

# Fair Observer

Monthly



January 2020

Fair Observer<sup>o</sup>

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# Fair Observer Monthly



January 2020

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# ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has more than 2,000 contributors from nearly 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

As a nonprofit, we are free from owners and advertisers. When there are six jobs in public relations for every job in journalism, we rely on your donations to achieve our mission.

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## The Stage Is Set for the Middle East in 2020

Gary Grappo  
January 3, 2020

**The US drone strike against General Qassem Soleimani and other pro-Iran militia leaders has further escalated the tit-for-tat series of actions between the US and Iran.**

The last several weeks have seen a dangerous escalation in US-Iran tensions in the Gulf. Following the pro-Iranian, Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah's (KH) attack on a US facility that killed an American contractor and injured others, the US responded with several airstrikes on KH's camps in Syria and Iraq, killing an estimated 25 militants. Shortly after those attacks, a KH-inspired demonstration resulted in an assault on the US Embassy in Baghdad's Green Zone, investing the embassy's lobby area, challenging the Marine Security Guard force and causing extensive damage with the start of a fire.

That General Qassem Soleimani — working with KH commander and long-wanted terrorist Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis — was behind the embassy incident is a given. Soleimani was the almost legendary force behind the Quds Force's and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) activities in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Saudi Arabia for years, if not decades. He had been considered to be Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's top security and policy adviser for the Middle East. In the short term, Soleimani's death on January 3 in a US drone strike in Baghdad is a major setback for Iran and its aggressive policies throughout the region. The impact of his absence cannot be exaggerated.

Soleimani had long been the regional nemesis of the US, responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American troops in the 2003-11 Iraq War and the chief strategist behind Iranian successes in Syria and Yemen's civil wars. The general was doubtlessly on the US hit list for some time.

The US and Iran are now inexorably moving toward open confrontation. Going after such a high-level official, likely seen as a "strategic" target, is tantamount to an act of war and will surely prompt Iranian retaliation. Here are a few questions to consider, however, as the various conflict scenarios are considered.

### Why This and Why Now?

First, why this particular action and why now? The US could just as easily have attacked Iranian non-personnel assets in the Gulf. That would have been a seemingly sensible response to the embassy invasion in Baghdad — i.e., physical asset for physical asset. In fact, KH's attack on the embassy, which reportedly involved no deaths or injuries of Americans or Iraqis, could have been interpreted as an attempt to adjust the retaliatory options to non-personnel after the US had bombed the KH camps.

US Defense Secretary Mark Esper previously stated that Iran was planning attacks on US facilities and personnel in the Middle East. That is only slightly more likely now after this latest escalation than it had been since President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018. Iran, too, has no doubt always had all sorts of options for striking out against the US.

So, the fact that the US would act preemptively against Iran and especially the inspiration behind Tehran's anti-US campaign, Qassem Soleimani, is entirely logical. But not to overstate the point, Soleimani wasn't just any Iranian target. His killing must lead to an appropriately proportionate retaliatory action(s) on Iran's part. The US will surely know that it has moved its conflict with Iran to a much higher and more threatening level.

In so far as timing, well, 2020 is an election year in the US. (Coincidentally, 2020 is an election year in Iran, too. This year, Iranians will go to the polls to elect a new parliament and, in 2021, they will elect a new president.) And nothing rallies Americans like war, especially against a long-despised enemy like Iran.

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President Trump, depending on which poll and pundit one chooses to believe, faces less-than-certain prospects for reelection in November. One can always hope that no president would willingly lead the US into war simply to boost his reelection prospects, but history and this president's unorthodox approach to governing suggest something different.

The timing is also a factor in Iran, which has been racked by anti-government protests and demonstrations for months. According to some reports, some 1,500 Iranians may have died at the hands of government forces in these protests. The government's popularity and that of its theocratic leadership may be at an all-time low. An attack like this on a high-ranking general, however, might rally Iranians to support their leaders or, at the very least, pause those protests. That would undermine US hopes, as impractical and far-fetched as they might be, for regime change in Iran.

### **Over to Iran...**

A second consideration must be the manner of Iran's retaliation. The killing of such a revered Iranian figure demands a strong response. But the Iranians are well aware that they cannot afford to be drawn into an open conflict with the US. America's dominant naval and air power in the region and its ability to marshal even greater resources are unmatched. Going toe-to-toe on a battlefield with the US would be unwise and end badly for the Iranians.

But Iran has resources and assets at its disposal. It has a long list of proxy groups that are more than willing and able to strike not only US targets, but Israeli, Saudi and other allies' facilities, cities and personnel as well. US embassies and bases in the region — including but not limited to the Gulf, the broader Middle East and even Europe — are unquestionably possible Iranian targets. Senior US officials, including ambassadors, generals and senior administration officials, should be considered as high risk, as well as virtually all other US government personnel in those areas.

The Lebanese Hezbollah, which is based in southern Lebanon and armed with tens of thousands of rockets and missiles, might easily be called upon to launch multiple and repeated salvos against Israeli targets across the border, including major urban areas like Tel Aviv and Haifa. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates may be targets and, at the very least, American facilities and personnel in those countries, too.

Iran may be circumspect about further escalation in Iraq, however, given recent popular Iraqi outrage over Iran's already outsized influence there. Iraq is critically important to Iran, and it cannot afford to jeopardize its now shaken presence and influence in that country. Yet attacks on US personnel and facilities in Iraq may not be as upsetting to Iraqis. Nevertheless, Iraq's unsettled political situation following months of intense popular demonstrations and hundreds of deaths urges greater caution for Iran.

In truth, the list of possible Iranian targets is nearly endless, given America's ubiquitous presence around the world. In reality, the global US footprint increases its vulnerability. For Iran, it's only a question of which one(s) and when.

### **Inevitable Escalation... Then What?**

Given the inevitability of Iranian retaliation, the final question seems clear: Then what? This US administration has put little stock in diplomacy, the one approach that could potentially defuse the crisis. Even quiet diplomacy employing US allies who have relations with Iran in an effort to get the Iranians into talks would help now. But President Trump's penchant for insulting traditional allies and denigrating their leaders — think Germany, France and Britain, who are perhaps the best suited for this sort of quiet, under-the-radar diplomacy — makes the chances for this sort of de-escalation tactic disappointingly low. But even Russia and China, both of whom maintain relatively good relations with Iran, have a stake in this and could also play potentially helpful roles.



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One thing we can be certain of, however, is that the US can forget about issuing ultimatums. They were never truly effective and even less so against an ideologically-committed leadership like Iran's.

Given the Trump administration's aversion to diplomacy with adversaries, is there no alternative to open conflict between the US and Iran? What would that mean for the Middle East, its millions of inhabitants and the shaky governing institutions in them? Then there are the oil markets — expect higher oil prices for the duration — and the concomitant impact on the global economy. What would American voters think about that?

The inevitable question is, of course: Could there ultimately be an all-out war? Yes, there could but, in fact, such an outcome would be unpredictable, horrendously costly and serve neither country's long-term interests. Nevertheless, escalation has a way of getting out of control. And in the case of two nations that could not despise each other more, a conflict once begun may not be controllable.

That is probably the biggest reason why one side or the other — I nominate the US — must find a way to begin de-escalating the situation. Quiet diplomacy to get a temporary truce followed by something more substantial and enduring that addresses underlying tensions and issues ought to be the ultimate goal. It is in the interest of any and all conceivable parties. As anxious as Iranians and Americans may be over this latest flare-up, the rest of the world should be equally nervous. Two nations that view one another as so patently loathsome and are governed by unorthodox leaderships are on a collision course. Coming off a tumultuous 2019, 2020 is not off to a hopeful start.

**\*Gary Grappo** is a former US ambassador and a distinguished fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies at the Korbel School for International Studies, University of Denver. He is also the chairman of Fair Observer.

