

Soleimani Killing: A Change for the Better?

America's Middle East policy has been disastrous since Ike, with the exception of the Nixon-Kissinger days.

by Conrad Black



President Trump entered office having promised to smash ISIS, avoid endless Middle Eastern wars, counteract terrorism, and support Israel. He has been accused of lurching about the region without a consistent policy. Dennis Ross, Middle East negotiator in the Clinton administration, wrote in the *Washington Post* on January 11 that Trump's partial withdrawals would be exploited by Russian president Vladimir Putin, as if Russia were still a great-power rival to the U.S. and Putin possessed any ability to discomfit the United States in that region. Trump is happy for Turkey and Russia to assert themselves in Syria and stabilize it, avoiding militant Islamic theocracy, humanitarian disasters, and threats to Israel. He has devised a new policy that appears so far to be

feasible: backing the informal alliance of Israel with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan in repulsing Iranian influence in the region, urging Russia and Turkey to keep the lid on Syria, and ratcheting up sanctions against Iran until it desists from seeking nuclear weapons. Ross rails against the non-recourse to “soft power” and Trump’s failure to get productive negotiations going. No negotiations in the Middle East have been productive of anything useful since the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, and there is no such thing as soft power in the Middle East. Ross and his ilk are victims of what Dr. Johnson called “the disingenuousness of years”; they are selling a failed policy.

President Trump has withdrawn American ground forces gradually from untenably overexposed positions, while responding with disproportionate severity to attacks on the United States itself. The idea that 400 American soldiers could separate the Turkish army from the PKK Kurdish guerrilla army was rubbish. The entire foreign-policy establishment is now effectively in mourning for Soleimani because of anticipated Iranian revenge. But the United States has overwhelming economic power to impose sanctions, especially since it has ceased to be an oil importer, and it has an unlimited ability to obliterate hard targets from the air at almost no risk to its own personnel. This is a winning and unanswerable combination, and the floundering and fumbling of the Iranian leadership after the removal of Soleimani illustrates this, as did their inadvertent destruction of a civil airliner and denial of responsibility for two days, and their “revenge” on America of a fireworks display of cruise missiles fired directly into Iraq that injured no Americans.

Negotiations in the Middle East are usually useless, and American ambitions in the region are now few, simple, and attainable. The U.S. doesn’t care who governs the countries there, as long as they don’t breed or sponsor terrorists or endanger the survival of Israel. The U.S. is strangling the

region's only menace to the world – a potentially nuclear theocracy in Iran – and it can counterstrike instantly to a power of ten against any attack on it, as the reprisal against Soleimani one day after the Iranian-inspired assault on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad demonstrated. Predictions from Ross and others of great Iranian reprisals are bunk. The Pentagon has made it clear that it could destroy every military target in Iran in 30 minutes. Clear aims, avoidance of endless wars and negotiations, and swift and heavy revenge for any provocations is the Trump policy.

The uniform, reflexive reaction to the death of Soleimani of the old State Department and their tightly linked alliance across present and former official Washington has reminded us of their prolonged failures, apart from the golden window of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, and President Carter's success at Camp David in 1978. The Roosevelt and Truman administrations were, correctly, not prepared to uphold the retention of British and French colonial governments in any Asian or African country and were concerned that the local Communists, if they monopolized championship of self-rule, could take them all over.

President Truman reluctantly agreed to support the creation of Israel as a Jewish state, partly to avoid permitting Stalin and the Soviet Union to appear as the principal sponsors of Jews around the world. The Eisenhower administration was angered by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's espousal of Cold War neutrality and his rather unsubtle efforts to play the Soviet and Western blocs off against each other. Eisenhower abruptly reneged on his promise to lead financing of the grandiose Aswan Dam project on the Upper Nile on July 19, 1956, and even eliminated CARE relief to Egypt. Nasser was the rising star of pan-Arab nationalism and of the neutralist movement with India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, Yugoslavia's President Tito, and Indonesia's President Sukarno. This about-face gave Nasser all the provocation he

thought he needed to seize the Suez Canal from the British and the French and arrange the funding of the Aswan Dam by the USSR. In one of the most hare-brained operations in the history of either country, Britain and France pre-positioned forces in Cyprus and then encouraged Israel to invade Egypt and, masquerading as self-nominated peacemakers, invaded Egypt also to restore peace and take back the Suez Canal. It was insane and they didn't even execute it well militarily, though the Israelis occupied all of Sinai very crisply.

