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What Would Democrat Candidates Do About Syria?

Something peculiar happened along the way to stopping a war: in order to prevent U.S. soldiers from marching on Damascus—a real possibility according to people who don't seem to follow such things—some decided that the cause of what they call “peace” required turning a blind eye to several wars that already existed. Neoconservatives, forever on the prowl for a casus belli, would have to be denied ammunition, and, principle being far too difficult an argument in a time of competing viral sentence fragments, it would instead be the realist task of denial—of atrocities, or at least the ability to do anything about them—to stop at least one party's bombs.

It was not necessarily sinister, this modus operandi; most who indulged in it probably have hearts that bleed liberally for the poor and vulnerable. But empathy is all about location, and given the option of “Another Iraq” or doing nothing, many quite sensibly chose the latter and, less wholesomely, concluded that the best way of preventing the former was to become a partisan of the Syrian Arab Army or a defense attorney for Bashar al-Assad, eager to sow doubt while also casting blame for every regime crime on a monolithically extremist opposition that only and confoundingly uses Sarin on itself.

Regime change never came—not because any U.S. generals feared the CodePink mailing list, though. Rather, pacifists and militarists feared and desired the same things: avoiding a quagmire and preserving a status quo deemed better than any alternative, democratic or otherwise. There was an abundance of cause, and red lines crossed, but never the interest among Washington's foreign policy elites to do the only thing the anti-war left ever organized against.

When the (U.S.) airstrikes came, in 2014, they targeted non-state extremists, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. Donald Trump did lob missiles at a vacated government runway, following a Sarin attack deemed a “false flag” by legendary reporter Seymour Hersh, but he also bombed a mosque in rebel-held Aleppo, killing dozens of civilians in a war crime that never made it to a poster board. As Hersh told me when I pointed out to him that his Syria reporting had been debunked by the United Nations, “[I] have learned to just write what I know and move on.”

The same could be said for the anti-war left: Comfortable with its arguments against Another Iraq, it was content to parade its slogans and move on when the threat of U.S.-imposed regime change proved to be a smokescreen for a U.S.-led bombing campaign that killed thousands, adding to an Assad-led death toll in excess of half a million. In practice, the most stridently anti-imperialist shared the same goals as the empire to which they imagined themselves opposed; sharing the “worry,” as recounted by ex-Pentagon official Andrew Exum in recent congressional testimony, “that the Assad regime might finally collapse”—a concern that prompted efforts to achieve closer coordination with the regime’s Russian sponsor, including intelligence sharing and a joint air campaign.

By the time Trump was killing hundreds upon hundreds of civilians in a campaign more intense than anything seen since Vietnam—an artillery round fired every six minutes in Raqqa, where Amnesty International says 1,600 civilians were killed by the U.S.-led coalition between June and October 2017—this anti-war left had moved on, awakening only when the Syrian regime appeared to be threatened by cosmetic, face-saving airstrikes on empty infrastructure.

Today, while attention has turned elsewhere, war still rages in Syria. In Idlib, the last opposition pocket, dominated militarily by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, an extremist militia with ties to al-Qaeda, an uptick in barrel bombs and Russian missiles in the first half of May drove out nearly 200,000 people and killed over 170 civilians; well over a dozen health facilities have been directly targeted, according to the United Nations.

Amid this renewed warfare: general indifference. Democratic Sen. Bernie Sanders has spoken eloquently about the need for a progressive front against the threat of right-wing authoritarianism. But in a May 12 statement, he omitted Syria’s fascist leader from his list of global bad actors, focusing on the need for progressive Democrats to “end the absurdity of rich and multinational corporations stashing over \$21 trillion in offshore bank accounts”—economism, his bread and butter, the counter to reactionary appeal.