## Will Iran and the US Go to War?

Abbas Farasoo

January 8, 2020

### **Eliminating Qassem Soleimani significantly raises the risk of a direct confrontation between the US and Iran.**

The assassination of the commander of Iran's Quds Force, Major General Qassem Soleimani, by the United States on January 3, along with his right-hand man in Iraq, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was a surprising move for many. Soleimani's assassination has increased pressure on President Donald Trump in Washington and has already intensified concerns about a new war between the US and Iran, which would be a disaster for the region.

On January 8, Iran carried out a ballistic missile attack on air bases hosting US forces in Iraq in retaliation for Soleimani's death. So far there are no reports of American casualties, but Iran claims it killed at least 84 US soldiers. This has not been independently confirmed.

Iran's retaliation seems more symbolic. Tehran wanted to respond to its domestic impulse for revenge. According to Adel Abdul Mahdi, the Iraqi prime minister, Iran informed him about the attack. According to Iraqi diplomatic sources, the attack has been "coordinated" with Washington in advance in order to avoid fatalities.

If this is true, Iran's retaliation happened just to save face, on the one hand, and avoided a full-blown war with the US, on the other. Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, quickly tweeted after the attack on the US bases in Iraq that Iran took "concluded proportionate measures" and, similarly, Donald Trump tweeted that "so far, so good." It sounds like a process of de-escalation now.

### **Proxy War**

In Soleimani, Iran lost a well-known strategist. Soleimani was the mastermind of Iran's asymmetric warfare in the region, comparable

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perhaps to someone like General Akhtar Abdur Rahman, director-general of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) between 1979 and 1987. Rahman was the architect of the jihad movement against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s when Pakistan supported, organized and trained the Afghan mujahedeen.

This strategy is known as “death by a thousand cuts.” As head of Quds Force — the external branch of the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) — for more than 20 years, Soleimani made it his mission to force the United States from the region.

Inside Iran, Soleimani was considered a “pillar of the Iranian Revolution itself” and has been portrayed as Iran's most powerful man after Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Outside Iran, he became a charismatic leader for many of Tehran's allies like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and other Iran-backed militant groups in Syria and Yemen. He was also considered as a mastermind of Iran's strategy in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. After the defeat of IS, Iran continued putting pressure on the US through proxies.

The Middle East has been squished into the spectrum of radical securitization and open hostility between aligned actors for a long time. Four decades of confrontation with the US and the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s pushed Tehran to adopt an asymmetric strategy to fight threats beyond its borders. US presence in the region has been perceived as the primary threat by Tehran since 2002, when President George W. Bush included Iran as part of the “axis of evil.”

Iran's concerns intensified after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Since then, one option for Iran was to increase the cost of the US presence in the region. Maintaining its regional influence and fighting real or perceived threats beyond its borders has been a key goal for Tehran, especially following the breakout of the civil war in Syria.

Based on what has happened between the US and Iran in the few last days, we can draw some

conclusions. First, proxy warfare has the potential to transform into a full-blown war. On December 27, a US contractor was killed and four other Americans wounded when more than 30 rockets were fired on the Iraqi military base near Kirkuk. Washington accused Kataib Hezbollah, an Iran-backed militia, for the attack. Two days later, the US launched airstrikes and killed at least 25 militia fighters, wounding 55.

The attack sparked violent protests by supporters of the Iran-backed militia groups, targeted at the US Embassy in Baghdad. The protests brought back unwelcome memories of the 2012 attack on the US Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, that took the lives of four Americans, including Ambassador John Christopher Stevens. The embassy attack also brought up the specter of Iran's hostage crisis of 1979. All these events have pushed the US and Iran a step closer to a full escalation.

Second, responses to proxy warfare are not the same. For example, Soleimani's assassination raises the question about US reluctance to take similar action against Pakistan's generals who are supporting the proxy war in Afghanistan. On May 2, 2011, the Haqqani Network — a military branch of the Taliban based in Miramshah, Pakistan — launched an attack against the US Embassy in Kabul.

The US accused Pakistan's ISI of supporting the attack. Admiral Mike Mullen, then chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the US Senate that “the Haqqani network, for one, acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency,” and that “with ISI support, Haqqani operatives planned and conducted that truck bomb attack, as well as the assault on our embassy.”

Since 2001, more than 2,400 Americans troops have died in combat with the Pakistan-backed Taliban in Afghanistan. Pakistan has been denying its support for the Taliban and keeps insisting on its position as a “key ally” of the US in the war on terror. Pakistan's strategy is a “double game” that enables it to have both a relationship with the US while pursuing its

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regional strategy by providing sanctuaries for the Taliban.

However, the US treats Pakistan differently because their relationship is based on a combination of diplomatic interaction and tactical engagement. Also, Pakistan pursues its regional strategy without insisting on political and ideological differences to fuel confrontation with Washington.

Washington justified the attack on Soleimani as “preemptive action” to avoid further attacks against the US in the region. In April last year, the US designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization. According to Reuters, IRGC provided more sophisticated weapons to the pro-Iran Shia militia in recent months. These weapons included Katyusha rockets and shoulder-fired missiles that could bring down helicopters. Despite these concerns, many were surprised by the unilateral decision to assassinate high-profile officials, with experts questioning US evidence suggesting an imminent attack on American targets as “razor thin.”

### **The Right Temperature**

Third, countries have different proxy war strategies. In comparison, Pakistan conducts its proxy warfare differently to Iran. In the 1980s, in the context of the Cold War, General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, the Pakistani president at the time, instructed the ISI that “the water in Afghanistan must boil at the right temperature.” He was worried about a full Soviet escalation against Pakistan.

However, it is hard to know what is the right temperature for avoiding direct confrontation. Perhaps Iran raised the heat too high by its bold involvement in Iraq and Syria. Soleimani played a vital role in helping the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, mobilized tens of thousands of Shia militia from Iraq to Lebanon, and provided them with arms and military advisers. This level of involvement intensified the concerns in Washington about its future in the region. Leaked archives of Iranian intelligence cables show that Iranian agents privately expressed concern about

Soleimani’s brutal tactics in Iraq and their consequences.

Fourth, the US does not have a good record of fighting proxy wars in the region, but this should not create a false sense of confidence. After 2001, the US fought insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, which had required a different military doctrine known as counter-insurgency strategy (COIN). However, the COIN doctrine resulted in no substantial achievement in either theaters.

In Afghanistan, the US ultimately started negotiations with the Taliban to withdraw its forces. This happened after 18 years of war that cost an estimated \$2 trillion and tens of thousands of Afghan lives. Pakistan appears to have won the proxy war in Afghanistan against the US to bring back the Taliban and undermine the Afghan government. The US failure in the region gave more confidence for Soleimani to play the game with confidence. For example, he kept promoting himself by taking photos on battlefields across Iraq and Syria, not unlike a rock star.

Fifth, Iran’s real revenge will come through the continued proxy warfare to force the US from the region. After Soleimani’s death, Iran will pursue cautious methods without changing its main strategy in the region. Iran has vowed to take “severe revenge” for Soleimani’s death, but its conventional forces are no match for the US military machine in a direct confrontation. Therefore, Iran will not fight a conventional war with the US.

After a ballistic missile attack on the US bases in Iraq, President Hassan Rouhani said: “Our final answer to his [Soleimani’s] assassination will be to kick all US forces out of the region.” Iran already pulled out of the nuclear deal, and Iraq’s parliament has passed legislation calling for the US forces to leave the country. If it happens, the US will likely end its presence in Syria as well because the US bases in Iraq are critical for the support of US forces in Syria.

After Soleimani’s death, the situation is extremely unpredictable. Proxy warfare can provoke an all-out war whether with the US or regional actors. From Tehran’s point of view, the

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US is not the only threat in the region, with enemies such as Saudi Arabia, Israel and anti-Iran Sunni groups such as IS and al-Qaeda to be considered.

Even if the US leaves the Middle East, the existing pattern of the amity/enmity between state and non-state actors in the region will remain stubborn for the foreseeable future. Therefore, it seems that Iran will not gamble its whole capability on a full escalation with the US. However, any miscalculation can push the US and Iran toward further escalation. If retaliation happens as tit for tat on a spiraling trajectory, a full-blown war could not be far away. This is how wars begin.

