

# Syrian Quagmire Baffles Democrats. “No New Ideas for Peace other than More War”

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*Democrats have no new ideas for peace other than more war.*

*None of the Democratic candidates in the October 13 debate had anything very useful to say about ending the carnage in Syria and the rest of the Middle East. The most belligerent was Hillary Clinton, wanting to stand up to Vladimir Putin’s “bullying” and establish a no-fly zone over Syria. The rest wanted more restraint on continued military action, and everyone vaguely supported “diplomacy,” with no suggestion how to get there. Additionally, Jim Webb called for confronting China over the South China Sea (the suggestion was ignored).*

Bernie Sanders called the Syrian situation a “quagmire in a quagmire” and left it at that. Unfortunately, that was the most detailed analysis from any of the candidates, none of whom demonstrated any willingness to think outside the box, or even to admit they were all thinking within a very old box that had served no one well. After decades of disastrous American bloodletting in the Middle East, the best the Democrats can offer is to maybe slow it down a little.

Certainly that’s better than Republicans, who are all gung-ho to watch the arms and legs fly and figure out whose body parts are whose later. The expansion of Russian military action in northwestern Syria has pushed Republican jingoism to the frothing stage, as if another war to end war is a mistake we need to make again.

Republican senators don’t quite have the honesty to say they’re calling for war with Russia over Syria, they just complain that President Obama isn’t doing anything to stop President Putin, as if there were some way to accomplish that short of military confrontation up to and including all-out war. [John McCain may be a former presidential nominee](#) and [Bob Corker may be the current chair](#) of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, but by berating the president for not leading the US into war against the Russians in Syria, they demonstrate once again, if demonstration were needed, that they are not serious people with the best interests of the country or the world among their priorities.

What use is a debate that avoids details and consequences?

Cautious only by comparison, Clinton’s call for a no-fly zone is just a euphemistic way of calling for going head-to-head with the Russians. Unless Clinton somehow imagines the Russians will stop flying, and will also persuade their Syrian ally to stop flying, how does Clinton expect to enforce a no-fly zone without US planes and missiles shooting down Russian and Syrian warplanes? A no-fly zone sounds bland enough, but on reflection it is clearly a stupid, ill-defined, unachievable tactic designed to give the impression of

sophisticated toughness where there is none. It is a sad measure of the quality of American presidential debates that there was no follow-up question from the moderator or any candidate as to how a no-fly-zone could be achieved, how long it would take to put in place, how long it would last, how much it would cost, or what risks it entailed.

Publicly at least, the leadership consensus in the US these days among Republicans, Democrats, Congress and the White House is that the US “has to do something” about Syria and the Middle East. What with overthrowing governments and supporting dictatorships from Iran to Libya, what with nurturing the mujahedeen in Afghanistan to bait the Russians, has the US not already done enough? Or way, way too much?

When people insist that the US “has to do something,” the first question from others, from the media, from the self-replicating governing intelligentsia, from almost everyone — the first question is the wrong question, because the first question is usually, “What?” “What,” they ask, reflexively, without stopping to reflect: “What should we do?”

“What should we do now in the Middle East?” is the wrong question

The right question is “Why?” Why should we do anything? What is there about the past 65 years to persuade anyone that the US has played a positive, peaceful role in any of the countries we have devastated? The time is long past when we might have first done no harm. Not that widespread destruction of ancient cultures is all our fault. It’s not. The US was a late arrival to supporting carnage and corruption in the Middle East, but the US has done more than its share to destroy the possibility of human happiness in too many places to be held blameless ever. We know what doesn’t work, measured clearly by the millions of people displaced, disabled, or dead.

And then there’s Tunisia.

Tunisia, despite having many of the same handicaps as other Middle East countries, has somehow managed to survive its inherent cultural and political tensions with a [collaborative effort that won the Nobel Prize](#) for Peace this year. Suffice it to say that the Nobel Committee’s award to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet honors a phenomenon unlike any in the US for decades. The Arab Spring that started in Tunisia in 2010 spread to many other countries, as the Nobel Committee noted, but:

“In many of these countries, the struggle for democracy and fundamental rights has come to a standstill or suffered setbacks. Tunisia, however, has seen a democratic transition based on a vibrant civil society with demands for respect for basic human rights.

