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## Reports

# A Thick Cloud in the US-Iran Climate

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Trump Suleimani [Aljazeera]

## Abstract:

The reckless assassination of top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in foreign land was, under international law, a breach of the U.N. Charter, a violation of Iraq's territorial integrity, an infringement on Iraq's political independence, and an act of state-sponsored terrorism. America's January 3 drone strike in Baghdad also killed several senior Iraqi military officials, a huge disrespect for the host nation.

The assassinations at the direction of U.S. President Donald Trump transformed the red lines. Trump probably took the biggest gamble of his presidency. By sharply escalating U.S. hostilities with Iran, the Trump administration stepped into a very dangerous territory that it may not be able to control the consequences. Initially, American officials tried to justify the assassination, claiming that Soleimani posed an "imminent threat" to American lives in Iraq. But there were obvious loopholes in their justification. "If there actually was an 'imminent' threat to U.S. interests in the region, then removing Soleimani doesn't remove that threat, because there were presumably already cells in place in Iraq ready to attack American personnel ... the underlying intelligence the Trump administration has cited as necessitating the strike against Soleimani is 'razor thin'." (1) Trump ordered the airstrike to "prevent future attacks but this assassination endangers Americans and makes both the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and Iran to retaliate ... It could backfire on the Americans ... (It

could make those groups act with even less discipline, so our people are still at serious risk.”

(2)

The same day the U.S. killed Soleimani, American forces carried out another mission to kill Abdul Reza Shahlai, a commander of Iran's elite Quds Force, but failed. It did not result in his death.

“The unsuccessful operation may indicate that the Trump administration's killing of ... Soleimani was part of a broader operation than previously explained ... This suggests a mission with a longer planning horizon and a larger objective.” (3)

### **Pre and Post-Soleimani Era**

The outrageous killing pushed the entire region into greater instability. It marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new chaotic history. In the post-Soleimani era, the U.S. has to spend billions of dollars to protect its military bases and troops in the volatile Middle East and yet it may not be able to do so. By killing Soleimani, Trump dangerously undermined international order and promoted the law of the jungle. “Soleimani’s assassination will have profound and grave consequences for Iran-U.S. relations. It was as big as the CIA-orchestrated 1953 coup that toppled the legitimate government of Mohammad Mosaddegh. The assassination proved that the Trump administration is seeking regime change in Iran,” prominent Iranian political analyst Ali Shokouhi told the writer. Associate Professor of International Relations Ali Adami says Soleimani’s killing showed that the U.S. neither has idea nor ability to create order in West Asia.



Iran's Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh as pictured on the cover of Time magazine as 1951's "Man of the Year." Two years later, he was overthrown by a CIA-sponsored coup.