\***Abbas Farasoo** is a PhD candidate at Deakin University in Australia.

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## **Ivan Duque's Difficult First Year in Office**

Glenn Ojeda Vega & Natalia Marquez-Bustos  
January 9, 2020

**President Duque's historically low popularity accounts for his inability to convince both his voters and his opponents of his agenda.**

**A**ccording to a recent poll conducted by Invamer, Colombia's president Ivan Duque is facing a historically low popularity after little over a year in office. The announcement followed months of continued struggles for Alvaro Uribe's protégé, which include (but are not limited to) his legislative initiatives being blocked by the opposition, and millions of Colombians going to the streets to protest against his government. But why do so few Colombians approve of President Duque? Can he turn these numbers around during the next three years?

Several reasons are behind the president's low popularity, including the perception among his supporters that Duque is not governing with

enough assertiveness; an outsized focus on foreign policy and a series of faux pas in that realm; unpopular economic measures and macroeconomic indicators; and a growing support for the implementation of the 2015 peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which Duque's party fiercely opposes.

In recent months, President Duque has faced a string of widespread protests airing diverse grievances across major cities — from calls to protect sharks along Colombia's coastlines to those demanding the elimination of ESMAD, a riot-police squad responsible for the death of 18-year-old Dilan Cruz during the protests. Although Duque's administration has begrudgingly engaged in dialogue with some of the protest leaders after days of public pressure, his government is standing by most of its agenda and moving forward with policy decisions.

However, Duque's accommodating attitude and openness to dialogue with the opposition have let down many of his supporters, both in politics and among civil society. The fact that Duque didn't simply stick to his guns and dismiss the protests as a Maduro-orchestrated plot frustrated some of the more heavy-handed members of his own party.

The same happened when he removed his former minister of defense after it was made public that new cases of "falsos positivos" — the so-called "false positives," referring to the killing of civilians by Colombia's military to inflate the numbers in the war against the guerillas — have allegedly occurred and that the Colombian army had killed seven minors in a bombing campaign against FARC dissidents.

### **Foreign Policy, Economics and Peace**

Another driver behind President Duque's low approval rating is the fact that he has spent a good amount of time engaged in overseas diplomacy, both on the economic and political fronts. During the early months of 2019, Duque spent a significant amount of time and resources focused on the political situation in Venezuela,

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which might have been better spent dealing with the situation of Venezuelans in Colombia, whose numbers are estimated to have surpassed 1.5 million last year.

During the height of Juan Guaidó's momentum to gain power in Venezuela in 2019, Duque hosted Guaidó and their Chilean and Paraguayan counterparts at the iconic border city of Cucuta for a communications operation featuring mountains of much-needed aid for Venezuela and a concert. In the frenzy of it all, Duque talked about the imminent transition toward democracy in Venezuela. A year later, said transition has yet to happen.

During his year in office, President Duque has made more than 20 trips abroad and spearheaded regional efforts — time that might have been better spent focusing on domestic issues.

The national economy has been another controversial front for the president. According to the latest numbers from Colombia's National Statistics Bureau and despite studies that suggest that the national GDP will keep growing, the unemployment rate has risen to approximately 10%. Additionally, despite Duque's campaign promise not to raise taxes for average citizens, in December he passed a tax legislation, known as the Law of Economic Growth, that lowers the income threshold for tax payers while decreasing duties and royalties for enterprises.

Lastly, there is the peace process. It is no secret that President Duque has overlooked and sought to alter some, if not all, of the commitments underwritten by the Colombian state during the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos.

According to The New York Times, 57% of the laws related to the peace accords are yet to pass congress, and Duque's vocal attacks against the Special Peace Jurisdiction system are accompanied by his inability to address the security concerns of ex-FARC members. The last report on Colombia's peace process presented to the UN Security Council concluded that 2019 has been the deadliest year for demobilized guerilla members.

This development (or lack thereof) is worrisome for the more than 6 million Colombians who voted to ratify the final agreement in the 2016 referendum and for those who support it nowadays. A Gallup Poll notes that, even though 67% of Colombians still believe in dialogue with armed groups, almost the same percentage feels that the implementation is going astray. Trust in both the government and the guerrillas is very low.

His first year in office has not been kind to President Duque. Beyond the many individual themes that he has addressed, there is both national and international consensus that Duque's government lacks a unique, defined flavor. While President Santos focused his policies and his personal image around the peace process, as Alvaro Uribe had done with his *seguridad democrática*, Duque has not yet adopted a banner for himself. His policies lack a defined direction.

This identity vacuum is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, his detractors find it impossible to differentiate him from Uribe and his party, an association that won Duque the presidency in the first place. However, now that Uribe's popularity is also dipping, the strong association might represent a liability for Duque. "The young leader needs to emerge from his sponsor's shadow," wrote The Economist.

President Duque's lukewarm policies have also angered his own party, which has complained of his lack of a follow-through on bold campaign promises and of his reluctance to do as Uribe advises. Amidst the November 2019 protests that paralyzed Colombia, Fernando Londoño, a senior figure belonging to the most radical wing of the Democratic Center party, went as far as to suggest openly that Duque ought to resign: "Someone has to govern, and if President Duque does not want to, if he is busy in the many conversations he has, someone has to be in charge."

In short, Ivan Duque's historically low popularity accounts for his inability to convince both his voters and his opponents of his agenda. Until he is able to set his priorities and give his

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presidency a distinctive character, the prospect of President Duque escaping the shadow of his predecessors will elude him.

\***Glenn Ojeda Vega** is an international policy professional and **Natalia Márquez-Bustos** works in information science.

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## **The US Will Never Leave the Middle East**

Amin Farhad

January 10, 2020

**President Trump's campaign promise of removing all US troops out of the Middle East is a utopia.**

**A** large number of people seem to believe that World War III has begun with the drone strike that killed Iran's Quds Force commander, General Qassem Soleimani, on January 3. On December 27, a US military contractor was killed in a rocket attack in Iraq, and the US responded with a bombing campaign. Iraqis rioted and attacked the United States Embassy in Baghdad. Washington then accused Iran of being behind the riots and assassinated General Soleimani — a high-ranking official in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps — along with his right-hand man in Iraq, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Iran threatened with massive retaliatory action in response to the US escalation (after the obligatory three days of mourning), and President Donald Trump announced that thousands of additional US troops will be deployed in the Middle East to deter an Iranian military response. In October last year, Trump ordered the withdrawal of US troops from northern Syria as part of his aim to pull America out of the "endless wars" in the region— a decision that was widely criticized and swiftly reversed to retain a military presence to protect Syria's oilfields. Following recent events, the US decided

to bring more troops to the Middle East: 750 soldiers to Baghdad, with another 3,000 on standby.

It is worth mentioning that President Trump's withdrawal from Syria, which was one of his main campaign promises, was perceived as a weak move by Iran. Yet judging from official numbers alone, the US maintains its strong influence in a number of Middle Eastern countries, such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

Following Soleimani's assassination, the Iraqi government asked for all the US troops to be removed, but, according to various media sources, there are no plans to pull the US troops out of Iraq or to evacuate the US Embassy in Baghdad. Iraqi officials accused President Trump of violating their country's sovereignty and of attacking targets inside the country, thus threatening Iraq's security.

As per Pew Research data, the United States remains largely disliked across the Middle East. There are suggestions that there is little the United States can do in the region, either in terms of diplomacy or by military means. As in Richard Nixon's nightmare, America is seen by some as a pitiful, helpless giant. Yet if you take a look at hard data, such as on military spending, that isn't true. What is true is that President Trump's campaign promise of removing all US troops out of the Middle East is a utopia. The decision to send additional troops to Baghdad is just the latest confirmation of just how unrealistic this promise is.

Another aspect worth contemplating is that both America's allies and foes in the Middle East are confused about the US government's long-term plan for the region, and current events have left a further sense of a bewildering chaos.

The Middle East is perceived as a litmus test of American military hegemony in the world. Switching geopolitical planes, if the US would fully retreat from the region, such a move would embolden both Russia and China to seize more land and power, like they have in Crimea, Ukraine and the South China Sea.

