Sanders and the Middle East

written by Riad Azar | July 3, 2015

Regardless of one's views on whether or not the socialist left should support Bernie Sanders in his race for the White House, the momentum behind the self-described “democratic socialist” has been impressive. Beginning at 2% in April, his popularity grew to 14% in May and at last check was 32% in New Hampshire. The swelling crowds he draws in primary states are noteworthy, and his ability to connect with Americans despite his identification as a socialist is inspiring. However Bernie falls woefully short on issues of foreign policy, issues that I believe (contrary to many) will be significant factors in the Democratic primary and the General Election. If Bernie can speak truth to power on the economy, he must speak truthfully about the U.S. government's foreign policy catastrophe.

It appears that the strategy of the Sanders campaign is to focus strongly on domestic issues. A quick visit to the “issues” section of the Sanders website shows no mention of foreign policy; tackling climate change is the closest reference to a problem of global scope. This is not surprising. Sanders has tended to focus on domestic issues like getting tough with banks, transnational corporations and big money, and has rarely discussed foreign policy.

His public statements present us with either (a) an opportunity for him to jab Hillary Clinton on her voting record in favor of the Iraq war, which arguably was a successful tactic that Obama used against her to secure the nomination in 2008, or (b) a narrow isolationism akin to that of a left wing Ron Paul. On the first point, I think this strategy is inadequate; it won't work twice. On the second, I think it's unrealistic. Pulling out of the Middle East and leaving the “Muslim nations,” as Sanders calls them, to go through their own version of the European Reformation is as irresponsible as it is inaccurate. Even if the United States were to completely withdraw from the Muslim world, US support for sub-imperialist powers in the Muslim world is enough to make us responsible for what happens there in the future. In other words, one cannot plan to withdraw from the region while continuing support for Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan, and hold the belief that the support of these nations does not amount to interference.

But why does this matter? On the primary level, Clinton is known as the foreign policy hawk. Her foreign policy experience was used against Obama in 2007 to strike fear into the hearts of voters with the infamous “3 a.m. phone call” advertisement. These types of attacks matter; we should not dismiss them regardless of how inaccurate or propagandistic they are. In the case of a Sanders primary victory, the Republicans already know that they will lose if they do not at least pay lip service to income inequality. Their response has been to either (a) disavow the economic policy of the Republican establishment and become populists, like Rand Paul or Rick Santorum or (b) assert their foreign policy credentials in a world that looks increasingly threatening to the average American, to highlight other supposed strengths. Another terrorist attack, a major victory by ISIS (say, by capturing Baghdad or Damascus), and/or a buildup of military forces along the Russian border will be all it takes to rally the American people behind a candidate who they believe to be a strong commander-in-chief. While I believe these scenarios to be unlikely, I do not dismiss the propagandistic trumpeting of the mainstream media. This has been a neoliberal tactic since Thatcher and the Falklands War: ignore domestic issues by focusing on perceived foreign threats.

This comes at a time when Democrats are already feeling the sting of watching their old foreign policy guard go into retirement. As Erin McPike recently reported for the Huffington Post, John

Kerry and Joe Biden will be moving into “some form of retirement” after the Obama administration. She also points out how other Democrats who focused on foreign policy have retired: Daniel Akaka of Hawaii, Carl Levin of Michigan, and Joe Lieberman of Connecticut. For the record, I do not agree with any of the above mentioned senators on foreign policy (or much else).

But I do see an opportunity for the left to push a progressive foreign policy that does not mistakenly focus on the illusion of isolationism and the false hope of “letting them deal with it themselves.” This does not mean a reoccupation of Iraq, Syria, or any country. It does mean a complete revolutionizing in how the U.S. government should conduct foreign policy along principles such as those stated by the Campaign for Peace and Democracy, whose statement of purpose reads, “The Campaign for Peace and Democracy works to advance a new, progressive and non-militaristic U.S. foreign policy — one that encourages democracy and social justice by promoting solidarity with activists and progressive movements throughout the world. We stand in opposition to existing U.S. foreign policy, which is based on domination, militarism, fear of popular struggles, enforcement of an inequitable and cruel global economy, and — despite the democratic rhetoric — persistent support for authoritarian regimes.”

If Bernie does not have a strong grasp on foreign policy, while Clinton and the Republicans appear to have that grasp (however wrong I believe they are), and the political calculus changes to include foreign policy issues in the primary or general election, the chance that Sanders has to raise public consciousness about an alternative to US foreign policy in the Middle East (or, in the best of all possible worlds, to win an election) will be completely extinguished.