“An essential factor for the culmination of the revolution in Tunisia in peaceful, democratic elections last autumn was the effort made by the Quartet to support the work of the constituent assembly and to secure approval of the constitutional process among the Tunisian population at large.... The broad-based national dialogue that the Quartet succeeded in establishing countered the spread of violence in Tunisia and its function is therefore comparable to that of the peace congresses to which Alfred Nobel refers in his will.”

Tunisians achieved this without significant help or interference from the US. The single national success story in the region came about without meaningful involvement by the [so-](#)

[called \(by itself\) “essential, exceptional, indispensable”](#) nation. Everywhere else that the US has engaged in the Middle East mayhem is the norm. Where the US was absent, in Tunisia, there is, for the present, a maturing, peaceful democracy.

Can you say it’s an option to do nothing? Always! First, do no harm.

Here’s the thing about US policy in Syria: having failed to find the imaginary “moderate opposition” to support, now the US is metaphorically reduced to choosing between supporting either the Kurds or the tooth fairy. Neither option promises any better results than previous efforts since 2011. And supporting the tooth fairy would at least allow the US to avoid the contradictions inherent in supporting the Kurds, who are the enemy of US NATO ally Turkey, which has once again been bombing Kurds in Turkey, Syria, and maybe Iraq and Iran for months now.

When bombs went off in Ankara October 10, killing and wounding hundreds of people, the victims were mostly Kurdish peace activists. Who carried out the bombings? Not yet known. Who benefitted from the bombings? The Turkish government benefitted from blowing up political opponents. The Islamic State (ISIS) benefitted from blowing up military enemies who are the most effective fighters against ISIS. The Kurds, who control a large swath of northwestern Syria along the southern Turkish border, have been driving ISIS slowly southward.

ISIS and other jihadi groups benefit from years of support from other supposed US allies like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. These Sunni states find it in their interest to maintain a steady flow of money and arms to jihadi elements of all sorts in a proxy struggle against the Shiite elements associated with Iran as well as the Alawites who make up the core of support for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

For no apparent rational reason, US policy in the region in the past few years has come down to a single, largely unexamined goal: Assad must go. That’s it. The US doesn’t even have the remotest idea of any kind of successor government, or even if any would be possible, short of a US occupation, which no one in the governing consensus is calling for. For a president who once wisely articulated a foreign policy principle of “don’t do stupid things,” it’s hard to imagine the US finding itself in a more stupid position than having a non-negotiable goal that it knows is unachievable by any means it is willing to employ.

What harm would come from US military de-escalation?

Militarily the US has been in a quagmire in Afghanistan since 2001, a quagmire in Iraq since 2003, and a quagmire in Syria since 2011. The conventional wisdom [articulated by President Obama](#) and others on down is that there is no military solution to Syria or anywhere else. That said, no one in authority proposes anything but more military measures.

Bernie Sanders doesn’t recommend any policy that follows the logic of his own observation that Syria in the Middle East is a “quagmire in a quagmire.” Why? No one disputed this characterization. And no one embraced it. The five Democrats gave the impression other leaders give, that they really don’t want to think about a problem to which there may be no active solution. Why take a stand when there’s no place to put your feet? When you have no good alternatives, why choose any of them?

Sanders called, as he has before, for an Arab coalition to take the lead in Syria and the

Middle East generally. An American president can't make that happen, an American president can only wait for that to happen. Meanwhile the US can stop bombing people, the US can disengage from the Saudis' criminal war in Yemen, and the US can focus on the multilateral negotiations all the Democratic candidates said they support.

The best thing to do when you're in a quagmire is to get out of the quagmire. Leave it to the Turks, the Saudis, the Russians, the Israelis, and all the other people who lack the courage and the wisdom to act like Tunisians.

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