

US Policies toward Israel and the Middle East Issue 86 (January-February 2020)

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[Martin Indyk](#) argues that the US no longer has vital interests in the Middle East. On the other hand, [Steven Cook](#) comes to the conclusion that the US cannot disengage from the region. Rather, the current situation shows that the US needs regional partners and its current partners believe that the US is not trustworthy, not efficient, and that its policies are “crazy.” In any event, the US remains drawn into two Middle East issues: Iran, following the assassination of Qassim Suleimani; and the consequences of Trump’s Peace Plan. On the Iranian issue, the two parties are dancing carefully around controlled escalation; and the “Deal of the Century” was presented by Trump in order to assist Netanyahu politically. These two issues are the main subject of fascinating political and constitutional disagreements.¹

A. Iran

The “Quds Force” was damaged by the elimination of its commander, Qassim Suleimani, but it did not fall apart, and Iran did not lose its subversive capabilities. Iran [maintains a sophisticated system that was expanded by Suleimani](#). The decision-making process to eliminate Suleimani was outlined in an in-depth article describing those “seven days in January,” as a [confrontation between the US and Iran that had “ripened” for many months](#). [Dennis Ross analyzes the possible responses](#) by the parties and estimates that Iran will respond at first with “measured” force, as indeed Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif described the firing of missiles on American bases. The Iranians also said that they did not intend to kill any Americans. However, the American expectation is that there will be an additional response, as echoed by the statements of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Miley. Ross does not rule out the possibility of an extreme response, similar to Iranian actions during the 1980 Iranian Hostage Crisis, where Khomeini held the hostages until Regan’s inauguration, in order to damage Carter’s presidential re-election campaign. Ross recommends that Trump, who prides himself on putting “America First,” begin to cooperate with third parties, like Putin or the Europeans. Iran is frustrated by the absence of European determination toward the US, and the lack of European condemnation of the US’ withdrawal from the nuclear agreement. While the “Dispute Resolution Mechanism”, launched by Europe on January 5, could provide a venue for the renewal of contact between Iran and the US; and indeed, there has been, so far, little Iranian revenge beyond the missile attacks on January 8. Khamenei’s speech on January 8, was full of praise for the martyr Suleimani. However, it did not focus revenge, instead, concentrating more on reform.

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¹ This bi-monthly column does not deal with several issues, including: US policy toward Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan, and Morocco

In fact, the US also responded to the Iranian retaliation with relative moderation, and the Americans were satisfied with new sanctions on the Iranian metal industry and senior Iranian officials (as of this point, sanctions have been placed on about 1,000 Iranians). The deployment of the "Harry S. Truman" aircraft carrier in the region was intended as deterrence and not as initiating an attack. Through Swiss intermediaries, messages were exchanged between Washington and Tehran, in order to keep mutual restraint. Trump described how close the situation came to war (which was confirmed by Zarif) and argued that the elimination of Suleimani was necessary in order to thwart attacks on four American embassies. However, Secretary of State [Pompeo said that the goal was not prevention, but rather to create "real deterrence"](#). Trump went on to declare that the action was meant to prevent a war, and not to start one. Trump minimized the Iranian response with a tweet claiming that "everything is fine," (it later became clear that 109 Americans were injured). [Trump's speech](#) on February 8 at the NATO Summit in England can be interpreted as an example of the old policy known as "declare victory and retreat", and the [Europeans were somewhat relieved](#). However, the President emphasized that if the Iranians respond, the US had already identified "52 targets" for a future response (recalling the 52 hostages from 1980). National Security Advisor O'Brien warned against an Iranian attempt at retaliatory action, calling any such attempt "very bad policy." The US is not softening its position of stubbornness, as was demonstrated by its refusal to grant Zarif approval to enter the US for discussions at the United Nations Security Council.

