

The Star-Ledger

The Syria mess: Another collapsing consensus

By Paul Mulshine

July 1, 2014

I see on the Sunday talk shows that Syria is becoming a haven for terrorist groups that could strike at the United States. The same is being said of Iraq.

Meanwhile the governments of both countries are stocking up on Russian-made weapons to fight off the threat from militant Muslims intent on carving out a new caliphate that would include both countries.

Hmmm. Wasn't there a consensus inside the Beltway just a month or so ago that the best way to fight terrorism was to rid the Mideast of all those nasty dictators?

That consensus is falling apart as the U.S. now finds itself on the same side as Syrian dictator Bashar Assad in the fight against ISIS rebels attacking both countries. The Washington crowd set out to establish secular democracy in the Mideast but instead ended up fostering feuds among fundamentalist Muslims.

What a fiasco. But its roots lie not so much with the collapse of this particular consensus as with the inside-the-Beltway love affair with the very idea of consensus itself.

The Washington crowd is always seeking it. But what is called consensus inside the Beltway is often just a gentlemen's agreement to stifle debate.

I noted that recently in a column in which I wrote that the scientific consensus on fat in the diet has slowly fallen apart over the 30 years since a "Consensus Conference" in D.C. that turned out to be based on bad science.

Will the same be true with the current consensus on anthropogenic climate change? We'll have to wait till 2044 to know. But in the meantime, why shut up the skeptics?

The Beltway types have a nasty habit of doing just that. The other day I discussed this with three of the rare Washington skeptics on Syria who are now seeing their most dire predictions come true. All noted that until the threat from ISIS emerged, virtually everyone inside the Beltway agreed with the observation made in a 2011 Washington Post editorial — and later echoed by President Obama — that "Assad must go."

"The consensus for a year or two has been we must do something to overthrow him," said Doug Bandow of the free-market Cato Institute. "But this whole ISIS thing has everyone looking at each other and saying, 'Oh my God!'"

Former Vietnam Green Beret and veteran Mideast operative Pat Lang recalled being ostracized at conferences for suggesting that Assad might not be going anywhere.

"It was an article of faith in the Washington think-tank policy establishment that Assad was going to go down," said Lang. "I asked these guys continually, 'How do you know that?' The answer usually was hostile sullenness."

Chris Preble, a military expert who is also at Cato, said he finds it curious that so many Beltway insiders who consider themselves conservatives also accept the liberal notion that the U.S. can successfully micromanage the Mideast.

"There are certain problems in the world that are not conducive to being fixed from the outside," said Preble.

There are indeed. I asked him why, after all these screw-ups, so many Beltway insiders keep proposing more meddling in the Mideast.

"People who come to this town believe they can fix things," he said. "They want to take action because they believe taking action will make things better."

I think that sums up the disease perfectly. As for the cure, it would help if all of these guys would start reading their old press clippings, said Bandow. (See a prescient 2012 piece by him [here](#).)

"No one ever pays a cost for being wrong," he said. "No one ever pays a price. It's extraordinary."

My TV tells me he's right. The same Beltway pundits who got everything wrong about Iraq are still going on the same talk shows and getting everything wrong about Syria. These characters need to realize that the United States and the Syrian dictator share the same interest in defeating the rebels.

"We and Bashar al-Assad are on the same side," he said. "But the U.S. government is just not willing to admit they have to make some kind of deal in Syria."

That's something the government and the Beltway pundits will now have to admit — unless of course they want to risk seeing ISIS establish that terrorist haven running through both of those embattled countries.

Let us hope that admission is accompanied by a further admission from the inside-the-Beltway crowd that their consensus concerning their own intelligence was also in error.

ADD: Chris Christie clueless on consensus as well.

Here's a column I did in late May on our governor's endorsement of the "neo" conservative approach to foreign policy.

Recent events show how unwise it would have been for the president to act on Christie's advice. Read this quote from Christie at a May event:

"Who's out there that you will nominate to make sure that justice is done around the world, that lives are protected, and that liberty and freedom is not only protected where it is but is pushed forward in places where people merely dream of it?"

If his views on Syria are any indication, we better hope that nominee is not Christie. Here's another quote from that spiel:

"No one understands any longer who America stands with or against. No one really understands exactly what we'll stand for — and what we are willing to sacrifice to stand up for it."

Among those who failed to understand who America should stand with in the Mideast is Christie himself. He also attacked Obama for failing to follow through on what the neocons argue was a promise to attack Assad after he supposedly crossed that "red line" on chemical weapons:

"Here's something that should not be up for debate, that once you draw that red line, you enforce it — because if you don't, America's credibility will be at stake and will be at risk all over the world."

Imagine Obama had taken Christie's advice and overthrown Assad. At the moment, ISIS would be well on its way to conquering Damascus and solidifying its control over Syria and a huge swath of Iraq as well.

And over what?

There's still no solid evidence that Assad was behind that chemical weapons attack. As former CIA spook Larry Johnson argues here, that whole attack might have been a false-flag operation.

But if we'd followed Christie's advice and booted Assad, that would have been a huge blunder even by Beltway standards.