



The promise of democratic socialism? Bernie Sanders, Palestine, and US policy in the Middle East

Tamara Kharroub

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Bernard (or Bernie) Sanders is one of two remaining candidates running for the Democratic Party's nomination for the 2016 US presidential elections. Following a 34-year career in elected office and after being the longest running independent in the history of US Congress, Senator Bernie Sanders announced in May 2015 his candidacy for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination.

From an unlikely contender, Sanders's poll numbers have been rising steadily. Starting his presidential campaign at 3% in the polls, Sanders went on to virtually tie with Hillary Clinton in the nominating race in Iowa and win the New Hampshire democratic primary— in what Sanders himself calls a political revolution. In March, Bernie Sanders won several states including Colorado and Michigan and maintained a seven-state winning streak from Idaho on March 22 through to the Wyoming caucus on April 9, 2016. In fact, a Quinnipiac University [poll](#) in December 2015 found Sanders to be more electable than Hillary Clinton against a Republican candidate and the most electable presidential candidate in either party.

As a self-confessed progressive democratic socialist, Bernie Sanders's political agenda has mostly been pro-equality and heavily focused on economic reform. From a Middle East perspective, a progressive liberal might seem to have significant potential to take US policy in the Middle East in a more positive direction, however one must look at Sanders's political record and ideologies to understand how a president Sanders might deal with the complex conditions in the Middle East today.

A political career defying the odds

Sanders's political activism started in his youth as a student at the University of Chicago in the 1960s where he was a member of the Young People's Socialist League, the Civil Rights Movement, the Student Peace Union, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. As an officer for the Congress of Racial Equality, Sanders led the first ever sit-in in Chicago's history and organized multiple sit-ins to oppose segregation in university housing, which resulted in the formation of a committee at the University of Chicago to investigate racial discrimination. He was even arrested once for protesting segregation in Chicago public schools. In addition to his civil rights activism, Sanders was active in anti-war and peace movements, and applied for 'conscientious objector' status during the Vietnam War.

Sanders first ran for elected office in the 1970s as a member of the Liberty Union (anti-war) Party, where he participated in four unsuccessful races for the United States Senate and for Governor of

Vermont, winning only 2-6% of the votes in each race. In 1981, Sanders ran for Mayor of Burlington, Vermont, and unexpectedly defeated the local six-term mayor by a mere margin of 10 votes, from which he went on to win re-elections four times serving as mayor of Vermont's largest city for eight years. Although he decided not to seek reelection in 1989, his legacy as mayor continues. As a result of his mayoral tenure, Burlington is considered one of the most livable cities in the country, and in 1987 Sanders was ranked by *US News* as one of the nation's best mayors.

During the 1980s, Sanders ran two more unsuccessful races for the US House of Representatives and the United States Senate, until in 1990 his career finally took him to the US House of Representatives as the first independent elected to the House in 40 years. Sanders was re-elected by the people of Vermont to serve in the House for eight terms. After 16 years in the House of Representatives, Sanders defeated Vermont's richest man Rich Tarrant to the US Senate, and was elected in 2006 and re-elected in 2012 (by winning 71% of the votes), where he continues to serve today. As a Senator, he rose to prominence in 2010 when he gave an eight-and-half-hour filibuster speech on economic inequality in opposition to extending the Bush-era tax breaks for the wealthy. Remarkably, Sanders has been the longest running independent in the history of the US Congress and has served a total of 34 years as an elected official (more than double the 15-year average among the 2016 presidential candidates).

Sanders's domestic political career is marked by noteworthy milestones. The 74-year old's surprising successes, within the larger political system, speak for his chances today as a presidential nominee. His consistent political philosophy, his commitment and record in civil rights, equality, and progressive liberal thought, as well as his unforeseen rise as a popular political figure, are quite remarkable. He defied all expectations and must not be underestimated in the 2016 presidential race. However, the freedom of a US president to act and implement policy changes lies largely in the foreign policy arena. With the increasingly turbulent conditions in the Middle East today, spreading across several countries in the region and greatly affecting the world at large, what would a president Sanders's Middle East policy look like?

