

In the Halls of Criminal and Deluded Washington

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Tulsi Gabbard is one brave Congresswoman. She has challenged her party and the president [saying](#) that it's time for Washington to halt its "illegal, counter-productive war to overthrow the Syrian government of Assad. I don't think Assad should be removed. If Assad is removed and overthrown, ISIS, al Qaeda, Al Nuusra, these Islamic extremist groups will walk straight in and take over all of Syria ... they will be even stronger."

Indeed, Washington's senseless policy in Syria has been hanging out there like overripe fruit for quite some time with the mainstream media instead marching at lockstep to the tune being whistled by a large disengaged and unaccountable White House. Gabbard might go one step further to ask why Syria is the way it is in the first place since that would question Administration priorities under Democrats as well as Republicans, both of which have emphasized eliminating al-Assad for no conceivable reason that has anything to do with actual American interests.

Much has been made of Washington groupthink, which is the concept that when a meeting of senior staffers is held everyone will veer towards a point of view that is being espoused by whoever called the meeting, be they the president or one of the cabinet secretaries. It is also reflected in the output of foundations and think tanks, which rely on government access as well as funding from beneficiaries of the war economy. Current groupthink, rejected by Gabbard, is that removing al-Assad is somehow an essential precondition for any settlement of Syria's torment.

Another prevalent [groupthink](#) that is sometimes linked to the Syria issue is that Russia's Vladimir Putin is somehow a reincarnation of Josef Stalin and that today's Russia is actually the Soviet Union, ready, willing and able to expand into Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Though considerable opposition to those two viewpoints can be noted in the alternative media it is not listened to in the White House.

Yet another kind of groupthink prevails within the government bureaucracies themselves, compounding the problem. From my own experience, analysts at CIA very often were scrupulous in their judgements on developments overseas but a funny thing would happen at Agency headquarters as information made its way from the ground floor up to the seventh floor where the political appointee mandarins would preside. It would become politicized and any viewpoints diametrically opposed to what prevailed at the consumer level in Congress and in the White House would be mitigated or even excised. Such is the nature of bureaucracy, which exists to support the status quo and inter alia requires a satisfied audience to prosper.

And the press fails to do its part to correct the listing ship. The rubbish that appears in the mainstream media under the rubric of "informed opinion" bears a large part of the blame because it continues to create a mythical magical kingdom in which Americans all wear white hats and go about slaying dragons because it is good for the whole wide world, even if those heathens don't appreciate it. That is what Americans like to think about themselves apparently, all contrary evidence notwithstanding.

A piece on Syria that appeared in the Washington Post before Christmas exemplifies precisely what

is wrong with the punditry that shapes the narrative that appears to drive the national consensus on what to do about terrorism and related issues. It is "Obama and Kerry's wishful thinking on Syria," by Frederic C. Hof, currently a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center. Hof was an army officer who had extensive service in the Middle East. He is, somewhat uncharacteristically, an actual expert on the Arab world and speaks Arabic. He joined the State Department in 2009 after an interlude in the private sector as the President and CEO of AALC, limited company, an international business consulting and project finance firm formerly known as Armitage Associates LC. In 2012 Hof served as President Barack Obama's Special Adviser for Transition in Syria.

Hof is a bright and highly competent guy whose professional life has been closely linked to the U.S. government version of reality, a reality in which Washington calls the shots and is empowered to "draw red lines." Relative to the U.S., all other governments are either client states or adversaries who can be disregarded or bullied into compliance. In October he wrote: "With regard to ISIL, a professional ground combat component provided by regional powers is desperately needed to work with coalition aircraft to sweep this abomination from Syria and permit a governmental alternative to the Assad regime to take root inside Syria. With central and eastern Syria free of both the regime and ISIL, an all-Syrian national stabilization force can be built. Western desires for a negotiated end to the Syrian crisis would be based, under these circumstances, on more than a wish and a hope. The United States should neither seek nor shy away from confrontation with Russian forces in Syria. Moscow will not like it if its client's ability to perform mass murder is impeded. Russia will not be pleased if ISIL, its false pretext for military intervention in Syria, is swept from the table. Ideally, Russia will not elect to escort regime aircraft on their mass homicide missions. And it would be difficult for even Russian President Vladimir Putin to articulate outrage if ISIL is crushed militarily. But if Russia seeks out armed confrontation with the United States in Syria, it would be a mistake for Washington to back down. People like Putin will push until they hit steel. And he will not stop in Syria."

The op-ed is saying several things, which most likely reflect the Washington consensus on foreign policy. First, it advocates a U.S. leading role in Syria in support of a currently non-existent and unlikely to exist regional force to fight ISIS thereby creating an alternative government enabling the removal of al-Assad from power and winding up with a "Western desired" democracy. Second, it characterizes Russia as supporting "mass homicide" in Syria and urges the U.S. to confront it militarily if necessary as Moscow is intent on expansion. That means that Syria somehow has become a vital American interest, important enough to go to war with Russia.