Responses in the US depend on political affiliation. [Alan Dershowitz wrote that the assassination was legal](#), President George W. Bush's National Security Advisor noted that it created an opening for diplomacy, and (formerly Democratic) Senator Lieberman lamented the loss of bipartisan consensus in foreign policy, [in the Wall Street Journal](#). The firing of Iranian missiles on American targets was defined as "an act of war." in Democrat circles as well, However, the [Democratic candidates for president expressed reservations](#) regarding the assassination and declared that they would reinstate the nuclear deal. Former [Secretary of State John Kerry argued that diplomacy was working with Iran](#) until Trump abandoned this approach. The leading four [candidates in the Democratic presidential primary campaign expressed harsh criticism](#) of the assassination. Former Vice President [Biden, who called on the US to return to its position of leadership in the world](#), warned against sliding into war. Sanders declared that the assassination would lead to a dangerous escalation, and Buttigieg (who takes pride in his military past) said that this was the worst decision he had ever seen. Warren called the action "irresponsible." On the more extreme margins of the Democratic Party, there were harsher voices calling the President a "monster" and a war criminal.

The disagreement is both political and legal, regarding the question of who has the authority to declare war: the president or Congress. The [Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the House of Representatives subpoenaed the Secretary of State](#) to testify, although he did not comply. Senator Murphy of Connecticut asked if the US has shifted to a policy of assassination without congressional approval and with the knowledge that the action would lead to a war. Obama advisor Ben Rhodes said that Congress should lead in determining policy toward Iran. The House of Representatives [passed legislation forbidding war with Iran](#). In the Senate, [Senators Kaine and Lee proposed similar legislation, explaining their motivations in a joint op-ed](#), announced their [goal of rescinding the "Authorization of the Use of Military Force"](#) that was passed in 2002, and called to return the "War powers" to Congress. This legislation will most likely be met with a presidential veto and will not be enacted. According to the [Wall Street Journal](#), the president is entitled to act without "435

Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” Democratic legislators even went as far as to argue that the accidental downing of the Ukrainian airplane by Iran was “collateral damage” resulting from the conflict between Iran and the US, even though Iran eventually admitted its responsibility for the event.

In light of the argument that the assassination of Suleimani was nothing more than Trump’s attempt to distract from his impeachment trial in the Senate, Trump redefined the assassination as the continuation of his “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran. However, pundits argued that the action really demonstrated “maximum failure.” The administration’s briefings to Congress were received with criticism, and even with disbelief. Democratic legislators interrupted the briefings to ask, “What were the threats posed by Suleimani?” Pundits argued that this was “an action with no strategy.” Former senior officials in the State Department, Burns and Sullivan [believe that Suleimani’s death will come at a steep price](#), higher than the price he posed in his life. The director of the Washington Institute, [Rob Satloff, argued that the assassination will be judged by its success](#), and that it could lead to Iran’s return to negotiations in the framework of a comprehensive agreement. However, [Dennis Ross estimates](#) that the primary winner will be Putin, who is left as the only one who can mediate between Trump and Iran. As a kind of summary, the [Washington Post wondered if the assassination was a smart move](#), and called Trump’s declaration of victory as “short-sighted and too early.” New York Times columnist [Tom Friedman argued that Trump assassinated the most stupid man in Iran](#), and sarcastically praised the “military genius” of Suleimani, who wasted the significant credit that Iran had gained. In contrast, the [Wall Street Journal supported the assassination](#) and called on the US to maintain its forces in Iraq. Alumni of the State Department called on the US to invest in smart diplomacy; for example, to prioritize investment in Tunisia, which is improving, instead of Iraq, which is corrupt. It also called on the US to avoid a strategy of diplomatic “autopilot” which is likely to lead to flawed thinking and continued decline.