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If sending more American troops to the Middle East has been part of an endless cycle since 9/11, what does the future hold for the US? We will see even more occupation and troops sent to the Middle East in what has been described as Pax Americana. Last year alone, 14,000 US troops have been sent to the Gulf region. And yes, this translates into never-ending involvement in the Middle East and increased hostility toward America from the people living in the midst of the chaos. This is due to US policies shifting with each administration — and sometimes even with each day — creating instability. Just consider the blowback from the Soleimani assassination.

General Soleimani and many other Iranian officials have declared in the past that US forces make for a long list of lucrative targets for Iran's military and militias, and Iraq is clearly the most probable battlefield for a proxy war. There are many anti- and pro-Iranian forces in Iraq, which means that in the face of Iran's retaliatory strikes, the US is looking at a long, bloody and protracted conflict in the region. However, not just Iraq but the entire Middle East might see an explosion of violence as Iran does not want to appear weak to its enemies. Faced with a retaliatory strike from Iran on US forces in Iraq, including a probable closure of the Strait of Hormuz, the US has two options: to strike Iran's allies or to strike Iran itself. In either case, it is apparent that more US troops will have to be deployed in the region.

\***Amin Farhad** is a Paris-based political analyst.

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## **Are the Windsors the New Kardashians?**

Ellis Cashmore  
January 14, 2020

**The queen agrees to a "transition" for Meghan and Harry — but what are they transitioning to?**

**Y**ou can understand Meghan Markle's frustration. There she is, half of one of the most illustrious, acclaimed and renowned couples on the planet. Practically every time she switches on the TV, she's reminded of what could be.

"All that money, publicity and influence — and what do they actually do?" Meghan might ask herself. "Sit around eating salads and talking about fad diets. And do you know how it all got started? A sex tape. We're royals! Not just any old royals either. We're the Windsors, for fuck's sake!"

Then, as if some celestial life force was listening, Uncle Andrew surged into the world's headlines at the center of a sex scandal like no other. When Virginia Roberts Giuffre accused the duke of York of having sex with her years ago, when she was underage, she detonated a charge with explosive power far greater than Kim Kardashian's sex tape.

That fateful tape propelled Kim and, later, her extended family, straight into our collective consciousness and ultimately turned them into the most influential family since the Borgias. Worlds are made and destroyed as a result of a remark from the family. I mean consumer worlds, of course. Their whims determine which products stay on the shelves and which ones move off at the speed of light.

We have no way of knowing whether Meghan Markle aspires to lead the Windsors to the same cultural plateau as the Kardashians. But, if she does, her timing is almost too perfect. Within four months of the apparent suicide in prison of Andrew's friend Jeffrey Epstein — a wealthy financier and convicted sex offender — Giuffre's damning allegations and Andrew's maladroit denial, Meghan and her husband Harry announced they were scaling back their royal duties and relocating (probably) to Toronto, though, I imagine, with plenty of time in southern California during the freezing Ontario winters. That doesn't mean they intend to transform into not-so-hidden persuaders à la Kardashians.

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All the same, the revelation that, over the past several months, the duke and duchess of Sussex have registered commercial trademarks for more than 100 commodities, including clothes and magazines, does suggest they have a marketing project in mind. They've also registered the domain name *sussexroyal.com* and have been in talks with the likes of Givenchy. It appears that a brand — probably something like *SussexRoyal™* — is going to be the platform of the couple's attempt to extricate themselves from the British royal family and become “financially independent,” as they put it.

Harry and Meghan's income currently comes from the prince of Wales and was, last year, thought to be about £5 million, or just over \$6.5 million — a decent wedge for most people, but small change compared to what it might be in a few years if the project proceeds. Celebrity couples, in particular, seem to mesmerize markets. Victoria and David Beckham, for example, have built a merchandising and marketing empire worth a billion US dollars. Kim Kardashian West and her husband Kanye West — often abbreviated as Kimye — are collectively worth \$295 million.

But will Buckingham Palace let it happen? Like every other living organism, the royal family has adapted to changing environments. Since the 1990s, it has been obliged to make several rapid adjustments due largely to the conduct of Diana, princess of Wales. Compared to her one-time husband and other members of the Windsors, Diana was emotionally incontinent. Her 1995 interview with Martin Bashir — in which she confessed “there were three of us in the marriage so it was a bit crowded” — was one of the least restrained in royal history.

Diana was caught in a maelstrom of cultural change: Private lives were being exposed by the media, and a new generation of celebrities was able to capitalize on public fascination for any details, no matter how trivial, of the lives of others. Diana was part of the change and helped drag the royal family into the whirlpool. Queen

Elizabeth II and her family have been struggling to swim to safety ever since. Recent lapses of restraint have excited some commentators into predicting the most serious constitutional crisis since 1936, when Edward VIII abdicated and married an American commoner, Wallis Simpson.

Since Diana's death in 1997, our fascination with celebrities has grown, and a consumer world — in which any recognizable face can name a product and persuade us to buy it — has been fully realized. No one doubts that, if Harry and Meghan push ahead with their project, they could mobilize their social media accounts, images and endorsements in a way that would rival the Kardashians. But there is an obvious difference.

Unlike the Kardashians, who are enthusiastically and expertly managed by the sisters' mother, Kris Jenner, Harry and Meghan have an altogether different woman as their head of family. Queen Elizabeth is known to adopt a policy of “say nothing” to minimize difficulties in such situations. Her displeasure with Diana was barely concealed, so her reaction to Diana's son's new venture is predictable. She may even exact a brutal retribution, stripping Harry and Meghan of their royal highness designation. It would be excruciating for the queen to witness an official rank used as a gimcrack method of selling merch. So it's unlikely she would stand by and watch her family being — to use a term of today — monetized.

Where some of us see a moneymaking project, others see a couple desperately escaping a racist British population buttressed by an equally racist media. This is an interesting hypothesis, but there is little hard evidence — just unobvious hints, perhaps — that the traditional broadcast or print media have cast racist aspersions. Social media is different, of course. In this lawless domain, racism flourishes. But how does a move west address this?

Harry and Meghan may not be trying to recreate the Kardashians, but, let's face it, celebrity culture is nothing if not capricious, and Kim and the others have held sway at the top for



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over a decade — “Keeping Up With the Kardashians” first aired in 2007. I’m sure HaMeg (excuse my premature celeb contraction) won’t chase a reality TV deal or go viral with lip-enhancing techniques, as Kylie Jenner did in 2015. And, while there’s been talk of a TV show deal, it would seem crass of Meghan to jump at this. At least at the moment: Down the road I surmise there will be plenty of well-paying TV appearances.

But I don’t think they’ll sit and listen obediently while the queen tells them to remember who they are and what they’re representing. Sometimes, the best policy in these matters is that no matter how preposterous and far-fetched something sounds, it could still happen. Keeping up with the Windsors is getting tougher.

\***Ellis Cashmore** is the author of “Kardashian Culture.”

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## **Can Sanders or Warren Clinch the Democratic Nomination?**

S. Suresh

January 16, 2020

**Democrats have wasted valuable time not realizing that the 2020 presidential election against Trump will be anything but normal.**

**T**he Democrats have been trudging along this presidential primary as though this were any normal election and the usual rules of politics during the primary nomination phase apply in 2020 as well. On the heels of being impeached by the House of Representatives, President Donald Trump launched a drone strike killing an Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani.

Trump’s reckless action showed his utter disregard for Congress, pushed US and Iran into a state of heightened tension and sparked fears of more instability in the Middle East. Thumbing its

nose at the Democrats, the Trump administration has now taken the position that killing Soleimani was justified whether or not he posed an imminent threat.

Democrats have wasted valuable time not realizing that the 2020 presidential election will be anything but normal. It has taken them more than eight months to whittle down the extraordinarily long list of hopefuls seeking a chance beat the incumbent Republican to a dozen. Six of them — Senators Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar, former Vice President Joe Biden, former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg and billionaire investor Tom Steyer — had met the requirements set by the Democratic National Committee and took the stage for their party’s 7th debate in Des Moines, Iowa, on Tuesday, January 14.

