Today's Issues Reading Feb 9

For this Sunday, February 9, the Today's Issues group will discuss two essays from the February 13 issue of the New York Review of Books:

Page 32, Geoffrey Wheatcroft, Boris Johnson: The Opportunist Triumphant

Page 39, Steven Simon, The Middle East: Trump Stumbles In

The group meets in the parlor of the Religious Education Building next to the church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Please do the reading and join our lively discussion.

Copies of both readings are attached.

The Opportunist Triumphant
Geoffrey WheatcroftFEBRUARY 13, 2020 ISSUE
Boris Johnson
Boris Johnson; drawing by John Springs
In October 1922 Conservative members of Parliament voted to fight the next election as a separate party, calling time on their coalition with the Liberals, with whom they had governed Britain since 1915. David Lloyd George resigned immediately as prime minister, never to hold office again. Over the next twenty-four months, there were three general elections, four governments, and four prime ministers. So the recent turbulence of British politics, with its three elections and three prime ministers since May 2015, wasn't unprecedented. In October 1924 the Conservatives under Stanley Baldwin swept away the first-ever Labour government in a landslide, and in December 2019 the Conservatives under Boris Johnson likewise routed the Labour Party. Baldwin was educated at Harrow and Cambridge and was at one time president of the Classical Association; Johnson went to Eton and Oxford and likes to parade the classics.

And there the comparisons end. Baldwin had damned Lloyd George—"A dynamic force is a very terrible thing; it may crush you, but it is not necessarily right"—in words that could apply to Johnson, who has been compared to Disraeli and even Churchill but may resemble Lloyd George more than either. "His rule was dynamic and sordid at the same time," A.J.P. Taylor wrote of "LG"; "he repaid loyalty with disloyalty," and, not least, he was "the first prime minister…since the Duke of Grafton [in the 1760s] to live openly with his mistress," until now. "A very terrible thing" describes how his enemies and critics see Johnson, but he has certainly crushed them. By backing Leave in the 2016 referendum on British membership in the European Union, seizing the leadership of the Conservative Party last summer, precipitating an election, and then winning a large majority, he has achieved total command of domestic politics.

In October Johnson called for Britain "to be released from the subjection of a parliament that has outlived its usefulness," which one commentator called "appallingly fascistic" words, but

they worked. The parliamentary stalemate of the past three years is broken. Any forlorn hopes of somehow reversing the result of the referendum are finished, the Brexit legislation has been passed, and on January 31, after forty-seven years “in Europe,” the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

How did this startling turn of events come about? In 2015 David Cameron and the Tories confounded the pundits by winning a parliamentary majority. As I wrote in these pages at the time, a real portent at that election was the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the right-wing Europhobic party led by Nigel Farage.1 UKIP has only ever elected one MP to Parliament, but in 2015 it won 12.6 percent of the popular vote, and its candidates ran second in 120 districts, forty-four of them held by Labour. Farage has never himself won a parliamentary seat, but he has some claim to being the most influential British politician of our time. Even so, the Parliament elected in 2015, like those elected in 2010 and in 2017, contained a clear majority of MPs who supported remaining in the EU, including most Tory members.

Before the 2015 election, Cameron had promised to hold a referendum on EU membership, as a tactical maneuver to neutralize UKIP and the noisy Europhobes in his party. In 1975 Harold Wilson had done the same: two years after the United Kingdom had joined the European Economic Community (EEC), he held, and easily won, a referendum to confirm its membership as a way of dealing with divisions in his Labour Party. In 2004 Tony Blair announced out of the blue and to the horror of his Europhile supporters that a referendum would be held on the new European Constitution. This was the result of a private deal he had made with the relentlessly Europhobic Rupert Murdoch, in return for the continuing support of Murdoch’s tabloid The Sun before the general election the following spring. When that election coincided with referendums in which the Dutch and the French rejected the constitution, Blair told the Commons that now “there is no point in having a referendum, because of the uncertainty it would produce,” and was reminded by the Tory MP Angela Browning of what he had told The Sun only weeks before: “Even if the French voted no, we would have a referendum. That is a government promise.”

Quite lacking Wilson’s sinuous guile or Blair’s shamelessness, Cameron set a trap and then walked into it himself. He may have thought that he could avoid keeping his promise like Blair, or that he could pull off a victory like Wilson. Had he, or his advisers, had the wit or knowledge, he could have quoted the two outstanding prime ministers since the war. In 1945 Churchill wanted to hold a referendum to extend his wartime coalition until the Japanese surrender but was told by Clement Attlee, still deputy prime minister in the coalition though soon to rout Churchill and the Tories in a historic election, “I could not consent to the introduction into our national life of a device so alien to all our traditions as the referendum, which has only too often been the instrument of Nazism and fascism.” And thirty years later, Margaret Thatcher agreed: “Lord Attlee was right when he said that the referendum was a device of dictators and demagogues.”

