must believe in the unicorns of “moderate” Syrian rebels, just like earlier you had to accept as “flat fact” that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was lying when he denied having weapons of mass destruction and that Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi was lying when he claimed to be under attack by terrorists.

But what is truly remarkable about these Washington “wise men and women” who are so unwise is that they simply move from one catastrophe to the next. The journalists and columnists among them routinely get basic facts wrong but are never fired by their editors and publishers, presumably because the editors and publishers are kindred ideologues.

And the neocon/liberal-hawk politicians also float above any meaningful accountability for their grotesque misjudgments and for their contributions to war crimes. On the Republican side, all the establishment candidates the likes of Marco Rubio, Jeb Bush and John Kasich favor doubling down on neoconservative foreign policies as they prove how “serious” they are.

On the Democratic side, the reputed frontrunner, Hillary Clinton, not only voted for the Iraq War but promoted similar warmongering as Secretary of State, pushing for a senseless escalation in Afghanistan, masterminding the mindless Libyan operation, and blocking any timely peace initiatives in Syria.

Her supporters may call her a “liberal” or “humanitarian” interventionist but there is no discernible difference between her policies and those of the neocons. [For details, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Hillary Clinton and the Dogs of War.”]

There may be some hope from the anti-establishment candidates Donald Trump on the Republican side and Bernie Sanders in the Democratic race but that’s mostly because they have steered clear of precise foreign policy prescriptions. They have, however, decried the Iraq War and suggested that collaboration with Russia makes more sense than confrontation.

Not surprisingly then, Washington’s neocon-dominated foreign policy elite has been scathing toward both men, seeking to marginalize them so far from the mainstream that aspiring pundits and academics with hopes for professional advancement will obsequiously vouch for the diplomatic chops of Hillary Clinton and the seriousness of the GOP establishment contenders.
Sniffing Out ‘Realism’

As for Sanders, David Ignatius has detected a clearly disqualifying characteristic, that the Vermont senator may be, gasp, a “closet realist.”

On Feb. 12, Ignatius raised that shocking possibility in another Washington Post column: “Is Bernie Sanders a closet foreign policy ‘realist’? Reading his few pronouncements on foreign policy, you sense that he embraces the realists’ deep skepticism about U.S. military intervention.”

Having sniffed out this foul odor of “realism,” Ignatius further asks, “Now that Sanders has nearly tied Clinton in Iowa and won New Hampshire, there’s a real possibility that he may emerge as the Democratic nominee. And the question is: How scared should mainstream Democrats be about Sanders as a foreign policy president?”

That’s right, how scary would it be if there was a “realist” in the White House?

But Ignatius observes that President Obama already has demonstrated some of the same disturbing “realist” traits although Sanders might be even worse. The pundit prognosticates, “If I had to guess, I’d say that Sanders would continue and reinforce President Obama’s wary approach to using force, whereas Clinton would be more hawkish. But that’s just a guess. Perhaps Sanders would be far more dovish.”

Like a hapless Inspector Clouseau, Ignatius then presses ahead trying to determine exactly how bad or “realistic” Sanders would be:

“Sanders’s statements on Syria suggest that he would take a position embraced by many self-described realists. His first priority, he has said, would be a ‘broad coalition, including Russia,’ to defeat the Islamic State. ‘Our second priority must be getting rid of [President Bashar al-Assad] through some political settlement, working with Iran, working with Russia.’”

Ignatius, of course, finds Sanders’s priorities troubling and pulls out an old canard to make the point, reviving the long-discredited claim that Assad was responsible for the lethal sarin gas attack outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “Was Turkey Behind Syria-Sarin Attack?” and “A Call for Proof on Syria-Sarin Attack.”]

Ignoring the lack of evidence against Assad, Ignatius writes: “Some critics would argue that it’s immoral to make replacing a leader who used chemical weapons a secondary concern.”

Yes, in neocon land, the moral thing is to accuse someone of a heinous crime
without any verifiable evidence and indeed with the evidence going in the opposite direction and then invading and occupying the country in defiance of international law, killing hundreds of thousands of its people, much like neocon policymakers did with Iraq as Ignatius and other foreign policy “moralists” cheered them on.

