

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

JANUARY 18, 2019

by ROBERT FISK
21.01.2019

Bernie Sanders, Israel and the Middle East



Drawing By Nathaniel St. Clair

If you're an American, he's still out there among the "maybe" candidates. But if you live in the Middle East – whether you're Arab or Israeli, Muslim, Jew or Christian – you should keep your eye on Bernie Sanders.

He's no shoo-in, of course – certainly not after his pitiful handover to the awful Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election. I still remember shouting "No!" myself when I heard his fans cursing his decision to stand down in favour of Clinton. But the guy just might have the guts, even the courage, to stand up to the ally to whom the US always gives groveling, uncritical, slavish, immoral support.

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

Note how at this point I don't need to identify Israel as the ally in question. Nor did I have to mention in my first paragraph that Sanders is one of the two most prominent Jewish members of the US Senate. In fact, Sanders wears his origins, race, religion, social background and integrity so easily that he comes across, even to a cynical European still living in a pre-Brexit world (just), as a patently nice guy. Unlike Donald Trump, he's sane. But unlike Obama, he's not so goody-two-shoes or optic-obsessed to think that he can fandangle voters with ageing good looks and the right heart.

It's one thing for a black candidate to go for the black vote in the US, but for an American Jew to go for the American Jewish vote is a very different matter.

Sanders' campaign is not just going to be about economics or the futility of Mexican walls. It might well be about Iran. It's going to raise a lot of questions among the Christian fundamentalists. But, most importantly of all, it's going to be about Israel. And, if this liberal intellectual is going to be a serious candidate for 2020, he's going to meet plenty of latent anti-Semitism in the United States. It took long enough for John Kennedy, the first Catholic American to become president, to shake off the claim that he would be more loyal to the Pope than to America.

Just imagine how Sanders will have to confront the same bigots when they insinuate that he's more loyal to Israel than to his own country. He's not – as one television presenter once suggested – a dual national. He's not an Israeli. He's the child of Polish Jewish immigrants.

“You know,” he told the same television host, “my Dad came to this country from Poland at the age of 17 without a nickel in his pocket. He loved this country ... I am, obviously, an American citizen and I do not have any dual citizenship.” He was, he said in a later interview, “proud to be Jewish” but not “particularly religious”. He spent time on an Israeli kibbutz near Haifa in 1963 after college graduation. So did thousands of other Americans and Europeans – and they weren't all Jewish.

Take a look through his Israel/Palestine CV, and Sanders is clearly neither an aggressive Zionist nor a liberal patsy. He's a New Deal Democrat, which is how many would judge him. Younger, leftist voters might consider him as a kind of upwardly mobile intellectual, a Chomsky on wheels – even though the great (Jewish) philosopher, activist and linguist said before the last presidential election that he'd vote for Clinton as a frontrunner rather than Sanders in swing states in a final vote to keep Trump out. Much good did that do him. But let's remember a few more things about Sanders. He's always supported the “right of Israel to exist” and its right to self-defence, and he's always condemned Palestinian

attacks on Israelis. But he's also kept away from pro-Israeli Jewish lobby groups such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) and he didn't restrain himself when he chose to condemn Israel for its illegal colonial project of building homes for Jews and Jews only in the occupied West Bank, nor when Israel has blatantly interfered in US domestic or electoral politics.

When Benjamin Netanyahu addressed a joint session of Congress in 2015 – with the usual Saddam-like standing ovations from American representatives more fearful of being critical of Israel than standing up to the lobby – Sanders skipped the speech. “He [Netanyahu] doesn't have the right to inject himself into an American political discussion by being the speaker before a joint session of Congress to criticise the United States,” he told CNN. This is breath-of-fresh-air stuff from a leading American politician, even if his 77 years gives Sanders the patina of wisdom – and thus more leeway than usual for a critic of Israel.

The 2014 Gaza war (with its usual exchange rate of 2,100 Palestinians dead, most of them civilians, for 72 Israelis) seems to have been a critical moment in the Sanders horror of Israeli-Palestinian killings. He spoke of “the Israeli attacks [sic] that killed hundreds of innocent people – including many women and children” and referred to Israel's ruthless air strikes as “disproportionate” and “completely unacceptable”. Unlike Hillary Clinton, he didn't cosy up to AIPAC by speaking at their 2016 policy conference. In the speech he would have given to them, he said that “it is absurd for elements within the Netanyahu government to suggest that building more settlements in the West Bank is the appropriate response to the most recent violence. It is also not acceptable that the Netanyahu government decided to withhold hundreds of millions of shekels in tax revenue from the Palestinians.”