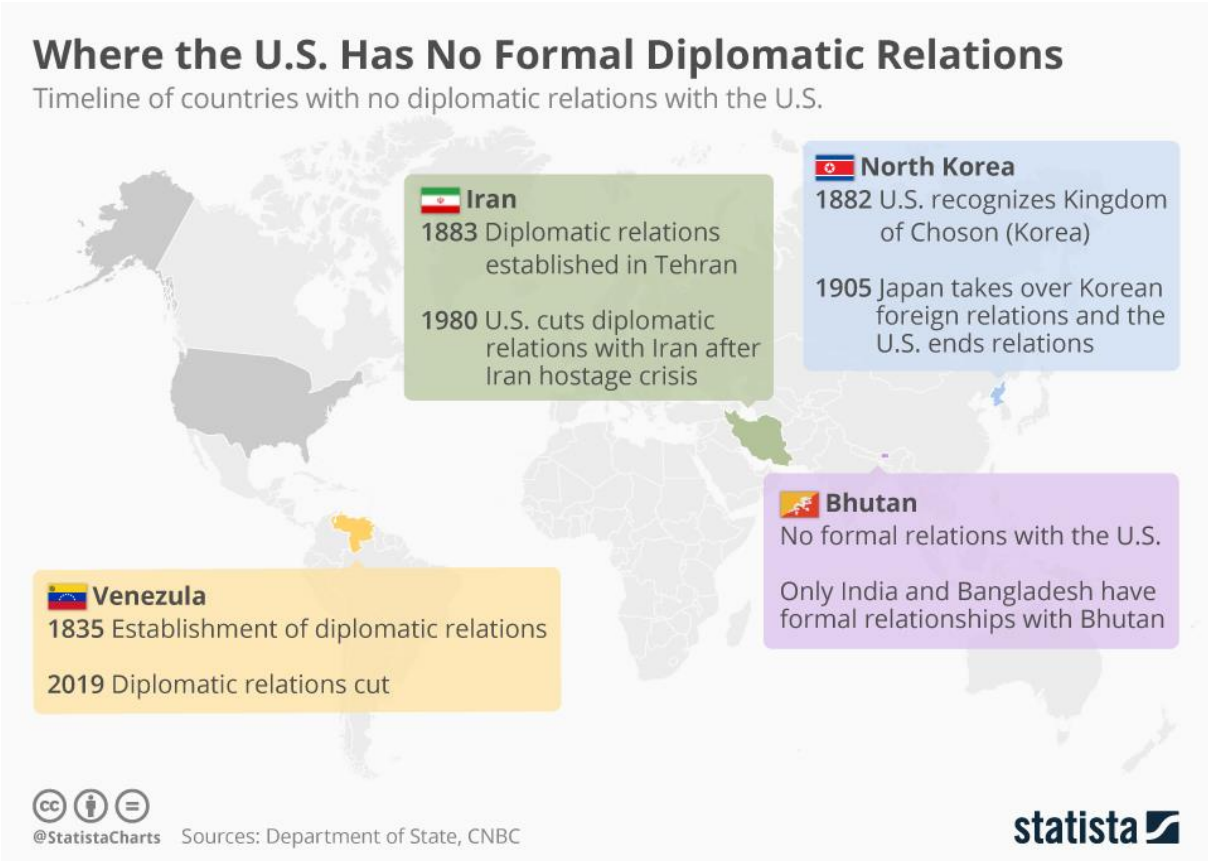
### Closed Door of Diplomacy

Soleimani's assassination demonstrated that the Trump administration has effectively shut the door of dialogue. Denying visa recently to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to attend a U.N. Security Council meeting in New York was another piece of evidence showing that the U.S. has closed the path of diplomacy. When Washington says it wants talks with Tehran without preconditions, it has already prepared a list of 12 conditions as spelled out by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The conditions, among other demands, want Iran to stop uranium enrichment altogether, end its ballistic missile program and stop supporting its regional allies such as Hezbollah, Hamas or Houthis in Yemen. (4)

Iran considers the conditions "insulting", calling them "brazen contravention of international law, well-established international norms, and civilized behavior." (5) "Pompeo's 12 demands for Iran read more like a declaration of war than a path to peace. The United States has effectively called for Iran to surrender all of its interests." (6) Trump abandoned Barack Obama's policy of "interaction" with Iran and instead adopted a new belligerent policy of "confrontation." His calculation is based on the assumption that Iran will finally back down in the face of tremendous pressure and that Iranian leaders will crawl to the table to sign a deal

he arrogantly desires. But that’s not what history provides. Trump has ignored Iran’s national pride and the widely-tested view that the Islamic Republic doesn’t give in to pressure.

Washington’s unilateral sanctions were a declaration of an all-out economic war against Iran and Soleimani’s assassination has taken the war to a highly dangerous military level. But this reckless policy may at one point spiral out of control and lead to a disastrous all-out war with grave and unpredictable consequences. “By assassinating Soleimani, the U.S. closed the door to bilateral talks. The only path open would be for the U.S. to return to the JCPOA,” Shokouhi opined.