So what should Sanders say when it comes to foreign policy in the Middle East? I believe that just as Sanders speaks truth to power on the economy, so should he make public how the U.S. government's alliances with certain countries in the Middle East have failed them and created the conditions the U.S. sees itself entangled in today. These alliances exist to cement U.S. imperial power and to assuage the accumulation of greenhouse gas emitting natural resources that have become the bedrock of the capitalist global economy. I have four particular cases in mind:

- First, a critique of U.S. support for the Israeli government, an apartheid state with a record for the inhuman treatment of Palestinians both in Israel as well as in the occupied territories. The Israel-Palestine conflict has empowered Islamic extremists for decades, and automatically associates the U.S. with each horror that Israel commits, whether this is abstractly through its unquestioning support for Israel, or concretely through the use of American products to bulldoze Palestinian homes and American weapons to kill Palestinian civilians.
- Second, focusing on the U.S. alliance with Saudi Arabia. It is obvious that ISIS and the Saudi royal family have more in common than not. Saudi Arabia is a dictatorship based on Wahhabism, an orthodox and extremist interpretation of Islam, the texts of which ISIS holds as its central governing philosophy. The wealthy elite of Saudi Arabia have funded themselves into a disaster by funneling millions of dollars into jihadist groups, and only stopping when they realized that ISIS's next target is the kingdom itself. They did this to assert dominance in the region by attempting to control the arena created by the Syrian civil war. And it is not unusual for Saudi Arabia to use jihadist groups to assert its influence abroad. The 28 redacted pages of the 9/11 Commission report seem to suggest the hand of Saudi Arabia, or at a minimum the involvement of prominent Saudi families, in the attacks of 9/11.
  Saudi Arabia's influence in the region also affects Islamic doctrine, with many imams around the world struggling to support mosques that do not preach Wahhabism, while some must capitulate to Saudi-inspired dogma to keep their religious institutions afloat with Saudi cash.
- Third, Turkey, a state that to this day denies the genocide committed on its Armenian population, and continues to repress other minorities such as the Kurds. Besides allowing jihadists to travel across their border so that they too could have influence in the Syrian arena,

they police the border when it comes to allowing Kurdish resistance fighters from entering into Syria to liberate Kurdish villages from the Islamic State. A progressive critique of American foreign policy must demand that Washington pressure its Turkish ally to keep its hands off the Kurds, the most left-wing secular armed force doing battle in the Middle East today.

- And fourth, Pakistan. The relationship between the Pakistani intelligence services (ISI) and jihadist groups operating within Pakistan's borders is at best porous and at worst not a relationship at all, but an indistinguishable whole. Pakistan opportunistically funds and empowers jihadists to wage guerrilla war in its long term feud with India, and allows fundamentalist Islamists a free pass into Afghanistan. The United States understood this most glaringly when discovering that the ISI was housing Osama Bin Laden in a fortified complex since 2006. A progressive critique of American foreign policy must recognize that Washington is indirectly funding the groups who it battles with in other countries.

Leftists should not believe that sectarianism and fundamentalist Islamic extremism is the way that the Middle East naturally "is". The line of "well, they've been fighting each other for 1000 years" is as ignorant as it is stale. Rather, these phenomena should be regarded as modern creations, and almost entirely the fault of the United States and the colonial Western European powers that preceded the U.S. presence in the region. U.S. imperialism actively empowers sub-imperialist actors in the region to shape the chaos in their benefit, using, funding, and empowering proto-fascist jihadist groups as their means. Retraction from the Muslim world without a critique and reevaluation of these relationships and alliances is useless.

Can Sanders act on these critiques? Maybe, maybe not, but they must at least be recognized so that his foreign policy is cohesive and not solely a defensive isolationism. Will he be committing political suicide? Probably, but has he not already by taking a stand against Wall Street, the financial industry, and big money? It doesn't seem like he has much to lose. If he adopts these critiques into his foreign policy platform, he gives himself something to stand on when it comes time for Clinton and the Republicans to attack him on issues of foreign policy, and his perceived lack of interest in it. Part of what makes Sanders such an exciting candidate is his willingness to lay a systemic critique on the economic system, rather than blame the problems away on individuals and bad actors. He should translate this critique into his foreign policy.

Riad Azar is a member of the *New Politics* editorial board.