The Sanders campaign, like just about every other campaign for the Democratic presidential bid in 2020, declined to comment when I asked what, if anything, the international community should do about a war that is raging today. That's a missed opportunity to explain how grand principles would translate to action; indeed, when Vox asked Sanders how his values would be reflected in foreign policy, he advised that the interviewer, "Talk to Obama. He'll give you a better answer." Given what we know about Obama's policy, that may be all the insight one needs.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren is the only serious candidate who has had anything to say about Syria as of late (requests for comment were also sent to the campaigns of Joe Biden, Sanders, Kamala Harris, Pete Buttigieg, Beto O'Rourke, and Tulsi Gabbard). "The reports from Idlib are horrifying and heartbreaking," she told the author in an emailed statement. "Russia's support for Assad has prolonged Syria's crisis, and their callous disregard for civilian lives has forced thousands from their homes in the last week alone." Russia, she said, "must uphold international humanitarian law, abide by its commitment to ceasefire, and cease its attack on Idlib." And Trump, who she'd like to see impeached, "needs a clear strategy to end the violence and hold Assad and his protectors accountable for their violence against the Syrian people."

The statement may lack in specifics, but it exists, which is good for a bit more than nothing, and more than most of her competition can say. Foreign governments, particularly those with extensive propaganda operations, care about foreign opinion; a strongly worded statement may be the "thoughts and prayers" of security policy, but it beats the tacit condonation of a bland call for "peace" with a belligerent global power. Warren is no neocon, either: she's called for U.S. troops to get out of Syria, where they're currently acting as de-facto human shields for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), operating under a U.S. no-fly-zone in what the SDF's Kurdish leadership calls the autonomous region of Rojava. (Not regime change, so one may be forgiven for not even noticing.)

The only other Democrat to say anything about Idlib is Hawaii Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, who has reserved her fire for those who would argue that an attack on Idlib is bad—relying on the fuzzy math of the War on Terror, where the presence of some 70,000 militants justifies making life even more hellish for 3 million civilians, half of them internally-displaced refugees.

Nobody wants another Iraq, but that specter has been exploited long enough. U.S.-backed regime change was an illusion pushed by foreign states and their friendly commentators, never something seriously pursued by Obama, much less Trump. Would, then, that our commentary reflected the world as it is—and that those who wish to lead what is still the globe's most powerful government could detail how their principles would be reflected in tangible actions. An international peacekeeping force, ideally replacing Turkish and extremist forces alike, would be one alternative to the resigned acceptance of a brutal conquest that will serve as a terrible example for other authoritarians, abroad if not yet at home. If such a proposal cannot make it past the United Nations Security Council, trying would not be for naught—it would, as argued in an [open letter](#) to the institution from Syrian solidarity activists, only demonstrate the need for structural reform so that great powers can no longer veto protection for the most vulnerable. The international coalition that has been bombing Syria for nearly five years could also choose to redirect some flights over Idlib—not to strike, but to serve as a flying shield.

Is there a will for that? To ask may be to answer, but progressives should not be bound by the expectations of yesterday. Words of condemnation are better than nothing, being superior at least to quiescence in the face of the most brutal fascism yet seen in this still-young century, and better still than an overt accommodation in the name of a false peace. Consequences for the tax-evading rich, and empathy for migrants, would be a welcome inversion of the status quo, perhaps depriving some reactionaries of angst to exploit. But sometimes right-wing authoritarians, and their openly fascist allies, are past the stage of stealing votes; they have tanks and missiles that they are happy to deploy against population centers where, for example, defenseless civilians outnumber militants by about 50 to 1. Resist the allure of an easy answer, sure, but those who wish to lead the remnants of a free world should be able to come up with something more than a shrug and a pivot to slogans, however admirable the principles they reflect.

To confront an axis of mass-murdering authoritarianism—from Israel to Syria to Russia to Saudi Arabia, following its defeat in the United States—the next president will need a plan to go along with the rhetoric. It's early, but we're still waiting to see one.

This piece first appeared at [Aljumphuriya.net](#).

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