No US Diplomacy (Statista)

### Iran’s Calibrated Retaliation Averts War

There was absolutely no chance that Iran would not respond to the assassination of its icon soldier. The assassination unified the Iranians. Large funeral processions for Soleimani and his companions in Iraq, with thousands of mourners in attendance, and millions of Iranians who paid tribute to their national hero \_ the largest *processions* in Iran since the 1989 *funeral* for the Islamic Republic’s founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini \_ was widely seen as a street referendum in support of Soleimani’s strategy.

Having gained and displayed public support, Iran on January 8 targeted two military bases inside Iraq housing U.S. troops - Ain al-Assad air base in western Iraq and al-Taji air base situated north of Baghdad - to avenge Soleimani's killing. The United States says no one was killed while Iran claims there were casualties without offering evidence. But Pentagon admitted on January 29 that 50 U.S. troops were diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries suffered in Iran's missile strike, contradicting Trump who had said no troops had been injured.

(7)

Iran's intention was to keep the strike limited and proportional. Firing a barrage of missiles from its own soil was retaliation, not escalation. It was intended to give a direct military response to America's act of war. But it was not designed to cause American casualties that would very likely lead to a full-fledged regional war. "Experts believe failure to inflict casualties was deliberate and is sign overt conflict is ending ... The judgment is that the attack ... was demonstrative, given that the Iranian missiles used were believed to be accurate to a range of 50 meters and could have caused more serious damage if Tehran had wanted to."

(8)

Iran's warnings in advance - without specifying targets - had alerted American military officials that missiles would hit them, giving their troops a chance to hide in underground bunkers and time to take steps to avoid casualties. Iran's overt response had to be bold and look quite impressive on television. The Guard's calibrated and carefully-designed military response to the U.S. did the job without leading to an all-out war. Iran showed the way to Trump, opening the path to de-escalation by the nature of its missile barrage. It led to Trump tweeting: "All is well!"

Iran's wisdom in designing "proportional retaliation" plus the accuracy of its missiles in hitting targets were instrumental in allowing de-escalation possible. Trump had threatened to target 52 sites in Iran if U.S. bases were attacked. Iran did so and Trump bitterly swallowed the missiles and backed down.

Iran's missile strikes were the first military strike by a state against the U.S. in 79 years since World War II when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. Iranian missiles destroyed the selected buildings inside the sprawling al-Assad air base. Should Iran's missiles had not been accurate in hitting targets after flying 700 kilometers in the air, Trump would have likely been encouraged to respond and further escalate the tensions.

## What's Next?

The overt phase of Iran's revenge appears to be over. But, dangers remain. In the words of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei "For now, a slap was delivered on their (U.S.) face." (9) But that's not the end. Trump has Soleimani's blood on his hands and he will be responsible for its consequences. The Trump administration opened a wound that it will not be able to heal. Adami believes Soleimani's killing "was not assassination of an individual or an Iranian national. It was assassination of an identity that knows no borders. It was assassination of values. In the post-Soleimani era, no one may be able to control the wounded Resistance Front. Soleimani's killing didn't undermine the logic for resistance but strengthened it."

Soleimani has a huge number of followers throughout the Middle East who will take revenge and they will not operate under Iran's control. Iran took its own revenge. Now, the Resistance Front throughout the Middle East, including PMF in Iraq, will take its own revenge at the time and place of its own choosing. America murdered senior Iraqi military officials including PMF leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on their own soil. It won't be a surprise if they retaliate by targeting American soldiers, their top commanders or their bases and installations. But Seyed Reza Mousavinia says attacks by PMF, and other non-state actors against U.S. targets, would be attributed to Iran and Tehran doesn't want an escalation at this point.

"Iran took its revenge by its barrage of missiles. Trump is pursuing a policy of active confrontation. His hostile policy has increased the likelihood of both war and talks. Iran is a rational actor. It doesn't want to enter a conventional war with a global power it can't win. At the same time, negotiations can't be achieved without the U.S. lifting sanctions," he said.