According a University of Maryland survey, [the American public does not support](#) war with Iran. The website of the Selective Service Agency collapsed due to the large amount of inquiries from young people worried that they would be drafted for a war with Iran. The Selective Service Agency collects the information of draft candidates in order to prepare for a possible military draft. Additionally, according to an [IPSOS survey](#), the American public is critical of the President’s policy toward Iran (in total, 53% oppose the policy, and 39% are “strongly opposed”). According to a [Pew survey](#), prior to the assassination of Suleimani, in many countries throughout the world (including the US) Iran was not considered to be an existential problem. The elimination was done without prior consultation, both within the US and among other entities (perhaps except for Israel, according to the Los Angeles Times). Its implications will create a significant challenge for Trump, if he wants to avoid regional escalation, which could quickly lead to chaos. It was also argued that even if the assassination was justified, it was not done as part of a comprehensive policy. Rather it was done as a capricious move, as the President has no clear Iranian policy and his conduct on the subject has been “confusing and inconsistent.”

The assassination of Suleimani has repercussions for Iraq as well. In light of the protests at the US Embassy in Baghdad, Trump warned that if the protests continue, Tehran will bear full responsibility. Trump will not accede to an event like the take-over of the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and has sworn that “there will not be another Benghazi.” As a result, Trump ordered the swift redeployment of personnel from Kuwait as well as aerial attacks. Following the assassination of Suleimani, Iraqis were seen celebrating in the

streets. However, the US should not take too much comfort in this. It is the US' responsibility to continue meeting its obligation to calm the situation in Iraq, while leaving a reasonable amount of forces there. Following [the mistaken announcement from the commander of US forces in Iraq declaring the withdrawal of forces](#) from Iraq, Secretary of Defense Esper announced that the US has not made any decisions regarding withdrawal. In light of the news of an initial withdrawal from 15 bases in Iraq, the Americans were compelled to clarify again, in the middle of February, that they are not withdrawing from Iraq. It appears that the Americans will remain in Iraq in the near future and will continue to act to improve Iraq's military capabilities.

It also appears that Suleimani was involved in the selection of a new prime minister in Iraq. In light of the political instability there, the US must work with protest leaders in Iraq (so far almost 500 people have been killed in the protests), in order to stabilize the system, so that it will be able to withstand Iranian influence. In response to calls in the Iraqi Parliament for the US to withdraw, Washington is hinting that Iraq's access to certain bank accounts might be blocked. The US' relationship with Iraq has reached a [crossroads](#), and the US is seeking to avoid further escalation: consequently, the (former) commander of CENTCOM suggested that Israel refrains from attacking Iranian targets in Iraq in the near future, in order not to complicate US-Iraq relations, whose advancement is also in Israeli interests. Ayatollah Sistani condemned the harsh American responses, but also condemned the Iranian actions that preceded them. Muqtada al-Sadr also called on Iraq to ensure the safety of embassies, while also calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces "in an appropriate manner."

The Washington Institute published a list of "[Do's and Don'ts](#)" that outlines the limits of American action in Iraq. It appears that Iran and the US are gathering their allies for a future confrontation in Iraq. The escalation in the security situation in Iraq following the Iranian attacks on Aramco, is likely to drag Saudi Arabia and Iran, and even the US, to a renewed conflict on Iraqi issues.

B. The Trump Plan, Israel, and the Jews

The Trump Plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was launched in a meeting between [Trump and Netanyahu](#) at the White House on January 27. The launch took place [in a celebratory ceremony, in the presence of Jewish](#) and Evangelical leaders, and three ambassadors from Gulf states. The Egyptian and Jordanian ambassadors, countries that have signed peace treaties with Israel, were not present at the ceremony. In Washington, there is a great deal of political doubt, due to the one-sided nature of the plan, in Israel's favor. However, there is also a great deal of [criticism of Palestinian rejectionism](#). Kushner invited the Palestinians to present their own ideas on border issues, and the CIA Director visited Ramallah. However, the Palestinian Authority rejected the Trump Plan almost out of hand, even before its official launch. It also approached the Arab states, Europe, and the United Nations in order to gain support of its position. This move was a continuation of the 2017 Palestinian Authority declaration, following the American recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, that they would not accept any American plan henceforth. The Palestinian Authority also warned that it was considering severing ties with Israel (including security cooperation). According to a Washington Institute survey, the [Palestinian public also rejects the plan](#), but prefers calm at this point in time.