However, with Syria, Ignatius tells us, it would be so simple to follow up the invasion and occupation with a plan “to build, carefully, the political and military framework for a new Syria.” No wonder Ignatius and other neocons are so hostile to “realism” and to Bernie Sanders.


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**Turkey’s Perilous Crossroad**

Turkey is at a dangerous crossroad, having plunged down the bloody route of “regime change” in Syria and getting drawn deeper into conflicts with Kurds, Iran and Russia. Can President Erdogan return to the more peaceful path he once followed, asks ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

What does Turkey need to do to overcome its present foreign policy fiasco, one of the worst in modern Turkish history? The irony of all this is that those directly responsible for this mess, the team of Recep Tayyip Erdogan (now president) and Ahmet Davutoglu, (former foreign minister and now prime minister), is exactly the team that one decade ago had made extraordinary steps in creating a new, creative and successful foreign policy.

What went wrong? And how can Ankara now climb back out of the deep hole that it has dug for itself? The answer is simple: Erdogan and Davutoglu should return to their original successful principles of a decade ago, now recklessly abandoned. The overwhelmingly most urgent task is for Ankara to get out of Syria.

Turkey’s Syrian policy has done more to destroy Turkey's international position than any other single factor. But let’s be clear: Ankara is not primarily responsible for the present disaster in Syria. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is. But Erdogan has hugely exacerbated the problem, encouraged radical jihadist
elements fighting in Syria, helped stir up sectarian passions, and mishandled the Syrian Kurds.

All these policies have damaged relations with countries that really matter for Turkey: Iran, Iraq, Russia, China, the U.S., the European Union, Kurdish communities, and of course relations with Syria itself. Instead Ankara has opened a dubious, dangerous and futureless coalition with Saudi Arabia. And it has created a damaging confrontation with Russia in which Turkey is already the loser.

What should Ankara now do?

1. Acknowledge the reality that Assad is not going to fall anytime soon, even though that was a reasonable assumption after the outbreak of an uprising against him in 2011. Turkey must abandon the obsessive effort to overthrow him. Russia, the U.S., the E.U., China, Egypt and even large numbers of Syrians now correctly believe that what might come after Assad is likely to be far worse than Assad. Turkey has little to gain and much to lose in continuing this fruitless struggle.

2. Work with the major powers to bring about a peaceful solution in Syria: working with the U.S., Russia and the E.U., and rejecting Saudi Arabia’s absurd vision of a massive international Sunni army seizing control of Damascus.

3. Return to Ankara’s earlier policy of standing above sectarian struggle in the region. Turkey is predominantly Sunni, but it has large Shiite and Alevi (quasi-Shiite) populations. Turkey has not really sought to be the champion of Sunni Islam for several hundred years. Indeed, Turkey gained respect and clout when it sought to act impartially between Sunni and Shia groups a decade ago. It should play no favorites in that capacity now.

4. Work to improve its relations with Iran. Iran’s role in the region is growing steadily. It is vital to Turkey strategically and economically. It is a democracy in the making. Relations were seriously damaged when Turkey went all out to overthrow Assad, an ally of Tehran.

5. Work closely with Iraq to help overcome sectarian problems, not simply as a supporter of Sunnis in Iraq. Turkey does not benefit from a divided Iraq. Nor does Iran, which would prefer to exert its influence in a united and stable Iraq. Turkey is well equipped to help bring sectarian reconciliation about in Iraq, with its excellent economic relations with Baghdad and shared interests in the wellbeing of Iraqi Kurdistan.

6. Back away from strategic ties with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia rejects everything that Turkey claims to value: moderate Islam, religious and ethnic tolerance, non-sectarianism, non-intervention, democracy, globalizing markets, cultural attractiveness and soft power. Saudi Arabia,
however, seeks only to draw Ankara in to be a Sunni champion and ally against Assad, against Iran, against the Iraqi Shiites and the Zaydi Shiites in Yemen.

7. Cooperate with the other Gulf States, as long as it is on a *non-sectarian* basis. Ties with Qatar, in particular, could be productive.

