

Biden Calls for Lifting Sanctions and Providing “Humanitarian Relief” for Iran Amid Coronavirus Pandemic

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Joe Biden has called for the American government to lift sanctions on Iran so that the Islamic Republic might be able to cope better with the coronavirus outbreak, by having enough money to buy masks, gowns, gloves, testing equipment, ventilators, and other medical equipment. Biden does not go as far as his rival Bernie Sanders, who has called for a much broader sanctions relief that would last not only during the entire time of the outbreak but continue even after the coronavirus had ended.

[Here's](#) the story:

Former Vice President Joe Biden, the overwhelming favorite to become the Democratic presidential nominee, came out in favor of humanitarian sanctions relief for Iran to help the embattled country cope with the coronavirus pandemic.

“There are already humanitarian exceptions in place for sanctions, but in practice, most governments and organizations are too concerned about running afoul of US sanctions to offer assistance,” Biden said in a statement. “As a result, our sanctions are limiting Iran’s access to medical supplies and needed equipment. The [Donald Trump] administration should take immediate steps to address this problem and streamline channels for banking and public health assistance from other countries in response to the health emergency in Iran.”

The Iranian regime has been using the coronavirus outbreak – and its own failure to deal adequately with it – as a way to pressure the American government to lift sanctions. It wishes to deflect attention from its own failings, and to ascribe its difficulties to American malevolence in refusing to again lift those sanctions on the regime that Trump had reimposed. We are supposed to believe that it’s not the Supreme Leader, with his crazy conspiracy theories that blame America for creating the coronavirus that “targets a genome possessed by Iranians,” who is to blame. And we should pay no attention to the failure of the regime to promptly close down Mahan Airlines flights between Iran and China, flights that allowed the virus to spread from Wuhan to Qom. And we should overlook the failure of the Islamic Republic to impose a quarantine on the city of Qom, which might have prevented students and pilgrims returning home from Qom to spread the virus – as it is now known they did – to Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, Iraq, Syria, Qatar, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. No, none of that matters; the Supreme Leader is right – the epidemic in Iran is entirely the fault of the Americans.

Biden's statement comes after his one remaining primary opponent, Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., called for even broader Iran sanctions relief amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Sanders joined Reps. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., and 31 other Democratic lawmakers in a letter to the Trump administration this week urging the president to undo the crippling sanctions he has implemented since withdrawing from the nuclear deal.

Sanders and his colleagues urged Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin to relieve sanctions on "major sectors of the Iranian economy, including those impacting civilian industries, Iran's banking sector and exports of oil," adding that the relief "should last for at least as long as health experts believe the crisis will continue."

For now, Biden is only calling for humanitarian exemptions to Trump's current sanctions regime such as "broad license to pharmaceutical and medical device companies" and "creating a dedicated channel for international banks, transportation companies, insurers and other service firms to help Iranians access life-saving medical treatment." He also called for new sanctions guidelines and letters for international aid organizations to reassure them that they will not run afoul of US sanctions for supplying humanitarian relief to Iran.

"Looking more closely at Biden's statement, some of the things he mentioned, such as licenses, are already in place," said Behnam Ben Taleblu, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. "A general license is how the Treasury Department helped work with the Swiss to approve a humanitarian channel that touches even the Central Bank of Iran."

Joe Biden has apparently overlooked the American offer that has already been made to send humanitarian aid to Iran, which

the Supreme Leader at once rejected. According to AP, Khamenei claimed that “ I do not know how real this accusation is [that America was behind the coronavirus epidemic] but when it exists, who in their right mind would trust you to bring them medication? Possibly your medicine is a way to spread the virus more. You might send people as doctors and therapists, maybe they would want to come here and see the effect of the poison they have produced in person.” Khamenei also alleged, having attained the farthest shores of absurdity, that the virus “is specifically built for Iran using the genetic data of Iranians which they [the Americans] have obtained through different means.”

Khamenei was also unwilling to accept the offer of help from Doctors Without Borders, to treat patients at a field hospital the group had brought with it and that it had hoped to install in the most heavily affected region of Iran. Instead, the group was expelled from Iran. The regime apparently wanted to show it can handle the coronavirus outbreak without any foreign help; that is manifestly untrue, and many Iranians have died unnecessarily because of the regime’s refusal to accept such aid from abroad.

Like others demanding that the Administration lift sanctions on Iran, Joe Biden misses the main point. Iran doesn’t need to have sanctions lifted to obtain the money it needs to combat the coronavirus spread. It need only change its priorities. It needs to make a choice: will it continue to send between \$10 and \$15 billion a year to support proxies and allies in Yemen (Houthi rebels), Iraq (Shi’ite Militias), Lebanon (Hezbollah), and Syria (the Assad regime), or will it decrease, or even end altogether, the funding for this foreign adventurism, and instead apply the billions saved thereby to dealing with the unprecedented coronavirus epidemic? Biden knows all about Tehran’s support for the Houthis, Hezbollah, the Shia militias in Iraq, and Assad’s military in Syria. None of that is secret. And he also surely knows – or he could find out in two

minutes of searching the Internet – just how much that costs the Islamic Republic. So why does he fail to mention those sums that Iran might save and use on PPE, ventilators, hospital beds? Does he think it illegitimate to bring up this matter of Iran's spending priorities? Why?

If Biden were sensible, and also wanted to distinguish himself from Bernie Sanders, Ilhan Omar et al., he would ask Iran's leaders something like this:

“Please explain to the American people, and to many others, why it is wrong to expect Iran to concentrate its available resources fully on the coronavirus outbreak, instead of spending upwards of \$10 billion a year on supporting proxies and allies in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, in these foreign campaigns. And think of the amounts spent, too, on the nuclear program. That has been Iran's choice, and for the well-being of the people of Iran, it has been the wrong one. As for lifting sanctions, that should be discussed, if at all, only after Iran has shown that it has made a different choice, and now will prioritize the health of its own people over supporting military adventurism abroad.”

Yes, “if Biden were sensible...he would ask....”

But he isn't. So he won't.

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