In addition to the usually debated topics on health care, immigration, climate change, foreign policy, economic inequality, government structure and education, the impeachment proceedings against Trump and the aftermath of his imprudent actions against Iran set the stage for the last debate before the Iowa caucuses.

### **Foreign Policy**

It was no surprise that the recent turn of events in the Middle East meant the first few questions to the candidates were around American foreign policy and their qualification for the role of commander-in-chief of the United States of America. Sanders wasted no time in calling out the lies of President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, and his opposition to the Iraq War in 2002. He also pointed out the other huge blunder in America’s foreign policy that got it embroiled in the Vietnam War. Sanders essentially reiterated his non-interventionist foreign policy that would rely on negotiations with adversaries in close collaboration with allies over military intervention and armed conflicts.

Senator Warren minced no words when she said that she would pull back all American troops deployed in the Middle East back and put an end to the corruption between the defense industry

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and the Pentagon. Biden was apologetic about his support of the Iraq War but touted his role in the troop reduction in the region during the Obama administration.

Buttigieg, who was deployed to Afghanistan as a naval intelligence officer, talked about the emerging threats to national security in the form of cyberattacks. He was the only person to bring up the topic of executive powers granted to the president post 9/11 and argued that they ought to be revisited, lest they be misused the way Trump did in his recent drone attack in Baghdad to target General Soleimani.

The debating candidates were more or less unanimous in how they would deal with Iran and North Korea. Their approach would rely on undoing the damage caused by Trump and his administration in both countries, ensuring Iran remains non-nuclear, and applying pressure on North Korea with the help of China and Japan.

### **Trade, Climate Change and Health Care**

Sanders vehemently opposed the new trade deal between America, Mexico and Canada, the USMCA, on account of the fact that there were no climate change-related checks and balances in them, even as he acknowledged that the deal had modest improvements favoring American workers. The two other senators, Klobuchar and Warren, voiced their support, as did the remaining candidates.

Steyer tried to make a case as the climate change candidate on the stage, but he failed to set himself apart in a meaningful fashion. Each one of his opponents agreed to take on addressing climate change, stating that it would be one of their top priorities.

Sanders could not convincingly explain how he would pay for his Medicare-for-all policy when he was put on the spot. Warren and Klobuchar aim to build on the Affordable Care Act, as does Biden, who did not lose the opportunity to christen his improvements to Obamacare as the “Biden option.” Buttigieg stood by his public option of health care for everyone with two key proposals: lowering

prescription drug costs and rolling back Trump tax cuts to corporations.

None of the candidates chose to talk about improving the overall health of Americans in a holistic fashion. Nor did they question how the health-care industry continues to alter what is considered normal for chronic ailments like blood pressure and cholesterol. Those changes have resulted in several more millions of Americans having to rely on prescription drugs. While the empirical evidence used to alter the range for chronic ailments ought to be respected, relying on prescription drugs without a holistic approach to health will only address the symptom and provide long-term and life-long customers to the pharmaceutical industry.

### **Can a Woman Become President?**

In the days leading to the debate, Warren had accused Sanders that in 2018 he suggested that a woman could not become the president of United States. Warren’s and Sanders’ campaigns had agreed not to go down the mudslinging route between themselves, but by bringing up something Sanders had allegedly said in 2018, Warren had chosen to move away from that arrangement. The issue came up during the debate: Sanders denied that he ever made such a statement, while Warren did not seem to acknowledge it.

After making a pitch of how the two women on stage have the highest record in winning elections, Warren went on to say that she is only one on stage to beat an incumbent Republican in an election in the last 30 years. Sanders promptly contested that assertion, stating that he beat an incumbent Republican in 1990, technically in the 30-year timeframe that Warren had mentioned. While Sanders and Warren chose not to escalate their barbs on stage, it was clear that there was not much love lost in the bickering between the two progressive candidates.

### **Best Suited to Take on Trump**

While no clear winner emerged from the debate, Biden, the current leader in national polls,

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emerged as a loser. Biden is running on a centrist agenda and his supposed ability to beat Trump. During the 7th debate he was hesitant, apologetic and inarticulate, all of which will make it impossible for him to stand up against the bully Trump during the presidential campaign and debates.

Steyer ought to realize that he is wasting everyone's time continuing to stick around — as should the remaining six who did not even make it to the national debate. Steyer would do well to spend his money on helping whoever emerges as the candidate to take on Trump. He should quit the race knowing his signature campaign agenda — climate change — will be addressed by whoever is the Democratic nominee to take on Trump.

Klobuchar was fluent, but lacked the conviction and substance the other three on stage displayed. Like Biden, she courts the centrist Democrats with her policies and her supposed ability to come out on top where Trump fared well in 2016.

Sanders and Warren, whose viewpoints were closely aligned much of the way, were persuasive and stood by them with authority. The challenge they will face is in convincing the centrist Democrats and the rest of the country that their progressive policies will, in the long run, be beneficial for the country even if it means reigning in the capitalistic excesses of the nation. Buttigieg showed himself to be competent and cogent, and will make an excellent addition to either a Sanders or Warren ticket.

Beating Trump will not be easy. Trump will run a brutal campaign that is dirty, filled with name-calling, personal insults, evading the truth and substantive issues while spreading lies. His impeachment has not swayed the opinion of his supporters. He will very likely be acquitted in the farce of a Senate trial later this month and emerge that much stronger and more vicious. Biden will not be able to stand up to the personal assault of a savage Trump campaign.

Sanders or Warren, on the other hand, will have the opportunity to face Trump without a

barrage of personal assaults that is bound to muddy the campaign. Their primary challenge will be selling their progressive agenda to the nation, especially in the swing states. Given how hard it is going to be to beat Trump, it is a risk worth taking rather than run with an insipid Biden and his centrist campaign.

\***S. Suresh** is a product executive and a writer.

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## **Putin Is Leaving, But Not Saying Goodbye**

Dmitry Belyaev  
January 21, 2020

**Russia's President Vladimir Putin can't simply retire: Too much power is concentrated in his hands to just leave it all behind.**

**T**he reorganization of power has begun in Russia. This process is also referred to as the solution to the so-called “problem 2024” — the year that marks the end of Vladimir Putin's last term as president. By law he has no right to run in the next election, since Russia's Constitution stipulates a limit of two consecutive terms in office.

In 2008, at the end of Putin's first presidential cycle, he passed his post to then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev for four years. At the time, Putin took over as prime minister but continued to lead the country from the sidelines, in a set-up that became known as the “tandem.” However, at the end of the 2012 election everything had already returned to its place: Putin had been reelected president, and Medvedev was made the head of government as prime minister. In Russian politics, this maneuver is known as “castling” — an analogy with chess.

After the second coming of Putin, the presidential term in Russia was increased from four to six years, granting the head of state 12 years in power. During this time, the annexation of Crimea, the war with Ukraine and the ensuing

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Western sanctions, as well as Russia's increased involvement in the Syrian Civil War, took place. The only thing that remained unchanged was Putin's power. He quietly won all the country's elections, leaving all rivals far, far behind. Technically speaking, there is some political opposition in the country, but none of the real opponents of the regime are allowed to engage in politics.

However, time is running out, and Putin will soon have to step down again formally as president. So, the time has come for the Kremlin to decide what power structures in Russia will remain after 2024. Journalists and political experts predicted various scenarios of the power transfer, such as the unification of Russia and Belarus to create a "Union State," as well as some sort of new castling. However, everyone was sure of one thing: Putin can't simply retire. Too much power is concentrated in his hands to just leave it all behind.

### **Message to the Federal Assembly**

The transfer of power began unexpectedly. The President's annual address to the federal assembly was scheduled for January 15. The country expected that Putin would talk about the economic situation and social issues. Russians have been growing increasingly weary of hearing about war and geopolitics. The president, aware of the popular mood, began his speech by announcing an increase in child allowances, and support to teachers, doctors and young families. He even promised free lunches to schoolchildren.