Democratic socialism and US policy

Sanders describes his political ideology as democratic socialism. This largely misunderstood and misrepresented political philosophy has strong negative connotations in the United States. However, democratic socialism is a common way of governance in much of the democratic world, as it refers to a combination of a democratic political system with a socialist economic system. Bernie Sanders insists on adding the adjective "democratic" whenever he is 'accused' of being a socialist, in order to distinguish his ideology from the Marxist-Leninist non-democratic, government-controlled, and centralized form of socialism.

In a November 2015 [speech](#) at Georgetown University, Sanders explained his brand of democratic socialism by associating it with Franklin Roosevelt's main premise of economic rights and Roosevelt's propositions on Social Security, minimum wage, 40-hour workweek, job creation, and unemployment insurance. Democratic socialism, Sanders said, "builds on the success of many other countries around the world that have done a far better job than we have in protecting the

needs of their working families, the elderly, the children, the sick and the poor. Democratic socialism means that we must reform a political system that is corrupt, that we must create an economy that works for all, not just the very wealthy." Bernie Sanders's domestic record and current policy agendas are consistent with this ideology. He has focused his efforts on raising the minimum wage, universal health care, Wall Street reform, universal college education, affordable housing, LGBT equality, pay equity for women, and addressing institutional racism.

As the first major candidate to run as a socialist in 100 years, Sanders walks the talk - at least with regard to his plan to "keep money out of politics". Sanders prides himself in being one of very few major candidates (if not the only one) to not take donations from wealthy interest groups and not have any affiliated super PACs; he has even disassociated himself with unaffiliated super PACs through official statements and legal action. In fact, after the New Hampshire win his campaign reported having raised a record-breaking \$6 million that night alone, with an average individual donation of only \$27. Moreover, in March 2016, Sander broke new ground in raising \$44 million through online political fundraising, following a total of \$43.5 in Februarys, bringing his [total raised](#) thus far to \$184 million, 97% of which raised online. In another record-breaking action, Sanders's stance against the major pharmaceutical companies led him to become the first member of Congress to bus senior citizens to Canada to buy lower-cost prescription drugs, which according to his campaign he continues to do today with groups of breast cancer patients.

Foreign policy in the Middle East

Evidently, Sanders's brand of democratic socialism is largely domestic, and mostly concerned with economic inequalities and social justice. This disproportionate focus on domestic policy works perfectly for local office, but not for the president of the United States of America. While Sanders has a strong consistent domestic policy portfolio, his foreign policy agenda -especially with regard to the Middle East- is less impressive, and rather shaky.

Regarding military actions, Sanders voted against the use of military force in the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and against the war in Iraq in 2002. Both times, he warned that war would destabilize the region and lead to more violence. Although he has claimed to be anti-war, he did support the use of US aircrafts in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1999, and did not support the vote in Congress to oppose the war in Afghanistan in 2001, instead he voted in favor of authorizing funds for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although Sanders has admitted that he is "not a pacifist," he maintains that war should be a last resort. "I supported the war in Afghanistan, I supported President Clinton's effort to deal with ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, I support air strikes in Syria," Sanders said in October 2015. Overall, his voting record suggests that a president Sanders would be reluctant to use military force in the Middle East, although -despite his claims- he is not considerably less hawkish than Hillary Clinton.

With regard to Syria and the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh), Sanders has repeatedly declared the need for the United States to defeat ISIS, although he remains cautious about further US involvement in the Middles East and wary of repeating past failures. He often

echoes the usual calls for a US-led and supported regional coalition, and for Arab allies and “wealthy and powerful Muslim nations” to invest more in the fight against ISIS. However, much like the other candidates, Sanders has no practical plan for getting rival regional powers to work together or how to address the global geopolitical and economic dimensions of this conflict. In his most detailed outlines, Sanders would like to work with Iran and Russia to defeat ISIS, he prefers diplomacy in dealing with Iran, and he thinks Russian president Putin is going to regret strikes in Syria! Sanders also does not support US ground troops in Syria and was very critical of president Obama’s proposition to strike the regime after Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad was reported using chemical weapons against civilian populations just outside Damascus. Sanders’s opposition to US military involvement is based primarily on his concern about further US spending on another unnecessary war in the Middle East.

