

Bernie Sanders says “some wars are necessary”

Tom Hall
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Since the Trump administration’s assassination of a top Iranian general brought the US to the brink of war, Senator Bernie Sanders has made frequent statements and appearances in which he has denounced the recklessness of the Trump administration and opposed a new war with Iran.

In addition to heavy activity on his presidential campaign’s social media accounts, Sanders has made the rounds of talk shows, including the “Late Show” on CBS, the “Today Show” on NBC and an interview on public radio.

This has been accompanied by the systematic promotion of Sanders by pseudo-left and left-liberal publications as the only “anti-war” candidate in the presidential election. Typical were headlines in *Jacobin* such as “Trump Wants to Drag Us Into War With Iran. Bernie Is the Candidate to Stop Him,” and in the *Nation*, “Bernie Sanders Is the Anti-War Candidate.”

Many people naturally assume that Sanders’ professed “democratic socialism” also means that the 78-year-old senator is an opponent of imperialist war. But in reality, since first entering Congress in 1991, Sanders has compiled a lengthy record of support for war and defense of the predatory interests of American imperialism.

In one politically revealing statement made during his January 8 interview on National Public Radio (NPR), Sanders declared:

“We should use our wealth and our resources, through carrots and sticks, to bring countries together, to end the kind of terrible conflicts that we are seeing all over the world, to strengthen international organizations where people can sit down and argue rather than shoot guns or drop bombs against each other.”

In plain language, this means Sanders supports the use of military power combined with diplomatic pressure to uphold an international geopolitical order that is dominated by the United States.

“Now, I’m not a pacifist,” he hastened to add. “There are times when war may be necessary. But I believe, as somebody who as a young person opposed the Vietnam War, which was such a disaster for my generation, as somebody who helped lead the effort against the war in Iraq, which was such a disaster for our younger people, that I will do everything I can to resolve international conflict through diplomacy, through

negotiations, and not through the continuation of endless wars. Enough is enough.”

When Sanders refers to “necessary wars,” he is not referring to popular revolutions against bankrupt social orders or revolts by colonial peoples against their imperial masters. He is referring instead to those wars that are “necessary” to advance the interests of American imperialism.

Sanders’ record demonstrates what he considers “necessary wars.” It includes the 1993 US intervention in the Somalian civil war, in which the US deployed death squads from the Army Rangers, Delta Force and other special forces units to the impoverished but strategically located African nation to decapitate factions opposed to the establishment of a US puppet regime. It also includes the NATO air war against Serbia in 1999, launched on the pretext of stopping the imminent ethnic cleansing of Kosovars.

In 2001, Sanders joined in a near-unanimous vote in favor of the invasion of Afghanistan. Today—now that the nearly twenty-year-long war is widely unpopular—Sanders conveniently declares that his earlier vote was a “mistake.” But he has continued to endorse US wars in the Middle East, including the US proxy war in Syria.

Sanders has also supported Israel’s repeated assaults on Gaza, imperialist war crimes made possible with the support of the United States. In a 2014 town hall meeting, Sanders shouted down an antiwar protester who challenged his support for Israel even as it was committing egregious crimes against the Palestinian population.

Moreover, Sanders has publicly voiced support for the use of assassinations and “extraordinary rendition” in the so-called “war on terror.” In 2015, when asked whether anti-terrorism policies under a Sanders administration would include drones and special forces, Sanders replied that he supported “all that and more.” In his interview with NPR, Sanders evaded answering when asked whether he would leave special operations forces in Iraq after withdrawing ground troops.

Where Sanders has voted against military conflict, as in his vote against the Iraq War in 2002, he did so along with the majority of congressional Democrats. But this did not stop Sanders from voting repeatedly for massive military spending bills in the years after the invasion of Iraq. Sanders repeatedly

describes the Iraq War as a “disaster” or a foreign policy debacle—but never as a crime, whose architects should be prosecuted.