However, the second part of his speech was entirely devoted to the redistribution of roles among the branches of power in the country. In fact, Putin proclaimed the beginning of constitutional reform.

The president's statements provided a rough idea of how events will unfold after 2024. The main idea is that Russia will remain a presidential system, but the role of the prime minister and government will be strengthened. The head of the government will be proposed by parliament — no longer by the president, as it is now, but the

president will still be able to dismiss the appointee. The federation council will have the right to remove judges from office, and officials and judges will be forbidden to hold a second citizenship or residence permits in other countries. Only those who have lived in Russia for the last 25 years will be eligible for the presidency.

In addition, they must never have held a residence permit of another country or a second citizenship. Putin also announced that Russia would no longer grant precedence to international conventions or court rulings over its own laws.

President Putin also spoke in favor of strengthening the role of governors and the federation council, which currently have rather nominal functions. He also suggested removing the term "consecutive" from the two-term limit on holding office. Putin recommended that all his ideas be enshrined in the constitution. In Russian political terms, a "recommendation" by Putin means direct orders.

The president concluded his speech on a dramatic note, saying that renewal and the change of power are an essential condition for progressive evolution of society and stable development. He preferred not to talk about his role in his imagined Russia of the future. However, one thing is clear: He has taken the necessary steps to secure his own political future in the country. Since he can no longer remain president, he needs another powerful position that will allow him to exercise the full extent of his power.

### **Government Resignation**

No one can say whether Dmitry Medvedev knew that January 15 would be his last day as head of government. He and the entire Russian cabinet resigned only a few hours after Putin's address.

The president proposed the candidacy of a new prime minister that same evening: Mikhail Mishustin, the country's chief tax collector. His name says nothing to the average man, as he only appeared on English Wikipedia after the new appointment. However, Mishustin is no novice in

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Russian politics. He is seen as a reformer, an expert in modern technology and a keeper of secrets for many Russian officials. The post of chief tax officer is a police post, with all its consequences.

Mishustin doesn't have much popularity, but does he really need it in his new position of power? Prime ministers in Russia are usually the fall guys. They are responsible for all failures of the government in order to shift responsibility from the president, who is busy with geopolitics and global issues. Nevertheless, Russia's parliament approved Mishustin's appointment without much hesitation.

As for Medvedev, he will now become deputy head of the security council. This new position was invented just for him. For the former prime minister — the second most powerful person in the country — such a transfer doesn't exactly mark a sign of success. However, this impression might be premature. The head of the security council is Vladimir Putin himself. It was the security council, not the Ministry of Defense, that was responsible for the Crimea operation.

For Medvedev, who has mainly been involved in matters of Russia's economy and industry in recent years, this is an atypical position. Therefore, it is hard to say for sure whether it is a demotion or another strategic maneuver. For Putin, Medvedev is still a special person. He once entrusted him with the power over the country, and Medvedev gave it back without question. Putin values such people, as loyalty is the most important quality in his eyes.

### **What Happens Next?**

A referendum on changing the constitution could potentially take place in September. Journalists and analysts are desperate to predict Russia's future. Only one person knows for sure what awaits the country in 2024 — Vladimir Putin, and he is in no hurry to reveal his cards. A referendum on the constitution, parliamentary elections in 2021 and a full four years before the end of his current presidential term are still ahead of him.

For example, by that time the next US president will have already been elected to replace the one who came into power in 2020. The only thing we can state with certainty is that Putin is not going anywhere. Perhaps he will no longer be addressed as president, but he won't stop ruling Russia. Now he is setting the scene for a new role. More precisely, you could even say he is forming a parallel government, a system within a system.

Perhaps he'll take over as prime minister? It's doubtful. Officially Putin doesn't even have a political party. In the last election, he ran as an independent, unwilling to be associated with any political bloc.

Maybe he rewrites the constitution and stays for a new term? Theoretically speaking, it's possible. Recent events have shown that the Russian Constitution is subject to amendment and can be rewritten to suit the political ambitions of the ruling class. If a new constitution brings in a new order and new rules allowing Putin to run again, this would potentially mean two more new terms and another 12 years of Putin. However, in this case, he will never get rid of the reputation of a dictator — even formally.

Maybe Putin will concentrate all the powers in the newly created state council? This is the more likely scenario. For good reason, he seeks to enshrine this office, which will allow him to oversee the various sectors of government and the direction of the country's foreign and domestic policy, in the constitution. Putin has four years to give the council the power it needs. It looks like the president will learn from neighboring Kazakhstan, where Nursultan Nazarbayev, who ruled his country for almost 30 years, voluntarily moved to the position of chair of the security council. In fact, Nazarbayev had become a local Ayatollah Khamenei — Iran's supreme leader — without whom no meaningful decision can be made. Putin may indeed embrace the role of the father of the nation.

Most likely, Putin is looking for a position where he could influence key decisions in the country, but not be in the foreground. In this case,

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it is no longer so important who becomes the new president of Russia. Maybe Dmitry Medvedev again, or someone else. Whoever it is, the country will continue to be ruled by Putin and his entourage. The same people will remain in power and will only swap their official titles. In this sense, Russia is beginning to increasingly mirror China, where it is impossible to engage in politics if you are not a member of the Communist Party. The only difference is that in Russia, it's Putin's party, and the country's opinion has no meaning.

\***Dmitry Belyaev** is a foreign policy analyst.

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## **The Holocaust: A Synopsis**

Leonard Weinberg  
January 27, 2020

**Between 1942 and its liberation by the Soviets on January 27, 1945, approximately 1.5 million Jews — along with some thousands of gypsies — were murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau.**

**T**he anniversary of the Red Army's liberation of Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, has become a date identified by the UN to commemorate the Holocaust on an annual basis. In the midst of the various ceremonies performed to remember the event, there may be some benefit in recalling exactly what happened in Europe before, during and immediately after the murder of some two-thirds of the continent's prewar Jewish community.

The volume of writing on the subject is enormous. What follows is a brief account of what happened. In so doing, we're following the advice the late Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg's advice that by answering the "what?" question we are then be able to answer the "why?"

Until the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, Nazi policy toward Germany and Austria's relatively small Jewish communities was to encourage their departure

from areas under Nazi control. This in itself created an international problem. In the middle of the worldwide economic depression, few countries, including the United States, were willing to accept a new wave of immigrants. In 1938, An international conference was held at Evian, on the Swiss-French border, to deal with what had become a refugee crisis.

None of the countries attending the meeting were willing to open their doors wide enough to all an influx of Jews. Later in the summer of 1939, the British government issued a white paper severely restricting the admission of European Jews to the UK's mandate of Palestine. In effect, democracies were sealing the borders to prevent Europe's Jews from seeking sanctuary from the Nazi regime's increasingly brutal persecution.

### **To Be Determined**

World War II broke out at the beginning of September 1939 with Hitler's invasion and conquest of Poland. At the time, Poland had a Jewish population of approximately 3 million individuals. In light of this massive population, Reinhard Heydrich, deputy leader of the Third Reich's Schutzstaffel (SS), sent a secret message to forces under his control in now Nazi-occupied Poland. Heydrich's order to the special action detachments — the Einsatzgruppen — was to begin the concentration of Jews into small sealed ghettos. Warsaw, Lodz and Lublin became the largest of these entities. Heydrich indicated this ghettoization was to be a transitional step toward a yet to be determined end.

Some thought was given to exactly what that end would be. Among key Nazi figures, including Hitler, there was consideration given to shipping Jews to the island of Madagascar off the east coast of Africa. But this scheme, and a few others like it, proved unworkable given wartime conditions and the Anglo-French control of the sea lanes. Still, until March-April 1941, the Nazis continued to expel Jews from German-occupied France, forcing them to move to regions of the

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country under the nominally independent control of the Vichy regime.

After March-April 1941, the expulsions stopped. Jews under Nazi control were no longer permitted to leave their own communities. The thought is that in the course of preparing for the German invasion of the Soviet Union, known as Operation Barbarossa, a policy of extermination began to be considered. At any rate, the Nazi invasion began on June 22, 1941, and enjoyed great success through the early months of the fighting. During this time, Einsatzgruppen and members of the Ordnungspolizei — the order police — followed behind the advancing German armies, murdering Jews as they came under German control, in what Hilberg labeled “mobile killing operations.”