Overall, Sanders’s foreign policy agenda is haphazard, flimsy, incoherent, and hesitant. In September 2015, he even apologized during a meeting in Iowa for not having a well-developed foreign policy program. He seems to answer every foreign policy question with reciting the story of the time when he voted against the war in Iraq and his associated (seeming) ability to make better judgments (than Hillary Clinton).

While Sanders does not favor US military involvement in the Middle East, his alternative policy options are not promising. Sanders’s view of the Middle East is rather isolationist, even elitist. His foreign policy discourse is dismissive of Arab countries and peoples, and is only short of calling the Middle East an explosive mess that should be avoided at all cost. Sanders is not willing to admit (and act on) America’s responsibility in the chaos taking place in the Middle East today. Despite Bernie Sanders’s passionate human rights and social justice rhetoric, a president Sanders is unlikely to take any significant action regarding the Middle East.

The curious case of Palestine

Up until recently, Bernie Sanders’s responses have been to questions about Palestine and Israel have been deeply uncomfortable – at best. What has been Sanders’s record regarding Palestine, and how would a president Sanders deal with one the most important and longest-running conflicts in the world today?

To begin with, Sanders’s Jewish background has led him to Israel in his early 20s, where he spent few months on a *Kibbutz*. Although some detective work might be needed to find this information, a recently [referenced](#) article from the 1990 *Haaretz* archives confirms that in 1963 the young Sanders volunteered at *Sha'ar Ha'amakim*, which was then run by the socialist (leftist Zionist) movement *Hashomer Hatzair*. What most media reports failed to mention is the fact that *Sha'ar Ha'amakim* was built in 1935 over the destroyed Palestinian village *El-Harthiyeh* (or *Hartieh*), from which 60 Palestinian families were forcibly evicted and displaced as part of the Zionist ethnic cleansing and state-building project in Palestine (the *Nakba*). Moreover, although the *Hashomer Hatzair* movement is often portrayed as liberal progressive, *Hashomer Hatzair* was active in the Zionist colonialist project in Palestine, and its members served in the Jewish terrorist militias *Palmach* and *Haganah* in the 1940s. While the *Haaretz* article reports that Sanders lost his connection to “Israel, Zionism, and Judaism” after this period, there is no evidence for this

claim. However, the fact that Bernie Sanders has not been vocal about his time in Israel and his campaign's reticence to comment on the subject might indicate Sanders' discontent or even shame about this experience. There are no reports that he ever went back to Israel.

In fact, during his earlier political career, Sanders expressed strong criticisms against the State of Israel. In 1988, during a [press conference](#) endorsing Jesse Jackson's campaign for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, Bernie Sanders strongly criticized Israel's treatment of the Palestinians. "It is an absolute disgrace, it goes without saying, soldiers of any nation especially an occupying power, are not allowed under any moral code to break the arms and legs of people, that is absolutely unacceptable period. And that type of behavior must be condemned" Sanders said. After some pressure from the audience, he even suggested that the United States could use its "clout" of military aid to induce change, "or else you begin to cut off arms." It was even reported later in the same year that Sanders said "the policy that Israelis shoot people is unacceptable. It is wrong that the United States provides arms to Israel." There are also reports that Sanders advocated "no guns for Israel" in the 1970s (a sentiment he also reportedly repeated in 1988 when he was running for a seat in US Congress), and that he called for "a Palestinian Homeland" in 1990. Actually, at the beginning of his congressional career, Sanders voted in 1991 to withhold \$82.5 million in US aid to Israel unless it stopped its settlement activity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In 2001, he refused to support a House resolution blaming Palestinians for all the violence. In 2004, Sanders opposed a resolution supporting Israel's annexation wall in the West Bank, deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice.