It appears that at first, Trump's intention was to assist Netanyahu in his political battle. However, after Gantz called this move as an intervention in Israeli elections, Trump was forced to invite him to Washington for his own meeting as well. When Netanyahu announced his plan for immediate annexation, he was quickly stopped by the White House, which opposed any annexation prior to the launch of the plan. At the launch ceremony, Trump emphasized that there a committee will be established to examine the final status of borders. Trump also said that any immediate annexation would damage the implementation of the plan. Netanyahu, however, attempted to smooth over the American position as a "technical issue," and quickly backed down from his plan for immediate annexation. Trump was encouraged after Britain expressed support for his plan, even if Johnson only did so with the goal of maintaining a positive trade deal with the US. The [EU](#) declared that it will continue to support (only those) moves that lead to a sustainable two-state solution, achieved through negotiations. European foreign ministers are also considering taking steps against the plan.

Right-wing analysts in Washington note that in contrast to past plans that focused on both sides of the conflict, the Trump Plan focuses primarily on Israeli security while also providing the Palestinians with comprehensive economic assistance and a recognition of their state, as small as it is. However, most of the defense and diplomacy community rejects the plan. These rejections focus on the plan's one-sidedness. However, they also object to some of its technical issues, like the water rights of the Palestinians. According to Biden, the Trump Plan is a political hurdle, and because it was not achieved through negotiations between the parties, it is likely to create a wave of unilateral moves. Biden also stated that it "does not contribute to the security of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state." Sanders rejected the plan because there is no chance that it will lead to the creation of a Palestinian state. Warren called the plan a "rubber stamp for annexation." In a joint letter, [democratic leaders of the congressional foreign relations committees](#) called on Trump to return to the two-state solution, and stated that there will not be peace without a Palestinian state. 12 Democratic Senators criticized the President in a letter, because of [the one-sided nature of the plan](#), as did [107 members of the House of Representatives](#). Only a small number of Democratic legislators, including Pelosi, expressed interest in learning more about the plan.

According to [Martin Indyk](#) the plan is destined to fail, because it does not leave anything for future negotiations. Makovsky and Ross from the Washington Institute warn that the plan has no chance of success if [Israel does not restrain its policy of annexation](#). They also criticized the plan for not clarifying if it is [an opening for negotiations or a fait accompli](#). Former US Ambassador to Israel, Dan Shapiro, estimated that a future democratic president would not accept this plan. Among Jewish organizations, J-Street rejected the plan, which it said entrenches the occupation and the conflict. AIPAC was restrained in its praise and emphasized that the administration conducted negotiations with two sides in Israel – Netanyahu and Gantz. The American Jewish Committee reacted similarly. The Republican Jewish Coalition, as expected, praised the plan as in line with American values.

The disagreements surrounding the Trump Plan represent a wider disagreement between the **Democratic Party and AIPAC**. Most of the Democratic candidates for president (except for Bloomberg) announced that they would not attend the AIPAC Conference, partly because of "Super Tuesday." Nevertheless, there is tension between AIPAC and several Democrats because of a post that AIPAC put out, which called Democrats "radicals." In response, Congresswoman Betty McCollum called [AIPAC a "hate group,"](#) and the organization was forced to issue a formal apology. Senator Schumer warned of a rise in anti-Semitism in Brooklyn, and there were calls for public condemnation from federal

leaders. The [Anti-Defamation League's annual survey](#) for 2019 notes that although American society has less tolerant towards anti-Semitism, problematic stereotypes persist, including the "dual loyalty" charge against Jews (24% of respondents), or the idea that Jews always want to be on top (25% of respondents). A [Pew survey](#) on Holocaust awareness shows that there is a reasonable level of knowledge about the Holocaust in the US.

Major events in January-February 2020

The US assassinates Suleimani, commander of the Iranian Quds Force

Trump launches his vision for Israeli-Palestinian peace

Netanyahu and Gantz visited the US and met separately with Trump

Disagreements break out between the Democratic Party and AIPAC

The US decides to keep forces in Iraq and assist in stabilization there