We don’t have fascism or dictators in England yet, but we have plenty of demagogues. The Leave campaign during the referendum was a display of naked and frequently mendacious

demagoguery, quite possibly with Russian help, and Thatcher's apprehensions have been amply justified by events. After losing any vote, it can be tempting to say, in Éamon de Valera's deathless words, that although the people might seem to have declared their will, "they did not declare that will as we know it to be their will." But referendums really are dubious, as Attlee and Thatcher said, not least because if you ask people a question about This, they may well give an answer to That.

In every opinion poll for many years past, "Europe" was far down the list of voters' concerns. Very few cared about the European Court of Justice and the Brexiteers' other bugbears; in one poll four years ago, barely one British citizen in a hundred thought membership in the European Union was the most important political question. But voting against "Europe" was an expression of the general and perfectly understandable resentment of so many people in postindustrial England who felt ignored and disdained by their leaders. The divisions exposed by the referendum were depressing and ominous. If the vote had been confined to those over sixty, Leave would have gained far more than 52 percent, but if confined to those under thirty, Remain would have won easily; nearly 70 percent of university graduates voted Remain, about the same percentage of those with minimal educational qualifications voted Leave, and that divide was reflected again at the 2019 election. The Oxonian Johnson could borrow the undereducated Donald Trump's words: "I love the poorly educated."

That's not the only transatlantic echo. At the heart of the December election was the disastrous failure of Labour and its leader. Three years before, on the night the "firewall" states Hillary Clinton had neglected because they were so obviously safe—Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin—fell to Donald Trump, one of her team exclaimed, "What happened to our fucking firewall?" Labour supposed that its own "red wall" in the working-class Midlands and North was safe forever, and in the early hours of December 13, as seats held by Labour for more than seventy or eighty years fell to the Tories—Wrexham, Bolsover, Bassetlaw, Wakefield—someone at Labour headquarters likely asked a similar baffled question.

Only an accident of history had made Jeremy Corbyn Labour leader in 2015: Labour was demoralized after two defeats, Blair's legacy was discredited by needless wars and personal greed, a change to party rules meant that anyone who paid less than the price of a pint of beer could join and vote for the party leader, and there was a sudden craze for a man most voters had never heard of. Corbyn had acquired a package of hard-left views and prejudices more than forty years before, and he has never since changed his mind, or seems to have thought very much, about anything. One of those views was that "Europe" was a capitalist conspiracy. Corbyn voted against EEC membership in 1975, opposed every European treaty since, and damned the single market as "free trade dogma." His halfhearted, mumbled support for Remain in the referendum was unconvincing, Labour's position was hard to discern, and many Labour districts voted Leave. Nonetheless, when Theresa May became prime minister after the referendum and Cameron's departure, and then called an unnecessary election in 2017 in the expectation of increasing her majority, Labour enjoyed an unforeseen resurgence, rising from 30 percent of the vote in 2015 to 40 percent in 2017.

Then the bubble burst, and that vote now looks like what the stock market calls a dead-cat bounce. Although Corbyn has been an MP since 1983, few voters had any idea who he was when he became leader, but the more they learned about him the less they liked him. That package of views—his claim that the Falklands War was “a Tory plot to keep their money-making friends in business,” “anti-Zionism” that looked like anti-Semitism, support for the Irish Republican Army when it was killing the sons of working-class families—caught up with him. Corbyn claims not to be personally anti-Semitic, but the miasma of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party isn’t just a figment of critics’ fevered imaginations, and it did a good deal of damage. Polls had already shown Corbyn’s extremely unfavorable personal ratings, even before most Labour candidates during this election reported the voters’ sheer, acute dislike for him. The Labour vote fell back to 32 percent, and with 202 seats the party now has its smallest number of MPs since 1935.

But it won’t do to arraign Corbyn alone. If anything, more blame for the eclipse of Labour, and for Brexit as well, attaches to Blair, who wrote in The Sun on April 23, 1997, “On the day we remember the legend that St George slayed a dragon to protect England, some will argue that there is another dragon to be slayed: Europe.” That was a week before he won his first landslide election. He claimed to be a good European but was a false friend to Europe—always looking over his shoulder at the right-wing Europhobic press, rarely saying anything positive about Europe—before his participation in the catastrophic invasion of Iraq split Europe apart.

One of Blair’s worst mistakes concerned immigration. When the former Soviet bloc states in Eastern Europe, with their much lower wages, were welcomed into the EU in 2004, the principle of free movement was modified so that Western European countries could restrict for some years immigration from them. Germany and France took advantage of this; distracted by his great Levantine crusade, Blair did not. Soon there were a million Poles in England, and I’ve learned to say “mulțumesc” rather than “thanks” to taxi drivers, since so many of them in Bath, where I live, are Romanian. And immigration really was a concern of Labour voters who chose Leave, and then Johnson.

Jeremy Corbyn
Jeremy Corbyn; drawing by John Springs
Quite possibly the Labour Party in its present form is finished—and is not alone in its plight. The right-wing press never ceased howling about the terrible threat from Corbyn, but no effusion was weirder than one from Allister Heath, the editor of the Sunday Telegraph: “Across the West, the forces of the extreme Left are on the march.” As anyone can see, across Europe the far left is everywhere in retreat, and the moderate left as well. Historic leftist parties—the French Socialists, the German Social Democrats, and others besides—reflect Labour’s grave condition. England today desperately needs an effective opposition party, which can’t be provided by Corbyn or any likely successor. And it desperately needs a serious radical party that can create an alliance between working-class and educated liberal voters. Corbynite Labour isn’t it, nor was Blairite New Labour, but something might yet arise from their ashes.