8. Place priority on restoring Turkish relations with Russia. Stop trying to drag NATO into unwise confrontations with Russia. The reality is that Moscow’s entry into the Syrian equation has all but eliminated Ankara’s options and freedom of action there. And Ankara cannot defeat Russia diplomatically. Furthermore, like it or not, Moscow is in fact well-positioned to forge a political settlement in Syria.

If Turkey undertakes the policy shifts outlined above, its relations with Moscow will automatically improve.

9. Devote priority to close relations with all *Kurdish elements* in the region. Turkey, through the wisdom of its earlier policies, had won over the Iraqi Kurds as a close ally. But Erdogan has allowed his earlier path-breaking rapprochement with the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey, the PKK, to collapse. Ankara has refused to deal with the Syrian Kurdish movement, one of the few effective fighting groups against ISIS in Syria. It may be sliding into a general war against the Kurds which it might be able win on the battlefield but will assuredly lose politically.

Growing Kurdish power in the entire region is a reality, it has been on an upward curve for the last 25 years, invariably benefiting from each regional conflict to achieve greater de facto autonomy and world awareness. If Ankara is determined to stop Kurdish progress towards greater autonomy, anywhere in the region, it will only alienate the Kurds; above all such a posture will only *hasten* the emergence of greater Kurdish political, economic and cultural demands. Efforts to block this process of Kurdish emergence will not only fail, but will guarantee an uglier and more dangerous relationship for Turkey and the entire regional Kurdish reality long into the future.

Ironically, handled right and granted broader autonomy, most Kurds will inevitably look to Turkey as a regional protector, economic entrepôt and cultural magnet, as long as Ankara does not alienate them. Where else could the Kurds look for valuable geopolitical ties in the region?

Ankara deserves great credit for having moved generously and humanely to accommodate more than 2½ million Syrian refugees inside Turkey. When Syrian domestic violence finally begins to end, many Syrians will go back home, but not all. This could be a problem for Turkey, but also a benefit.
The Ottoman tradition included an important role for Arabs within imperial rule. Today Turkey can only be enriched and strengthened through the acquisition of new Turkish Syrian citizens who can facilitate Turkish entree into the Arab world. Turkey is, after all, multinational already with huge numbers of other ethnic groups, from the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Balkans. A stronger Arab voice and expertise will only add to Turkey’s regional clout, economic access, and skills.

Finally Turkey should cooperate with Washington where it can, but only to the extent that Washington’s own policies in the region are wise and productive. Since 9/11 (and arguably even much before) U.S. policies in the Middle East have been disastrously bad, failing and destructive. Ankara would not cooperate.

President Obama in recent times, however, has dialed back the level of U.S. intervention and aggressiveness, especially now in Syria. If Ankara can undertake all these policy shifts its relations with Washington will much improve. That is assuming the next American president approaches the Middle East with wisdom, for which there is little guarantee.

All this also assumes that Erdogan will act wisely and not sacrifice Turkey’s foreign policy interests to his own reckless and divisive drive for greater personal power. Erdogan’s personal interests are not synonymous with the Turkish national interest.

Erdogan had once embraced and implemented Ataturk’s wise adage: Peace at home and peace abroad. Now he has abandoned those principles and is left with neither.

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America’s Slide toward Failed State

The blanket refusal of Senate Republican leaders to consider President Obama’s choice to succeed Justice Scalia reflects a descent of the United States toward the kind of dysfunctional failed state that Washington normally upbraids, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

We Americans, usually quick to judge other societies by American standards, can
become more self-aware by reversing the direction of the comparison and thinking of what the attributes of other nations might highlight about our own deficiencies.

Such comparisons can work in either of two ways. One is to observe how far the United States has fallen behind others in endeavors at which others excel and set the standards. Investment in transportation infrastructure, for example. Ride a train in Switzerland after riding one in the United States and the point becomes clear.

The other sort of comparison is to examine the troubles of other countries that are deeply troubled, with an eye toward identifying underlying problems that might also be found in the United States even though the United States has not gone as far down the troubled path, at least not yet. There is no shortage of countries, from Syria to Somalia to South Sudan, that we commonly label as politically unstable and that present grief for their own citizens, challenges for U.S. policymakers, and fodder for foreign policy pundits.