To Iran, the befitting response to Soleimani assassination would be to kick American troops out of the Middle East. According to Khamenei, "Military action as such (Iran's missile strike) is not sufficient. What is important is that the seditious American presence in the region must end." (10) Americans should just ask themselves this question. What would they do and how would they react if Iran had assassinated U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper or the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley?

The United States has effectively encircled Iran by setting up military bases all around it and stationing about 68,000 troops, 11,000 kilometers away from its borders. The prime responsibility of every state is to protect its own security and the security of its people. Soleimani's assassination proved beyond any doubt that U.S. military presence in the region is an existential danger to Iran and a threat not only to Iran's territorial integrity but also Iraq's security.

That's one reason why the Iraqi Parliament, in reaction to the U.S. drone attack, approved a resolution January 5 calling for the expulsion of American troops from Iraq. A majority of about 180 legislators voted in favor of the nonbinding resolution. Sunni and Kurdish lawmakers didn't attend the session but the resolution and the January 24 "Million-Man March" protest in Baghdad sent a clear message to Washington that most Iraqis want U.S. troops, estimated at over 5,200, out of their country.

Should American forces not leave Iraq peacefully, in the words of Iraqi militia commander Qais al-Khazali, they "would be considered an occupying force" and kicked out by force. (11) Zarif says Soleimani's assassination is the beginning of the end to U.S. military presence in the region. "End of U.S. malign presence in West Asia has begun." (12) But, Mousavinia believes while expelling U.S. forces would serve Iran's interests, it may not be realistic to expect that it would happen anytime soon. "Kicking out U.S. forces from this region may not be feasible within the next five years," he said.

Soleimani's assassination has not made the Middle East safer for U.S. troops. Iranian officials have indicated that Soleimani being dead is more dangerous to U.S. forces than being alive. "In his death, the Iranian general may cost the United States far more than it gained by his killing." (13)

A brazen threat by U.S. envoy Brian Hook, that the new Quds Force Chief General Esmail Ghaani "will meet the same fate" as Soleimani, if he follows the same path, indicates that Washington has no intention to change its belligerent policy. (14) Iran's military legend was the champion of asymmetrical warfare. It's the successful war of the weak against the strong. So, it's likely that Iran and its friends will take revenge in the Soleimani style. Soleimani's death



undoubtedly is a major loss for Iran. He was the face of Iran's regional strategy but Tehran's strategy would now go beyond him.

## In the Shadow of the Assassinated General

Soleimani carried out Iran's security strategy across the Middle East from Afghanistan to Lebanon to Gaza Strip. He was the celebrated commander of the Resistance Front. He inspired Lebanese and Palestinian fighters to stand up to Israeli occupation and assisted Iraqis to put up resistance against the U.S. invasion and occupation of their land. His death will have profound regional consequences. Soleimani's removal could be described as "assassination of the century" since his killing is believed to be part of a scheme to pave the way for Trump's infamous "deal of the century." (15) "The Soleimani assassination is America's most consequential strike this century." (16)

The U.S. and Israel see the Resistance Front a major obstacle in the way of their scheme. So, Soleimani, a champion of this front, needed to be removed. But, it's simplistic to assume that decapitating Soleimani will open the way for U.S. and Israeli domination of this region.

Soleimani made Iran the most consequential player in the Middle East. He led Iran's public diplomacy - reaching out to people rather than governments - inspiring people to defend their rights, their country and their identity.

It is not difficult to understand Trump's strategy of confronting Iran: Imposing maximum pressure to obtain maximum leverage ahead of any talks to dismantle Iran's uranium enrichment program. Furthermore, his strategy has targeted the two main elements of Iran's regional power: Its ballistic missiles and its regional allies. Removing these two elements will be a key to give "deal of the century" a minimum of chance to work. Iran has learnt the hard lesson that the international system is not based on ethics or even international law but power. If you are not powerful, you will be bullied, humiliated and toppled. That's why Washington seeks to take these two elements away from Iran because it doesn't want Iran to be strong.