However, as his congressional career progressed, Bernie Sanders became increasingly less vocal about Palestine and Israel. In July 2014, Sanders did not oppose a bill endorsing Israeli war crimes in Gaza, which was passed unanimously in the US Senate (79 signed, 0 objected). Although he was among 21 Senators who did not sign the bill, Sanders did justify Israel's actions by endorsing Israel's claim of avoiding civilian casualties, despite UN investigation's reports that confirmed Israel's unjustified targeting of residential areas. When confronted by constituents at a [town hall](#) meeting in August 2014 asking him to oppose Israel's war against Gaza, Sanders blamed Hamas and Palestinian provocations for the attacks. "You have a situation where Hamas is sending missiles into Israel" Sanders said, "They're coming from populated areas. That's a fact." When asked if the Palestinians have the right to resist and why he did not condemn Israel's actions, a frustrated Sanders said "Excuse me! Shut up! You don't have the microphone," after which he quickly diverted the conversation to talking about ISIS. In another recent occasion in October 2015, activists holding banners that read "Will ya #FeelTheBern 4 Palestine?" were thrown out of his rally in Boston. Also during his presidential campaign in 2015, his campaign spokesperson denied Sanders ever called for cutting military aid to Israel. Over the years, Sanders has repeatedly deflected questions about Palestine and Israel by saying "I don't have a magical solution."

While Sanders was the first Senator to announce boycotting Benjamin Netanyahu's March 2015 address at the US Congress and he has been by far the most vocal about Palestinian rights among US politicians, his failures to act according to his beliefs speak volumes. Bernie Sanders failed to oppose Israel's continuous violations of Palestinians' rights and, instead, justified Israel's ethnic cleansing practices. Sanders's positions regarding Palestine/Israel seem to have shifted in a way that contradicts his political philosophy and his original views in the last century and the first

decade of the current century. As a progressive democratic socialist, Sanders's supporters are very progressive and liberal young people and minorities, two major groups among democrats that have expressed strong discontent with the United States' biased policy towards Palestine and Israel. Being better than Ted Cruz or Hillary Clinton is not enough!

Although Sanders is among very few presidential candidates and politicians who have not accepted donations from large pro-Israel donors like Haim Saban and Sheldon Adelson and have not spoken at AIPAC conferences, he seemed to have succumbed to certain pressures – most likely regarding issues of electability as president of the United States. His presidential campaign's statement regarding Palestine and Israel echoes the official US policy's support for the two-state solution: "Israel has a right to exist in security, and at the same time the Palestinians have a state of their own," although without discussing any practical steps to achieve this. In addition, Bernie Sanders failed to support a Palestinian unilateral declaration of statehood in 2011 when he did not object to a resolution (passed unanimously) supporting the President's opposition to and veto of a unilateral declaration of a Palestinian state. Interestingly enough, Bernie's older brother Larry Sanders (Green Party candidate in the UK) is more assertive in his positions, expressing support for BDS; the Palestinian-led nonviolent global movement for a campaign of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel until it complies with international law and Palestinian rights.

In a surprising turn, Bernie Sanders recently declined to attend the AIPAC conference in March 2016 -although it was announced to be due to a scheduling conflict- and he offered to participate via video, but the offer was rejected. While every other presidential candidate rushed to pander to the powerful pro-Israel audience at AIPAC, Sanders gave his [speech](#) from Utah discussing the Israeli settlements, the Gaza blockade and unemployment rates, Palestinian water rights, Israel's "disproportionate" attack on Gaza, Palestinians victims, and criticisms of Netanyahu's government, among other things. Although this is a first when it comes to US politicians and presidential candidates, Sanders's positions on Palestine are far from revolutionary and continue to focus on Israeli interests than justice and human rights.

While Bernie Sanders may have been the most vocal about Palestinians' rights among the presidential contenders, we should not hold our breath for a president Sanders to place any substantial pressure on Israel to comply with United Nations conventions, international agreements, or human rights. Sanders's conservative position regarding Israel seems to have shifted back to the left in his recent speech to reflect his progressive liberal base during the campaign, however it is unclear whether a President Sanders would show a serious commitment and follow through his statements with any actions. His shaky Middle East agenda is likely to generate skepticism about his ability to deal with global threats, while his socialist label would certainly deter middle-of-the-road democrats and independents. If he is to win the democratic nomination, Sanders's progressiveness must go all the way, especially in his Middle East policy agenda and on Palestine, in order to have a chance at the general elections.