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Transcending the Clinton-Sanders Debate: The Middle East in US Foreign Policy

By Ramzy Baroud
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As US liberals and some leftists are pulling up their sleeves in anticipation of a prolonged battle for the Democratic Party Presidential nomination, the tussle becomes particularly ugly whenever the candidates' foreign policy agendas are evoked.

Of the two main contenders, Hillary Clinton is the obvious target. She is an interventionist, uncompromisingly, and her term as Secretary of State (2009-2013) is a testament to her role in sustaining the country's foreign policy agenda under George W. Bush (as a Senator, she had voted for the Iraq war in 2002) and advocating regime change in her own right. Her aggressive foreign policy hit rock bottom in her infamous statement upon learning of the news that Libyan leader, Muammer Gaddafi, was captured and killed in a most savage way.

"We came; we saw; he died," Clinton rejoiced during a TV interview, once the news of Gaddafi's grisly murder was announced on October 20, 2011. True to form, Clinton used intervention in the now broken-up and warring country for her own personal gains, as her email records which were later released, publicly indicated.

In one email, her personal advisor, Sidney Blumenthal congratulated her on her effort that led to the "realizing" of "a historic moment" – overthrowing Gaddafi – urging her to "make a public statement before the cameras (and to) establish yourself as in the historical record at this

moment.” She agreed, but suggested that she needed to wait until “Qaddafi goes, which will make it more dramatic.”

Her rival for the Democratic Party nomination, Senator Bernie Sanders and his supporters, of course, pounce on the opportunity to discredit Clinton, which is not entirely difficult. But many have argued that, although Sanders is promoted as the more amiable and trustworthy, if compared to Clinton, his voting record is hardly encouraging.

“Sanders supported Bill Clinton’s war on Serbia, voted for the 2001 Authorization Unilateral Military Force Against Terrorists (AUMF), which pretty much allowed Bush to wage war wherever he wanted (and) backed Obama’s Libyan debacle,” wrote Jeffery St. Clair. Aside from supporting the US’ current position on Syria, Sanders has “voted twice in support of regime change in Iraq,” including in 1998.

“It should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime,” the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 read.

On Israel, Sander’s legacy is very similar to that of current President, Barack Obama. He seemed to be relatively balanced (as “balanced” as Americans officials can be) during his earlier days in various official capacities, a position that became more hawkish with time. It behooves those who argue that Sanders is the lesser of two evils to examine the legacy of President Obama, whose sympathy with the Palestinians was underscored by his friendship with the late Palestinian Professor Edward Said, and Professor Rashid al-Khalidi. The trappings and balances of power, however, led Obama to repeatedly grovel before the Israeli Lobby in Washington DC, and he has stalwartly backed Israel’s wars against Gaza. More Palestinians died at the hand of Israel during Obama’s terms than those killed during the administration of W. Bush, who was an adamant supporter of Israel. Still, the current administration is negotiating an increase in US funding of Israel to exceed, and by far, the current 3.7 billion dollar a year.

As odd as this may actually sound, as First Lady, Clinton, too, was criticized for not being firm enough in her support for Israel, before shifting her position in supporting Israel, right or wrong, just before she eyed a Senator position representing the State of New York.

Not that many are ignorant of Sanders’ less-than-perfect past records, but some are rushing to Sanders’ side because they are compelled largely by fear that a Clinton White House would spell disaster for the future of the country, not just in the area of foreign policy, but domestic policies as well.

It is this train of thought that has compelled leading Leftist professor, Noam Chomsky, to display support for Sanders, and, if necessary, even Clinton in swing states to block Republican candidates from winning the presidency.

Chomsky, of course, has no illusions that Sanders’ self-proclaimed socialist title is even close to the truth. He is not a socialist, said Chomsky in a recent interview with Al Jazeera, but a “decent,

honest New Dealer.” Thanks to the massive repositioning of the American political system to the Right, if one is a New Dealer, one is mistaken for a “raving leftist.”

To a degree, one can sympathize with Chomsky’s position considering the madness of the political rhetoric from the Right, where Donald Trump wants to ban Muslims from entering the country, and Ted Cruz is advocating “carpet bombing” Middle Eastern countries to fight terrorism. But, on the other hand, one is expected to question the long-term benefit of the lesser of two evils approach to permanent, serious change in society. Chomsky had, in fact, made similar statements in previous presidential elections, yet America’s foreign and domestic policies seems to be in constant decline.

If seen within the larger historical context, US foreign policy, at least since the end of the Second World War, has been that of “rolling back” and “containing” perceived enemies, “regime change” and outright military intervention. The tools used to achieve US foreign policy interest have rarely ever changed as a result of the type of administration (the lesser of two evils, Democrat, or a raging Republican) but varied, largely based on practical circumstances.

The rise of the Soviet Union as a global contender after WWII, made it difficult for the US to always resort to war as a first choice, fearing an open confrontation with the pro-Soviet bloc and possibly a nuclear war. It was Henry Kissinger that helped navigate America’s imperial interests at the time, resorting to most underhanded and, often, criminal tactics to achieve his goals.

But the demise of the USSR has opened up US appetite for global hegemony like never before. The US’s interventionist strategy became most dominant throughout the 1990s, to the present time. If Republican or Democratic administrations differed in any way, it was largely in rhetoric, not action. Whereas Republicans justified their interventions based on preemptive doctrines, Democrats referenced humanitarian interventionism. Both were equally deadly and, combined, destabilized the Middle East beyond repair.

The Presidency of Obama is hardly a significant departure from the norm, although his doctrine – “leading from behind”, at times and aerial bombardment as opposed to “boots on the ground” and so on – is mostly compelled by circumstances and not in the least a departure from the policies of his predecessors.

While US administrations change their tactics, infuse their doctrines and adapt to various political conditions, wherever they intervene in the world, massive, complex disasters follow.

Clinton might have come, saw and Gaddafi was brutally murdered, but the country has also descended into a “state of nature” type of chaos, where extreme violence meted out by militant brutes and managed by western-backed politicians, have taken reign.

Similar fates have been suffered by Iraq, Yemen and Syria – one sanctioned, invaded and occupied, another served as a war front for the US war on al-Qaeda, the third was groomed for intervention many years ago, in publicly available documents prepared by pro-Israel American neoconservative organizations.

Thus, it is essential that we understand such historical contexts before, once more, delving into impractical political feuds that, ultimately, validate the very US political establishment which, whether led by Republicans or Democrats, have wrought unmitigated harm to the Middle East, instability and incalculable deaths.