Trump's calculation is that "maximum pressure" strategy will either culminate in the collapse of Iran's ruling system or its surrender. But very likely, none will be achieved. Trump's coercive diplomacy will only result in greater chaos and instability in the region. No surprise to assume that Iran's Quds Force will do everything in its power to make America's military deployment

in Iraq and elsewhere in West Asia unsustainable. Trump's "deal of the century" is a betrayal of the two-state solution based on 1967 borders. It ignores U.N. Security Council resolutions that call Israeli settlements in the West Bank illegal and support East Jerusalem to be the future capital of an independent Palestinian state. Under Trump's plan, Israel maintains sovereignty over west of the Jordan River, an undivided Jerusalem will be Israel's capital, and Israel will annex all Jewish settlements scattered throughout the West Bank. Palestinian refugees are required to give up their right of return. Palestinians have to accept a path to a future so-called state in a territory carved up by Israeli settlements and roads. Israel will have full sovereignty and control of the eastern border with Jordan. Palestinian enclaves in the West Bank in a future state will have no borders with the outside world. Palestinian groups have to be disarmed and dismantled. Many have likened the proposed archipelago of Palestinian enclaves under Israeli security control to the apartheid-era South Africa.

Under his plan, Trump has generously donated Palestinian lands to Israel as if it is his personal property, telling Netanyahu to unilaterally annex it in Israel's favor and take as much land as he wants. "After the nonsense that we heard today we say a thousand no's to the 'deal of the century,'" said Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. "We will not kneel and we will not surrender." (17)



The Ironies of the US-Iranian Relations (Getty)

The Trump's administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moving the U.S. Embassy there had already turned the U.S. into a warring side, not a mediator. And Trump's proposed plan has been designed and developed without consultation with Palestinians. Even as Trump unveiled his plan, he named Soleimani. He effectively reaffirmed that Soleimani's assassination was a prelude to his "deal of the century."

"Trump's 'deal of the century' is no deal at all. Rather than working to bridge the profound gap between Israelis and Palestinians that bedeviled U.S. policymakers for decades, the Trump administration has spent the past three years doling out concessions to the former, while placing its boot on the latter." (18)

### **Destabilization and Control**

The Trump administration's 2017 National Security Strategy stipulates that "The United States seeks a Middle East that is ... not dominated by any power hostile to the United States." (19) The U.S. has been unable to impose American values and its way of life on the Middle East. Under George W. Bush, during the "unipolar moment", neoconservatives engineered "a policy coup" in the wake of the September 11 attacks to destroy governments in seven countries in five years. Their policy was "regime change" by force. The Bush administration started with Iraq in 2003 and had planned to then move to "Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and, finishing off, Iran." (20) But the entire strategy failed after the U.S. was caught in the Iraq quagmire with dire consequences. The Iraq war disaster contributed to America's decline.

Under Obama and Trump, the United States has followed the same policy of imposing U.S. values on the Middle East through a new tactic: Destabilize and control. It has employed "restraint" strategy, meaning that it pursues the strategy of "buck-passing" - getting other states to deter or fight a rival or enemy while it remains on the sidelines. The U.S. wants its allies to pay the "expenses" and "blood", not America. It includes pitting traditionalists against modernists so that the two opposing forces in the Middle East challenge and undermine each other; people get fed up with their Islamic way of life; and finally embrace American values in the long term.

Simultaneously, Washington has worked to weaken governments and push the region backward. When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) emerged, it was Soleimani going to the frontlines to fight it. He was the international face of the Resistance Front against ISIS

terrorists. Without Soleimani, Baghdad would have fallen to ISIS in 2014. He successfully defeated ISIS while the Americans bombed one selected ISIS target for publicity and then assisted terrorists by bombing Syrian army bases to pave the way for ISIS advance. Soleimani's assassination was a gift to the terrorists who were defeated in the battlefield in the hands of the Iranian legend. Rarely anybody can dispute the fact that ISIS was the winner of Soleimani's death. "There's a winner from the US-Iran crisis, and it's ISIS." (21)

The United States does not want stable governments in the Middle East, excluding Israel, and a phenomenon like ISIS helps America's cause. It was not a slip of tongue when Trump called Obama "the founder of ISIS." (22) But, he stops short of acknowledging his own support for ISIS.