At first, the killings were restricted to adult males. Then, at the end of July 1941, Herman Goering — nominally Hitler’s second in command — issued an order calling for the “final solution” to the Jewish question in areas under German control. From that point of clarification, the Nazi goal of total extermination of European Jews was set. There was no more uncertainty and quibbling: The special action squads and, in many cases, their Ukrainian, Latvian and Lithuanian auxiliaries, killed all the Jews in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union they could find.

### **Enter Auschwitz**

By the fall of 1941, it became evident to the Nazi leadership — on this occasion led by the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler — that these mobile killings were too slow, inefficient and demoralizing (to the perpetrators). Some experimentation was needed. Accordingly, SS men tried the use of gas vans — trucks in which the exhaust pipes were shaped to empty into the compartment rather than the rear of the vehicle. By sealing Jews in and driving the van for roughly 45 minutes, the occupants would be asphyxiated.

This technique was first used on a stationary basis at Chelmno, in eastern Poland. It proved to

be sufficiently successful for SS leaders to create new fully-fledged stationary death camps at Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek and Belzec by the end of the year. Gas vans were replaced by stationary truck or tank engines whose exhaust fumes were then used to kill Jews forced into sealed gas chambers.

Such “killing center” operations were well underway when Heydrich and his assistant, Adolph Eichmann, convened the Wannsee Conference in January 1942. This meeting in a suburb of Berlin brought together representatives of government agencies and a handful of SS men to discuss the implementation of the final solution. Their goal, as specified by Heydrich, was to organize the killings as efficiently as possible. They estimated the number of Jews to be killed at over 11 million individuals. The scheme they produced involved a series of steps: Jews were to be identified (not all that easy in Western Europe), concentrated at gathering points and then deported, usually by train, to one of the killing centers.

Enter Auschwitz: The Polish town of Oswiecim is located approximately 30 miles west of Krakow. It had a number of attractions for the Nazis. It was a rail junction for trains heading north/south and east/west. It was attractive for business firms manufacturing synthetic rubber, since it was located on a river and had large deposits of lime nearby — crucial ingredients for making rubber. Before the war, it had barracks used to house Polish army officers — what later became Auschwitz I.

Under Nazi occupation, it came to be used for slave laborers working in the I. G. Farben manufacturing plant and other labor-intensive factories. Birkenau became part of the Auschwitz complex in early 1942 and quickly turned into the Nazis’ principal killing center. Birkenau, or “birch woods” in German, consisted of barracks, which were converted horse barns, and gas chambers. Instead of carbon monoxide, the SS used a pesticide, Zyklon B, to kill those Jews immediately identified as not fit for hard labor. Between 1942 and its liberation by the Soviets,

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approximately 1.5 million Jews — along with some thousands of gypsies — were murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

### **Not the End**

This is not the end of the story, however. As the Red Army approached, those Jews who had survived Birkenau were forced to walk or were taken by train to concentration camps inside Germany. Bergen-Belsen became a major receiver of the leftover Jews. Anne Frank, for example, died of typhus in this camp after arriving from Auschwitz.

Nazi Germany surrendered unconditionally on May 7, 1945. What happened to the Holocaust's perpetrators and survivors?

Among the key perpetrators, Heinrich Himmler committed suicide while in British custody; Reinhard Heydrich was assassinated in 1942 by Czech nationalists outside Prague a few months after the Wannsee conference. Adolph Eichmann escaped to Argentina, thanks to what came to be known as the "rat line," where he was seized by Israeli agents and brought to Israel for trial. He was executed in 1962. Rudolph Hoss, the first commandant of Auschwitz, was tried and executed by Polish authorities in 1947.

Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka, fled to Brazil. He was extradited to Germany but died of a heart attack in 1971 before the end of his war crimes trial. Five leaders of the special action squads were tried and convicted by an allied tribunal held at Nuremberg and hung in 1951. Lesser lights, like the death camp guards, were prosecuted by German courts in succeeding years. Many perpetrators, including Eichmann's top aid, escaped justice.

A few hundred thousand European Jews, those outside the Soviet Union, survived the Holocaust. Some sought to return to their prewar homes. Typically, they were not met with open arms. In Poland and Hungary, there were several pogroms in which survivors were murdered by local townsmen in order to prevent the returning Jews from reclaiming homes and other properties that had been confiscated after their deportation.

Numerous survivors wound up in displaced persons camps, many of which were located in Germany. Thanks to legislation passed by the US Congress in 1949, thousands of displaced persons were able to enter the United States. Not all, though, were Jewish survivors. Some ex-Nazis and their collaborators were also classified as displaced and, as a consequence, were also able to come to America. In later years, these war criminals were identified by the US Justice Department and returned to their countries of origin.

Thousands of Jewish survivors also sought admission to Palestine. Given the sensitive political situation, the country's British rulers blocked their admission. After the British threw up their hands in 1947 and the area briefly came under UN auspices, substantial numbers of Jews were able to make their way into the area that became the state of Israel in 1948.

The above commentary is a brief answer to Hilberg's "what?" question. Answer to the "why?" will have to wait for another occasion.

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## **Cubans Feel the Blow of US Sanctions**

Elton Smole

January 30, 2020

**The latest US sanctions reversed the progress made by the Obama administration, and the brunt of their force is being felt by the very people the measures claim to support.**

**I**n Havana, Cuba, the effects of sanctions imposed by the Trump administration have seeped their way into daily life: the long lines of cars outside gas stations, the dwindling stock on store shelves, the increasingly common apagones, or power outages. In early September



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2019, Cuba's President Miguel Díaz-Canel appeared on live television to address the Cuban people, describing the country's economic situation as "coyuntural," meaning happening on some occasions, but not in a habitual or customary manner.

This diagnosis was ridiculed by many Cubans, all too aware of the decade-long crisis known as the Special Period that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union — a geopolitical shift that decimated the Cuban economy. With more and more symptoms of another lasting economic hardship today, the word "coyuntural" strikes many as an ironic description of a situation that may not be as temporary as it seems.

### **Cuban Thaw**

Upon taking office in 2017, US President Donald Trump immediately vowed to reverse the policies of the Obama-era Cuban thaw, a period which saw the 44th US president become the first to visit Cuba in almost a century, along with the easing of the decades-old embargo, looser travel restrictions and the reopening of embassies in Washington and Havana. "Since December 2014, the Treasury Department and our partners across the Administration have progressively reshaped our regulations in order to empower the Cuban people and enable economic advancements for Cubans and Americans," said Jack Lew, secretary of the treasury under Barack Obama, in a statement announcing the continued easing of sanctions, which were in effect until early 2017.

The Obama-era changes had marked a new potential for economic growth in a country in need of foreign investment to develop its economy. Tourism boomed as a result of these policies, along with changes to Cuba's Constitution in 2019 that expanded the private sector. Cuba became the "fastest growing country on Airbnb ever in the history of our platform," its founder said in 2016. The number of US tourists visiting Cuba annually rose from 63,046 in 2010 to 162,927 in 2015, then nearly doubled in both 2016 and 2017, before plateauing at 637,907 a year into Donald Trump's presidency. Between

2017 and 2018, the number of Americans visiting Cuba rose by a mere 19,561, compared to a 333,749 increase the previous year.

It was on June 16, 2017, that Trump issued a National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM) on "Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba," outlining his hard-line stance. Restrictions on financial transactions, trade and commerce were announced in November of 2017 by the Departments of State, Commerce and the Treasury to implement the NSPM. The Trump administration has continued laying on sanctions, releasing new travel bans, including restrictions on vessels entering Cuba, in June last year.

