

Bernie Sanders defends American imperialism at town hall on Iran

By Tom Hall
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Last week, Senator Bernie Sanders held what was billed as a town hall meeting in the US Capitol on Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.

The discussion brought together a number of former State Department officials and think tank academics who, along with Sanders, presented an entirely conventional, pro-imperialist critique of the Trump administration's decision to pull out of the 2015 agreement between Iran, Britain, France, Germany, the European Union, Russia and China that was brokered by the Obama administration.

There are bitter divisions within the American ruling class and the US military/intelligence establishment over Trump's move. It is seen by many strategists of US imperialist foreign policy as a reckless action that will further isolate Washington from its nominal allies in Europe, encourage Iran and other regional rivals of the United States to pursue nuclear weapons, and dramatically increase the likelihood of a far wider war in the Middle East.

Among these is Trump's own defense secretary, retired Gen. James Mattis, as well as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford, who recommended remaining within the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. There are also significant US corporate interests that want to gain entry to the Iranian market and access to the country's vast energy reserves.

The Democratic Party, while criticizing Trump for being insufficiently aggressive against Syria and Russia, is generally aligned with this faction of the military/intelligence/corporate establishment. There was nothing in Sanders' panel discussion last week that contradicted the general policy line of this faction of American imperialism.

The pro-imperialist and pro-Zionist outlook of Sanders and his panelists was demonstrated by their reluctance to address the mass murder of unarmed Palestinian

demonstrators in Gaza just one day before the May 15 town hall event. While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Trump emissaries Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner celebrated the opening of the US embassy in Jerusalem, Israel Defense Forces snipers fired round after round of live ammunition at Palestinians protesting at the border fence against the illegal move. More than 60 men, women and children were killed and over 3,000 were wounded in a massacre that recalled atrocities such as Amritsar in India and Sharpeville in South Africa.

Sanders and his guests did not even raise the Israeli mass killing until more than half way through the hour-long program.

The panelists included:

* Jon Cirincione, president of the anti-nuclear weapons Ploughshares Fund. He previously served as a staffer for both the House Armed Services Committee and the Government Operations Committee.

* Suzanne DiMaggio, a senior fellow at the New America think tank, a Democratic Party-aligned Washington think tank headed by former Obama State Department official Anne-Marie Slaughter. DiMaggio has been intimately involved in US diplomatic intrigues with Iran and North Korea, and acted on behalf of the Trump administration on several visits to North Korea as late as February 2017.

* Rob Malley, president of the International Crisis Group, a George Soros-backed transnational NGO with a strong anti-Russian bias. Malley is a former member of Obama's National Security Council, where he headed the Middle East Department. He was personally involved in the drafting of the Iran nuclear agreement.

* Lara Friedman, president of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, an American non-profit that promotes a "two-state" policy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She was director of policy and government relations at Americans for Peace Now, and before that she was a US

Foreign Service officer in Jerusalem, Tunis and Beirut.

Sanders summed up the concerns animating his holding of the panel discussion in a column he published just prior to the event in the *Guardian* newspaper. He wrote: “To be clear, Iran is engaged in a lot of bad behavior, including backing dictator Bashar al-Assad’s war against the Syrian people, support for violent extremist groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, and human rights abuses inside Iran. However, if we are genuinely concerned about these Iranian policies, as I am, this is the worst possible course. *It will make addressing all of these other issues harder.*”

In other words, Sanders, along with the majority of the foreign policy establishment, views the scuttling of the Iran nuclear deal as counterproductive to the goal of subordinating Iran to Washington’s drive for hegemony in the Middle East.

The concern that Trump’s actions are counterproductive was echoed in the comments of the panelists. Cirincione began the discussion by declaring that Trump’s unilateral move had broken “the faith of our allies” and “severely damaged American credibility.”

“If the idea is to have a policy towards Iran that is going to work, there’s no way the United States can do that on its own,” Malley said, adding that the US was now in the “embarrassing” position of being opposed by most of the world in its policy toward Iran.

Aware of the deep opposition to war within the American population, the panel attempted to present Trump’s militarism as an aberration from an otherwise peace-loving US foreign policy. DiMaggio complained that Trump’s decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and his backing for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s war-mongering against Iran had undermined the United States’ supposed “role of a moderator and an honest broker” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Cirincione added, “If we had just played our normal, historic, moderating role, we might be tamping down instead of pouring gasoline on the fire” in the region.

Sanders joined in this pacifist posturing, declaring toward the end of the discussion: “I think the overwhelming majority of the American people believe that the function of the United States in global politics is to do everything it can to prevent war.”

Some of the panelists, including Sanders, made mild criticisms of the Israeli government’s massacre of Palestinian demonstrators in the Gaza Strip. However, this criticism focused on concerns that Netanyahu’s

calculated policy of mass killing would produce a debacle for the Zionist state. Cirincione worried that the slaughter in Gaza would weaken Israel’s security in the long run.

Friedman, the supposed peace activist, was the most blunt in defending Israel’s “right” to oppress and murder Palestinians. She said that Hamas’ actions gave Israel “a sometimes legitimate, sometimes not legitimate excuse to say this is all terrorism, this is an act of war, and under the laws of war we have the right to use lethal force against unarmed people, who are near the fence, which if they were to damage that fence and breach it they could come into Israel and be a threat to us.”

Neither Sanders nor any of the other panelists challenged this apology for mass murder.

Sanders is a longstanding supporter of Israel. In 2014, during the Israeli invasion of Gaza, he voted for a Senate resolution that proclaimed Israel was “[defending] itself against unprovoked rocket attacks from the Hamas terrorist organization.” When Sanders was challenged by protesters at a town hall meeting in Vermont, he shouted at them to “shut up.”

The most damning exposure of Sanders’ socialist pretensions is his support for the international war and plunder carried out by the American corporate/financial elite he claims to oppose. During his primary campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2016, he repeatedly defended Obama’s militarist policies in the Middle East and Central Asia. Asked during the campaign if he would, as president, continue Obama’s drone assassination program, Sanders replied that he would do that “and more.”

Since the election of Trump, he has fully endorsed the anti-Russia campaign of the Democratic Party, which is aimed at whipping up anti-Russian sentiment to justify a major escalation against that country, leading toward a war between the world’s two biggest nuclear powers. At the same time, his chauvinist trade war policy against China is similarly preparing the way for war against that nuclear power.

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