Building strong governments in the Middle East is detrimental to U.S. interests. Washington wants weak governments for a double purpose: To ensure Israel's domination and make people in the Middle East give up their local values and embrace American way of life instead. "Deal of the century" is a plan in this direction.



US former Secretary of State John Kerry discussing the Nuclear Deal with his Iranian counterpart Mohamed Javad Zarif

## Triggering Dispute Resolution Mechanism

Europe appears to have moved closer to the Trump administration's position on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at the cost of losing its own face, values of multilateralism and jeopardizing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). By triggering the dispute resolution mechanism, the European trio - Britain, France and Germany - have "kickstarted a process" that, if not resolved, could finally lead to the re-imposition of U.N.

sanctions against Iran and result in “the collapse of the 2015 nuclear deal ... It would represent a severe blow to the cause of multilateral nuclear non-proliferation.” (23)

Admission by German Defense Minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, that the Trump administration had “secretly” warned the European trio that the U.S. would impose a 25 percent tariffs on European cars if they didn’t trigger the dispute resolution mechanism demonstrates that Washington has openly resorted to extortion and extraordinary use of economic leverage to achieve foreign policy goals. (24) Unfortunately, Europe has given in to Trump bullying. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s call to “replace the Iran deal with the Trump deal” demonstrates that Europe is not honest when it claimed that it activated the dispute mechanism because of Iran’s step-by-step breaches of the nuclear deal. The reason: They didn’t call for resolving the disputes. Instead, they’ve demanded that the “Trump deal” replace the JCPOA.

After the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the multilateral nuclear deal on 8 May 2018, Iran remained committed to all its obligations for one year in the hope that Europe will keep its part of the deal. Europe used to buy 500,000 barrels a day of crude oil from Iran. Under the threat of U.S. sanctions, it stopped buying Iranian oil. Their companies withdrew from Iran. There were no banking relations. Under the JCPOA, Europe was required to normalize trade relations with Iran but it did not. Europe had promised to activate a special purpose vehicle, known as the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), to facilitate non-dollar trade with Iran but it was never implemented.



President Reagan's team during the Contra-Arms deal [Getty]

A disappointed Iran began to gradually reduce its commitments to the JCPOA as of May 2019 to restore the balance since it could not unilaterally continue to abide by the deal while Europe did nothing for Iran's benefit. Iran has clarified that all the steps it has taken in recent months are reversible if Europeans abide by their obligations under the deal. The JCPOA is not dead yet but is moving towards a gradual death. Iran has now threatened that it will pull out of NPT if U.N. sanctions return. "Europeans submission to Trump's bullying has jeopardized the JCPOA. Europeans won't get the Trump deal by destroying the JCPOA. They have stabbed Iran in the back. They've betrayed Iran and yet are moving to kill the deal. This approach will only lead to greater tensions," Shokouhi said.

Iran continues to provide full access to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to monitor Iran's nuclear facilities. It also implements the Additional Protocol, which allows intrusive inspections of its sites. But, this may not remain so if Europe continues to bend towards Trump. "Europe is gambling on keeping the 2015 Iran nuclear deal alive by threatening to destroy it — a risky, oddly timed strategy that could backfire badly ... dispute resolution mechanism starts a clock that the Europeans may not be able to control, subject to unpredictable actions by the leaders of both Iran and the United States." (25)

Iran currently finds no reason to hold talks with an administration that speaks through assassination and economic terrorism. Iran had a multilateral deal with the U.S. and Trump

broke it. Why should Iran re-negotiate a deal with the U.S. when it violated its own signature?

Why should Iran consider the terms of a proposed deal that's tantamount to surrender?

But things may change if respectful language replaces bullying.

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