This affected vessels transporting oil to the island from Venezuela. Cuba depends heavily on oil exports from Venezuela, which have slowed down in recent years as a result of the latter's own economic crisis. Up until 2015, Venezuela supplied Cuba with 90,000 barrels of crude and fuel per day, the majority of the island's 145,000 bpd consumption, according to Reuters. However, sanctions placed by the US on PDVSA, Venezuela's national oil company, have led to a significant decline in its output in recent years, with an estimated \$11-billion loss in proceeds from exports in 2019. For Cuba, which as of 2017 only produces 51,000 bpd, these sanctions have had an extreme impact on daily life.

The Trump administration's policy on Cuba, like that of his predecessor, claims to be in support of the people of Cuba. "We are taking additional steps to financially isolate the Cuban regime. The United States holds the Cuban regime accountable for its oppression of the Cuban people and support of other dictatorships throughout the region, such as the illegitimate Maduro regime," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in September 2019. "Through these regulatory amendments, Treasury is denying Cuba access to hard currency, and we are curbing the Cuban government's bad behavior while continuing to support the long-suffering people of Cuba."

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Although these sanctions claim to be a response to government suppression, such as the arrest of an independent journalist, Roberto Quinones, in September, they do little to achieve their intended purpose of supporting the people of Cuba. In reality, the economic impact of the sanctions is felt most by ordinary Cubans struggling to make ends meet.

The petroleum shortages have caused a large-scale transportation crisis, leading to severely overcrowded public transportation and constant delays. Long lines of cars could be seen outside of gas stations, and some taxi drivers resorted to sleeping in their cabs overnight while waiting for gas, in order to continue working the next day. The University of Havana was forced to shorten the school day by two hours to allow more time for students to commute to class, and the National Library, among other national institutions, turned off its lights and closed its doors early as a way to reduce energy consumption.

In many neighborhoods, power outages have also become increasingly common. During the Special Period in the 1990s, when Cuba faced more extreme oil shortages, the government was forced to implement scheduled power outages across the country. Although the current power cuts tend to be sporadic and temporary, they are a dark reminder of that difficult time, and some fear that the hardships of this so-called “coyuntural period” may become the norm.

Trump’s approach to Cuba has been a policy failure at best, and at worst another chapter in the United States’ long history of exerting its grip on the country under the guise of defending its people. The latest US sanctions reversed the progress made by the Obama administration in reopening diplomatic ties with Cuba and, more than anything, the brunt of their force is being felt by the very people the sanctions claim to support.

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## **With Trump’s Peace Plan on the Table, Palestinians Face an Existential Decision**

Gary Grappo  
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**Donald Trump’s Middle East peace plan is a far cry from what Palestinians have wanted for decades. But it’s time to be realistic.**

**F**ollowing President Donald Trump’s long-awaited unveiling of his “deal of the century” Middle East peace plan on January 28, the Palestinians now confront an existential moment: find a way to make it work or begin wrestling with how to accommodate a single state.

The optics of Trump’s announcement ceremony said it all. A beaming Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu standing beside the US president at such an announcement meant only one thing: This is an Israeli plan. Any plan that could win the immediate and unqualified support of Israel’s conservative prime minister, a well-known opponent of the two-state solution, wasn’t going to resonate with the Palestinians. The fact that no Palestinian participated in its drafting — a foolish, self-inflicted wound on the part of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas — only underscored its receipt on the Palestinian side with a dead on arrival notice.

While short on specifics, however, the plan does offer something the Palestinians feared would be missing — the two-state solution. It offers a notional capital for the proposed Palestinian state, albeit in a distant, non-descript area southeast of East Jerusalem. It bears none of the significance of the Jerusalem revered by most Jews, Christians and Muslims. That Jerusalem will remain wholly and entirely under Israeli sovereignty, according to the White House announcement and released plan.

### **A Patchwork State of Palestine**

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There are many elements of the plan that Palestinians will find distasteful. The Bantustan-like sections of the proposed state with no contiguity is a likely major one. The West Bank is chopped into three sections connected by tunnels and/or bridges, but few, if any, land connections.

And then there's Gaza — always to be a geographically separate portion of the Palestinian state — and two smaller land masses barely connected by a thin strip of land to Gaza and to each other, each lying along the current Israel-Egypt border, which is largely desert. They resemble cheap stones dangling from the Gaza pendant. The two clumps were obvious swaps meant to compensate for West Bank areas to be confiscated by Israel.

Israel will have complete sovereignty over the Jordan Valley. The Palestinian state may retain Jericho but nothing else, making the proposed state an island within the state of Israel.

The desperately-held notion of the right of return, which would have allowed Palestinian refugees to come back to historic Palestine, is dismissed. The historic Palestinian claim had been perennially and firmly rejected by Israelis of all political and religious stripes, and even most of the international community. But the Palestinian leadership had always held out this empty promise to the Palestinian refugee diaspora as a kind of sop. It was never to be, and anyone familiar with the matter knew it.

The Trump plan merely codifies this. Limited numbers of Palestinians will be permitted to return to Israel, but only at Israel's discretion. They would be permitted, if they so choose, to return to the newly independent Palestinian state or to another Arab state willing to take them.

### **The Cold Reality**

The plan is indeed a far cry from what Palestinians have wanted for decades. But it is time to be realistic. The chances of Palestinians getting anything close to what they've wanted evaporated in 2000 and 2001 with the failure of Camp David II and the Taba Talks, respectively.

The former was a colossal miscalculation by Yasser Arafat, and the latter an outcome of Ariel Sharon's impending election. When the Palestinians recklessly launched the Second Intifada, they lost the trust of the Israeli people and any chance of winning anything approximating the Palestinian state of their illusive dreams.

First there was 1947, then 1967, then 1979, then the Oslo I and II Accords of the mid-1990s, followed by the aforementioned missed opportunities of 2000 and 2001, the Bush "roadmap" of the mid-2000s, the ill-fated Mitchell mission of 2010-11 and, finally, the predictably forlorn Kerry effort of 2013-14. While these failures cannot be placed entirely at the feet of the Palestinian leadership, it is clear it failed to achieve something likely much closer to its aspirations when the opportunity was there.

But this is the reality. There is little with which to negotiate now. Their Arab brethren — themselves plagued with restless and hopeless populations, horrendous employment challenges, flagging economies, weak institutions, ever more repressive authoritarian regimes, failed and failing states, and vicious, violent extremist groups — would rather not deal with "the Palestinian problem." They would prefer to put it behind them as quietly as possible. Moreover, Israel, which faces none of those internal problems, is the regional power now and a reliable counterbalance to the real threat — Iran.

The Palestinians stand by themselves. Perhaps Syria and Iran may support their tired cause, but only from the sidelines, not as players.

### **Focus on the Future of the Possible**

And that is why Palestinians must engage with the Israelis on this plan, as difficult as it may be. They can drag it out if they wish — the plan does acknowledge the prospect of further negotiations — but in the end, they must consider some version of this with modest adjustments to accommodate the flaws mentioned above.

If they do, they must also seriously consider becoming a genuine security partner of Israel. A

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threat to Israel's security is a threat to theirs. Moreover, they will want to sync their economy with Israel's as closely as possible for the foreseeable future, using, for example, free trade agreements as the plan envisions, and even favorable investment arrangements. They should also press Israel to allow as many Palestinian workers as possible into Israel. Security, trade, investment and employment opportunities should help to make this a "warm" peace as opposed to the more tepid Egyptian and Jordanian accords.

There is also the possibility that a warm and successful peace may move Israel to lessen some of the more onerous security provisions of the plan.

Should the Palestinians choose to reject this plan, there is one and only one outcome left. Israel will begin annexing the West Bank, starting with the Jordan Valley, as Netanyahu has already proposed but has now postponed, and surely to be followed by settlements. Effectively, the Palestinians will be left with negotiating their status in a single state. With the annexation and the resulting de facto one state, negotiating such a status will be an altogether different and more problematic task.

These are the Palestinians' only two choices. There will be no deus ex machina, like a new Democratic US administration that can offer them better. There's nothing better to be offered now. The better choices, if they ever existed, long faded into history. Settle this longstanding problem now on the best terms that can be negotiated under the proposed plan, make Israel a warm ally and begin to create a future for the Palestinian people.

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