Hof's more recent foray in the Post makes a number of similar points. First, that the Syrian civil war cannot end as long as al-Assad remains in power is described as an "objective truth" that adversaries like Russia and Iran refuse to accept. Al-Assad is described as a "barrel bomber in chief." Iran, in particular, should "grasp the chance to become a normal state." Hof likens the Syrian, Iranian and Russian leadership to Hitler thirty years ago in that they are being given a pass by the West and avers that they "know that Assad is the single greatest obstacle to a united front against Islamic State." Iran is motivated by propping up a client state while Russia is into the game desirous of "humiliating the United States by preserving Assad." The op-ed goes on to claim that delaying action for thousands of Syrians will mean "people slaughtered, maimed, stampeded, starved, tortured and raped by Assad's people" and reiterates the call for "professional ground forces...under U.S. command" to deal simultaneously with both al-Assad and ISIS.

Given all of the above, it is no wonder that many of us find American foreign and national security policy incomprehensible. First of all, by what Act of God does the United States have a Special Adviser for Transition in Syria? Why does that position even exist? How the White House react if the Chinese or Russians were to create a similar bureaucracy tasked with subverting the manifestly

corrupt U.S. institutions and even arming “rebels” to do the job?

One suspects that antagonism towards Damascus is rooted in the fact that the United States government have been working hard in a neoconservative driven effort supported by Israel to subvert the Syrian regime ever since President George W. Bush signed the Syria Accountability Act in 2004. Al-Assad’s alleged use of chemical weapons on his own people is frequently cited as a justification for armed intervention, but there is considerable controversy over the incident at Ghouta in 2013, with many observers believing that the attack was staged “false flag” by the rebels possibly aided by the Turkish intelligence service to implicate the Syrian government. And it is easy to forget that before Syria under al-Assad became an enemy it was considered friendly, having participated in the U.S. led coalition that ousted Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991 and also having supported Washington’s counter-terrorism “rendition” program post-9/11.

It is simplistic to see everything as a problem created by the Syrian government, Russia and Iran, all of whom have been described as “adversaries” of the United States even though they are actively fighting ISIS. That label would be comforting if one were a reader of the Rupert Murdoch media but Tehran’s and Moscow’s desire to stabilize the Syrian government position as a prelude to negotiations for a settlement is not exactly wrongheaded, as Congresswoman Gabbard has noted. And any narrative’s thrust more-or-less depends on where one starts. To my mind the blame for the mess in Syria and Iraq coupled with the rise of ISIS should be put squarely where it belongs: at the White House under our two most recent presidents and their advisers. The rot began in 2003 when Iraq was invaded. At that time both Baghdad and Damascus were quiet, stable and terrorist free even if they were not democracies. Neither threatened the United States and neither threatens the U.S. to this day, which makes one wonder at why al-Assad has been elevated to enemy-in-chief status by the White House and media.

The inside the beltway dismissal of Iran and Russia is classic Washington groupthink. Iran may indeed not be a “normal” nation, but that just might be due to threats against it emanating from the United States and Israel since the foundation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. We are currently witnessing the U.S. Congress and Israel cranking up the pressure to defeat implementation of the nuclear program agreement recently signed with Tehran, an effort that suggests that no matter what it does or doesn’t do Iran will never be seen as normal or even acceptable by most of the powerbrokers in Washington.

And the denigration of Russia is another given, complete with the often heard but ridiculous claim that Moscow is out to “humiliate” the U.S., which often comes coupled with a reference to Hitler. Russia may have a government that is not to our liking but it has a serious and legitimate interest in preventing the spillover of Islamic insurgency into its own heavily Muslim southern federated states. Creating a cartoon image of Vladimir Putin as someone who has to be taught a lesson even though he has in fact been a largely realistic, restrained and rational player in his foreign policy, is not a serious argument. Stating that Russia is only interested in propping up a client and enabling mass murder is both sloppy and does not allow for other considerations that might actually be both sensible and legitimate while a willingness to confront major power Russia militarily over unimportant Syria is something closely akin to madness. And attributing all the mayhem in Syria to its government is similarly myopic in that it ignores the other players on the ground, to include groups supported by America’s nominal Arab and Turkish allies that the United States calls “terrorist.”

The apparent willingness among policy makers to put U.S. troops on the ground in Syria against both its government and ISIS flies against all reason given the poor track record of White House initiated military interventions over the past fifteen years. The creation of a “stabilization force”

without any current Syrian government participation is laughable as even President Obama has conceded that the identification and deployment of “moderate rebels” is a bit of a [fantasy](#). And Syria is not taking place in a vacuum. Afghanistan is rapidly sliding back under Taliban control, Iraq is chaotic and its closest friend is Iran while Libya is anarchical. Another intervention? No thanks.

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