President Eisenhower, in the middle of his reelection campaign, and as the Soviets suppressed the Hungarian revolution, declared American support for Egypt, and undermined the British pound in international currency markets. It was too late to get any credit from Egypt, and the U.S. government had the greatest argument with Britain since the Venezuela Boundary dispute in 1895, as Egypt rushed headlong into the arms of the Kremlin, taking a good deal of the Arab world with it. The United States then effectively played only a modest role in the Middle East, supporting Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War, initiated by the Arabs and won by Israel. Yasir Arafat became the Palestinian leader in place of Jordan's King Hussein, after Jordan lost the West Bank to Israel in 1967. When Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, successfully crossed the Suez Canal and penetrated the Israeli Bar Lev Line in the Yom Kippur War of 1973, the Nixon administration intervened by practically supplying Israel with a new air force but also restraining Israel from surrounding an Egyptian army, so that an honorable and unembarrassing peace could be negotiated. This led to the great feats of shuttle diplomacy of Henry Kissinger, arranging peace between Israel and Syria and Jordan.

The Camp David agreements restored Sinai to Egypt, reopened the Suez Canal after it had been closed for eight years, and saw the exchange of embassies between Israel and Egypt. It also led to the assassination of President Sadat, and to a

series of spurious “land for peace” arrangements between Israel and the Palestinians. These were givebacks of land Israel had gained in wars started and lost by the Arabs (1948, 1967). There was no peace – merely cease-fires that were not observed by the Palestinians. On the heels of the triumph at Camp David, which erased the Aswan Dam and Suez fiasco, President Carter committed the second colossal American blunder in the Middle East and effectively undermined the shah of Iran, on the theory that the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini represented democratic reform. The proportions of that catastrophe need not be elaborated.

Even President Reagan, despite the complete success of his Cold War policy and his intermittent ferocity with Iranian provocations, lost his judgment in dealing with Iran and sent his third national-security advisor, Bud McFarlane, to Tehran in disguise (a red wig), with an autographed Bible for Khomeini, as he negotiated ransom for hostages in Lebanon in a complicated and mad scheme that involved Israel selling American arms to Iran at a profit and remitting the capital gains to the Contras fighting the Communist Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Reagan destabilized his whole administration with the Iran-Contra nonsense. George H. W. Bush deftly evicted Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991 and President Clinton made a spirited effort at a comprehensive agreement at Taba at the end of his term in 2000, but Arafat didn't want peace. The PLO leader would have become just the unimportant chief of a dusty little sliver of a country instead of one of the world's celebrities, and idol of the Arab masses.

The next American Middle East debacle, George W. Bush's return to Iraq in 2003 to transform it into a democracy, has been the most horrifying shambles of all: the disintegration of the country and Iranian domination of much of it, a humanitarian tragedy with millions of refugees, and the intensified advance into the Arab world of terrorist clients of the Iranian theocracy (Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthi

in Yemen). And to complete the cycle of American Middle Eastern foreign-policy disasters, from Aswan and Suez to the exit of the shah to the second Iraqi invasion, Obama muscled five other major countries into agreeing that Iran could develop nuclear-tipped missiles and warheads but would defer the creation of the fissile material to load such warheads for ten years (half of which have now passed). The inspection system is very inadequate, and as a signing bonus, Obama released \$150 billion of frozen assets, which has been largely squandered on Iran's terror campaign masterminded by the late Qasem Soleimani.

Those who have had a hand in any of these colossal failures have no standing to criticize what appears to be the only plausible American policy in the Middle East since the piping days of Nixon and Kissinger.

First published in [*National Review*](#).