

Bernie Sanders Demands That Israel “Lift Its Restrictions on Humanitarian Aid,” But There Are No Such Restrictions

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Bernie Sanders tweeted on Sunday about the latest outrage committed by that Oppressive Colonial-Settler State of Israel:

Palestinians in Gaza already faced hardship under a blockade. Now they're dealing with the coronavirus.

My Senate colleagues and I call on Trump to send U.S. medical

relief. And the Israeli government must also lift its restrictions on humanitarian aid.

Sanders mentions the “hardship” caused by the “blockade” imposed on Gaza by Israel. It’s curious that he never mentions the similar blockade of Gaza by Egypt – is he aware of it? – and therefore doesn’t ask the Egyptian government “to lift its restrictions on humanitarian aid.” Nor does he recognize that Israel’s blockade was imposed not out of motiveless malignity, but for understandable reasons of self-defense.

Israel’s is a very partial blockade, designed to make it difficult for Hamas to obtain certain products that can be militarily useful. Cement, for example, can be used in building the walls and ceilings of terror tunnels, or for emplacements for weapons, including the rockets that Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have been lobbing at Israeli civilians in Sderot by the thousands. The blockade does not apply, as Sanders apparently thinks, to food or medicine or any other kind of humanitarian aid. There was no need for him to demand that Israel “must also lift its restrictions on humanitarian aid.” There is not now, and never has been, an Israeli blockade of humanitarian aid. If in the past there have occasionally been shortages in Gaza of certain medicines, that has nothing to do with Israel. Sanders apparently does not realize that the Palestinian Authority orders, pays for, and receives medicines for the Gazans, and then transfers them to Gaza. The PA has been known to hold back some medicines to express its displeasure with its rival Hamas. For example, in May 2017 the spokesman for Gaza’s Hamas-run health ministry, Ashraf Al-Qidra, said that PA shipments of medicine to Gaza, especially drugs to treat cancer and cystic fibrosis, had dropped 35 percent since late March. Such acts by the PA to “punish” Hamas are strictly an intra-Palestinian affair.

Bernie might not be aware of just how much humanitarian aid Israel transfers to Gaza. Consider all the aid Israel

transferred to help the people of Gaza just before, during, and after the three-week campaign – to end the barrage of Hamas rockets on Israeli cities – known as “Operation Cast Lead, that lasted from December 27, 2008 to January 18, 2009, Israel transferred huge amounts of humanitarian aid.

On December 26, 2008, day before the operation began, Israel sent 90 trucks of humanitarian aid supplies to Gaza. Israel worked round the clock with international and private aid organizations, to ensure that the Palestinian civilians were taken care of. During the three weeks of Israel’s operation against Hamas, 1,202 trucks carrying over 29,000 tons of humanitarian aid supplies entered the Gaza Strip through Israel.

At the end of the fighting, Israel sent into Gaza 64 trucks carrying 1,530 tons of humanitarian aid (including basic foodstuffs, medicines and medical supplies, tents and generators) via the Kerem Shalom crossing on just one day. Jan 18, 2009.

That provides some indication of how careful Israel has been to look after the well-being of civilians in Gaza, even in the midst of fighting a war that was thrust upon it by Hamas.

Since Operation Cast Lead then there have been many exchanges of fire between Hamas (and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad) and Israel. At no time has Israel halted, or stinted on, humanitarian aid.

The coronavirus first appeared in Gaza in mid-March, brought by two Palestinians who had just returned from Pakistan, where even now there are still no restrictions on mosques, which have been filled to the brim by fanatical worshippers, certain that the coronavirus will not infect devout Muslims. Israel went into action. It immediately provided a thousand test kits, protective equipment and disinfectant to Gaza, with more to come. It could not provide ventilators because, like every

other infected country, it hasn't nearly enough – in Israel's case, it began with only 1,437, but after searching all over the world, now has 2,864 ventilators, for what are expected to be 5,000 critically ill coronavirus patients who require artificial respiration. In such a situation, how can Israel be faulted for not being able to send ventilators to Gaza? Neither the U.S., nor the member states of the U.N., have sent ventilators to other countries. Why should Israel be held – by the likes of Bernie Sanders – to a different, impossible standard?