But, he added, it was unacceptable for Palestinian “president” Mahmoud Abbas – my inverted commas, here, for a man who has long run out of presidential legality – to “call for the abrogation of the Oslo agreement”. This would make sense – only Abbas had actually threatened Oslo because the continued building of Jewish colonies on Arab land had already effectively destroyed the agreement. And in a later AIPAC-encouraged Senate round robin letter, Sanders appeared to give all the usual caveats to Israel, complaining that the UN delivered disproportionate criticism of Israel and demeaning the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). He later said he didn't actually write the letter even though he signed

it, which was a bit like apologising to the Palestinians after you have thrown them under the proverbial bus.

The nearest he's got to confronting the great taboo – the sacrosanct economic-military relationship between Israel and America which no candidate ever wants to talk about – was half-Chomsky and half-Obama. “What must be done,” he said, “is that the United States of America must have a Middle East policy which is even-handed, which does not simply supply endless amounts of money, of military support to Israel, but which treats both sides with respect and dignity, and does our best to bring them to the table.”

But he even got a nod of approval from that brilliant grudge Norman Finkelstein when he told J Street liberals that Donald Trump's support for a peace deal didn't amount to much. “The real question is: peace on what terms, and under what arrangement? Does ‘peace’ mean that Palestinians will be forced to live under perpetual Israeli rule, in a series of disconnected communities in the West Bank and Gaza? That's not tolerable, and that's not peace.

“If Palestinians in the occupied territories are to be denied self-determination in a state of their own, will they receive full citizenship and equal rights in a single state, potentially meaning the end of a Jewish majority state? These are very serious questions with significant implications for America's broader regional partnerships and goals.”

If you want to see what Sanders is up against in the abuse stakes from American Jews who would definitely not vote for him, you have only to glance at columnist Andrea Peyser's critique in the New York Post in 2016. “Bernie Sanders is not quite Jewish,” she wrote. “He's Jew-ish – a non-practising, anti-Israel, kinda, sorta Hebrew ... What's ‘disproportionate’ about Israel's self-preserving responses to rocket fire on civilians' heads, Bernie?” Sanders, she said, had “forged a far-left political brand, siding with Jew-haters and Israel foes, which is redundant”.

But Bernie Sanders can also dish it out. When anti-Israeli audience members interrupted him in Vermont, he told them to shut up – itself a red rag to the super-left, who immediately condemned him for being pro-Israel. He's talked about the dangers of Hamas, but he's also condemned proposed US legislation that would punish boycotts against Israel and Israeli colonies on the West Bank (the Israel Anti-Boycott Act) on the grounds that it would harm free speech in America.

He's now bashing Trump for destroying the Iran nuclear agreement, Saudi Arabia for its Yemen war and Israel for its shooting down of Palestinians on the Gaza Strip fence. He's

even critical of that imperial journalistic messenger Thomas Friedman for blaming the Palestinians for their own suffering. So things can't be that bad.

Of course we have to remember the numbing sickness of American politics; the absolute need to kowtow to power when there's no alternative; the use of the word "compromise" instead of capitulation; the personal pressures that might be used against a Jewish presidential contender. I'm not sure Bernie Sanders can resist all this. I still recall how Judge Richard Goldstone, a fine and decent man whom I wrote of two weeks ago, believed in justice for the Palestinians and wrote so eloquently of their suffering in the 2008-2009 Gaza war in his massive UN report. Yet he, after pressure on him from Jewish groups and from his own Jewish family, then recanted and turned his back on those who trusted him.

Be sure Bernie Sanders knows of Goldstone's Calvary, but he may be made of sterner stuff. The Arabs will watch Sanders, if they're wise, though they are still blinded by the Trump bauble. The Israelis, whose lives depend on their future dependence on America as much as their past reliance, may come to fear him.

One certainty is that if Sanders is up for the 2020 race, the US-Israel Middle East collusion is likely to lose its taboo status for a long time to come.