Sanders’ support for war is closely connected to his longstanding support for trade war with China—a position that raises the danger of a shooting war with a nuclear power and the world’s most populous country. In fact, his first piece of legislation in Congress was a bill he co-sponsored with Nancy Pelosi opposing favorable trade relations with China. Since the election of Trump, Sanders has alternated between overtures of support for Trump’s trade war measures with China and attacks on Trump and even fellow Democrats for not committing sufficiently to a conflict with China.

This record is generally unknown to Sanders’ own supporters, in large part because, except for occasional verbal shows of opposition, which are designed to conceal his actual record and mislead popular opposition to war, Sanders has kept a studied public silence on foreign policy throughout his career.

But Sanders’ support for US imperialism exposes his professed “democratic socialism” as a fraud, since it is impossible to oppose the policies of the financial oligarchy at home while supporting wars fought on their behalf abroad. His support for over a quarter-century of war waged by the American capitalist class in a struggle to maintain its world dominance is the clearest indication that, beneath his left-sounding rhetoric, Sanders is a pro-capitalist politician.

A pamphlet by Keith Jones

Since the 2016 primaries, as Sanders has been elevated from the margins of the Democratic Party to one of its top public figures, he has been compelled to make more frequent and lengthy public statements on foreign policy, beginning with a major speech in 2017.

In that speech, made at the site of Churchill’s famous “Iron Curtain” speech of 1946, Sanders proclaimed his support for wars for “democracy” and “humanitarian intervention,” and pledged his support for the Democratic Party’s warmongering against Russia and Syria. By his choice of venue and his praise in his speech for presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson, the architects of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, Sanders cloaked himself in the mantle of Cold War-era anticommunism, signaling to the ruling class that he can be a reliable defender of its interests.

In his criticisms of Trump’s drive to war against Iran, he is articulating not the deep hatred of the population for war, but the tactical concerns of the Democratic Party. This is a fundamentally *pro-war* opposition, which is concerned primarily that Trump, in assassinating General Qassem Suleimani, acted rashly without making adequate preparations for a war with Iran, both from the standpoint of troop deployments in the Middle East and from the standpoint of conditioning the American public for the enormous material and human costs of such a war.

Moreover, the Democratic Party is concerned that a war with

Iran would tie up hundreds of thousands of US troops that might be otherwise deployed against Russia, which the Democratic Party sees as a more pressing and immediate adversary of American imperialism. Its demand that Trump continue his predecessor Obama’s military buildup against Russia lies at the heart of the campaign to impeach Trump and the non-stop efforts to brand him a stooge of Putin, a campaign that Sanders has supported.

Only a month ago, in the midst of their vote to impeach Trump, congressional Democrats voted to hand Trump a \$738 billion military budget, one of the largest in history. In the House, members of “the squad,” congresswomen aligned with the Democratic Socialists of America, sought to posture as opponents of war by casting meaningless votes against a budget whose passage was already secured. In the Senate, Sanders did not even make a show of opposition, deciding instead to abstain.

In promoting himself as a leading anti-war figure, Sanders is preparing a carefully laid-out political trap for the tens of millions of workers and young people who are opposed to war and deeply concerned about the devastating consequences, both at home and abroad, of a massive new war in the Middle East.

This is a repeat of the role Sanders played in the 2016 primaries. He ran in order to capture the mass opposition to poverty, inequality and war among workers and youth, which has motivated a rapid and growing interest in socialism, in order to channel it back behind the Democratic Party, where it could be trapped and disoriented.

Sanders’ endorsement in the general election of Hillary Clinton, widely reviled as a warmonger and Wall Street hack, enabled Trump to capture some of this opposition through his right-wing populism, under conditions where workers were left with no other way to register their opposition to the entire political setup.

A genuine anti-war movement must be based on the working class, in complete opposition to all of the capitalist parties and their political enablers, and on the basis of genuine socialism, which seeks to put an end to war by abolishing its source, the capitalist system itself.



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