Sanders does not mention the obvious: the American government should pressure the rich Gulf Arabs, which have not been hit hard by the coronavirus, to supply test kits, PPE (Personal Protection Equipment including masks and gowns), and pay for makeshift field hospitals, to Gaza. The Emir of Qatar has in the past sent hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to Gaza – money he was encouraged to send by Israel, which has been fundraising in Doha for the Gazans. That is something Sanders probably doesn't know about, and if he did, he would make certain to keep it to himself. It doesn't fit the image of Israel as the Palestinian-tormenting ogre that Sanders and his advisers would have you accept. The Emir of Qatar should be able to pay top dollar for ventilators wherever they are to be found around the world, and send them to Gaza. The Saudis are in the same enviable position – very few coronavirus cases and plenty of money to pay for ventilators. Even though they hate Hamas, which they see correctly as a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Saudis might calculate that sending ventilators to Gaza would be a public relations coup for them, and would undermine the position of Hamas.

Sanders' complaint about Israel needing to “lift restrictions on humanitarian aid” to Gaza is grotesque. There are no “restrictions on humanitarian aid” by Israel, so there are none to lift. Meanwhile, Israel sends what it can to Gaza – test kits, PPE, and medical equipment (other than

ventilators), and has also been urging the Qataris to send more money and, if possible, ventilators to the Gazans.

Bernie Sanders denounces Israel even though that most anti-Israel of institutions, the U.N., has been praising the Jewish state for its cooperation with the Palestinians – in both the West Bank and Gaza – in combating the coronavirus epidemic.

[Here](#) is what Nickolay Mladenov, the U.N.'s Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, said about the coordination between the Israeli and Palestine authorities in reacting to the COVID-19 pandemic:

In a statement released on Friday, the coordination and cooperation established between Israel and Palestine, with regard to tackling COVID-19, was described as “excellent”.

The Israeli and Palestinian authorities are continuing to coordinate their responses closely and constructively, the statement said, which is a major factor in the level of disease containment achieved so far.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Israel has allowed the entry of critical supplies and equipment into Gaza: examples of critical supplies include swabs for collection of samples and other laboratory supplies required for COVID-19 testing, and Personal Protective Equipment to protect health workers.

The statement also noted Israel's cooperation in allowing health workers and other personnel involved in the COVID-19 response to move in and out of the West Bank and Gaza.

It is not only Mladenov. The U.N. itself has admitted that Israel is not impeding any aid to the territories and praised Israel for fully cooperating with the Palestinian Authority, international NGOs and even Hamas.

To sum up, Bernie Sanders needs to understand that Israel has

- 1) never blockaded humanitarian aid to Gaza
- 2) started sending aid, including masks, gloves, gowns, medical equipment (though not ventilators of which Israel has its own severe shortage), to Gaza as soon as the first two coronavirus cases were confirmed
- 3) so far sent more humanitarian aid – food, medicine, medical equipment – to Gaza than all the Arab states put together, save for Qatar with its cash payments
- 4) served as a fundraiser for Gaza, urging, and apparently persuading, the Emir of Qatar to transfer hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to the Strip. Perhaps it can also persuade him to find, and to transfer to Gaza, the ventilators the Gazan Arabs will undoubtedly need in the coming months.

And, of course, Israel continues to provide excellent care not only to its Arab citizens, but to Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank who require a level of care that their own hospitals can't provide, but that Israel's hospitals, and doctors, can. There is, for example, *A Heart for Peace*, an Israeli group that provides free medical care to Palestinian children with congenital heart defects. Since 2005, when it was founded, the group has provided heart operations to more than 1,000 Palestinian children at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem.

Sanders doesn't have to rely on the misinformation he is constantly fed by such the virulently anti-Israel Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, and Phillip Agnew. He could find out for himself, with a few minutes of googling, that all humanitarian aid is exempt from Israel's "blockade" of Gaza. He could find out, too, about how much humanitarian aid – food, medicines, medical equipment – is on average transferred each day daily from Israel to Gaza. He could learn about what happens to Palestinian patients when a certain level of medical care is unattainable in their own hospitals. These patients, from Gaza and the West Bank, are instead treated at Israeli hospitals,

with some of the most complicated and expensive care, such as operations for those with congenital heart conditions, provided for free.

Finally, when even the U.N., and the U.N.'s Mladenov praise Israel for its cooperation on the coronavirus outbreak with the Palestinian Authority, NGOs, and Hamas, then Bernie Sanders ought to be more diffident about condemning the Jewish state. Sanders is not known for admitting that he's made a mistake. But in this case, the error is so egregious, that perhaps he'll own up, and admit that his charge was baseless. Some might then think a bit better of him. Most can hardly think worse.

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