An attempt to identify underlying problems can come up with many things, involving the structure of civil society, ethnic divisions, and the like. But two very fundamental necessities for stable liberal democracy are in short supply in those trouble lands. One is the acceptance as legitimate of interests and viewpoints different from one’s own. Such acceptance does not preclude continued sharp differences. Recognized legitimacy is not the same as agreement. Opposing political positions can grow out of different interests or different views about the best way of pursuing a shared interest. Either way, what is required is acknowledgment that one’s own side in a political contest does not necessarily have a monopoly on what is just, wise or moral, and that those on the other side have as much right to be part of the contest and of the give-and-take that feeds into national policy.

The other big necessity is a commitment to the entire political system that is greater than commitment to any of the particular interests or objectives that get pursued through that system. This does not just mean an avowing of patriotism; expressions of nationalist sentiment are easy to come by even in troubled and unstable nations. What is needed is acknowledgment and genuine belief that the health and smooth functioning of the entire system are of paramount importance and that without them those more parochial interests could not be effectively pursued anyway.

The Republican posture of keeping the U.S. Supreme Court short-handed for a year, and thereby screwing up not just one but two terms of the court, solely to deny an appointment to the incumbent president and to try to hand that power to
a hoped-for Republican successor, is the latest and most salient of several episodes that indicate a growing shortfall in the United States of these two essential conditions for stable liberal democracy.

There have been other episodes occurring with increasing frequency in recent years. These include blanket rejection, begun even before Justice Antonin Scalia’s death, of anyone Barack Obama would nominate as an appellate judge. They include automatic opposition to the President’s most important legislative initiatives, as seen most vividly with health care, on which the opposition has become an obsession pursued without regard to the conceptual origins of the particular legislation or its actual effects once enacted. And they include the use of extortion, with threats involving default on debt or shutdown of government, in pursuit of some matter involving the budget or a social issue.

This pattern exhibits a lack of the first requirement involving an acceptance of the opposing side’s legitimacy. The outlook involved has been clear on an issue such as abortion, in which an opposing side get defined as not just wrong but as immoral. The outlook also has been applied personally to Barack Obama more than to any other U.S. president in modern times.

Suffusing through much of the reflexive opposition to his policies, and punctuated by the birther nonsense, has been a sense that he is somehow, well, not quite one of us and not quite a real American, that he is less a legitimate occupant of the Oval Office and more of a transient interloper there. To what extent this attitude is due, as many African-American supporters of Mr. Obama believe, to his race is impossible to determine definitively, but the attitude is too obvious to ignore.

The pattern also exhibits a shortfall in the second key requirement of stable liberal democracy, the greater value that must be placed on the political whole than on any more parochial interests. This shortfall is obviously present with the extortionate tactics involving damage to the nation’s credit rating or to the operation of the entire government, as it is now with tactics threatening to cripple the Supreme Court.

All of this goes beyond the damage that is due to intensified partisanship, which also has become worse in the United States over the past couple of decades and is bad enough just by itself. We are talking here about something more fundamental, and something that is alike in kind to what underlies the instability in any number of politically unstable countries on other continents.

The corresponding problem in the United States, though alike in kind, has not become alike in degree to those archetypical unstable countries from the Third World, again, not yet. But the trend is in the wrong direction, and those who
care about the health of American democracy ought to be worried about that trend.

American citizens who do care, and at least as much, those who have been participating in some of the disturbing episodes mentioned above, ought to look at those unstable countries abroad and think the following thoughts.

First, there but for the grace of wise forefathers and other lucky circumstances of America go we.

Second, the critical ingredients of successful and stable liberal democracy are precious, not all that common in the world, and vulnerable to being lost. It may sound oxymoronic but is nevertheless true that political stability is fragile.

And finally, we need to ask ourselves continually what is more important: whatever specific policy issue has gotten people’s dander up at the moment, or having a political system, healthy and effective as well as free, that enables us to argue and compete about such issues at all.

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