With all that, our latest political drama has one central character, and the name “Boris” screams from headlines in a London press that has surpassed itself in its hysterical adulation. For much of the last century, the Daily Telegraph was a bastion of respectable suburban conservatism. It was gray, even dull, but also conspicuously honest. When Lord Camrose owned the paper, from the 1920s to the 1950s, he made a cardinal principle of objectivity and would write sharp notes to the editor saying that his lead story read like a handout from Conservative Central Office.

Today’s Telegraph isn’t just a Johnson fanzine; it has a ring of the official journal of some third-world statelet or of a vast despotism worshiping the Great Helmsman or Dear Leader. “It’s time critics saw Boris for the Churchillian figure he is,” screeches Tim Stanley as he drools over “the blond magnificence.” “Boris’s win proves the soul of our nation is intact,” shrieks Allison Pearson. “Dear Boris, Hallelujah!” shouts Andrew Roberts, the (by his own account) “extremely right-wing” polemicist and historian. That comparison with Churchill is repetitiously made, along with endless invocations of 1940. Having acclaimed the Churchill biopic Darkest Hour as “splendid Brexit propaganda,” Charles Moore calls Johnson Churchill’s reincarnation, who “sees trouble coming from the European continent and risks his career on the point…unites country, wins.” Besides that, Moore says that Johnson “is one of the very few people I have ever met who can be described as a genius.”

Come to think of it, maybe there are comparisons with Churchill. In 1906, after he had bolted from the Tories to the Liberals and been rewarded with office, the High Tory National Review called Churchill “the transatlantic type of demagogue (‘Them’s my sentiments and if they don’t give satisfaction they can be changed’)…. It will be interesting to see how far a politician whom no one trusts will go in a country where character is supposed to count.” Three years later, Lord Knollys, private secretary to King Edward VII, said that, however Churchill’s conduct might be explained, “Of course it cannot be from conviction or principle. The very idea of his having either is enough to make one laugh.” And when in the early 1930s Churchill attached himself to the reactionary but sincere Tories who were fighting self-government for India, Lord Selborne, one of their number, said, “He discredits us; we are acting from conviction but everybody knows Winston has no convictions; he has only joined us for what he can get out of it.”

Words like “fascistic” don’t really explain “Boris.” If the only “ism” Hollywood understands is plagiarism, then the only “ism” Johnson understands is opportunism. Dominic Lawson is one more of the gaggle of Europhobic “calumnists or columnists” (Churchill’s phrase), but not stupid or unobservant, and he spells out a truth universally acknowledged that still deserves to be italicized: “Johnson was never in favour of Brexit, until he found it necessary to further his ambition to become Conservative leader.” The idea of Johnson having any conviction or principle is enough to make anyone laugh; he only joined Leave for what he could get out of it. But his support for Leave in the referendum was reckoned more important than anyone else’s, maybe even decisive, and so the course of our history has been drastically altered by a man who is at once ruthlessly ambitious and totally unprincipled.

That is not a unique opinion. Moore's predecessor as editor of the Daily Telegraph was Max Hastings, who dismisses Johnson as a "charlatan and sexual adventurer." Matthew Parris, a columnist with the Times and a former Tory MP and aide to Margaret Thatcher, defines Johnson's career as "the casual dishonesty, the cruelty, the betrayal; and, beneath the betrayal, the emptiness of real ambition." Ferdinand Mount, former editor of the TLS and also once an adviser to Thatcher, for whom he wrote the 1983 Conservative election manifesto, thinks Johnson "a seedy treacherous chancer." More temperately, and quite correctly, Hastings says that "scarcely anybody who knows him well trusts him." One of the more repellent sights of the past year was Tory MPs who to my knowledge don't trust or respect Johnson at all nevertheless jumping on his bandwagon, and one or two newspaper editors as well. This isn't written out of personal animosity. I've known Johnson for years, and when he was editor of The Spectator and I wrote for him, our dealings were perfectly cordial, but then I've dealt with plenty of affable rascals in my time.

Wherein can Johnson's "genius" be found? He was of course a journalist before he was a politician, like Churchill and Mussolini. He thrilled Telegraph readers with his transgressive naughtiness, calling African children "piccaninnies," gay men "tanktopped bum boys," Islam "the most viciously sectarian of all religions," and Hillary Clinton "a sadistic nurse in a mental hospital." Most breathtaking of all, he denounced single mothers for "producing a generation of ill-raised, ignorant, aggressive and illegitimate children," which really takes a prize for chutzpah in view of his own personal life. (Asked by an interviewer how many children he has, Johnson refused to answer, and to be fair he may well not know.)

Or is his genius found in his books? Fintan O'Toole has written in these pages about Johnson's The Churchill Factor, which he wrote five years ago and which became a best seller.2 For Johnson, Churchill sometimes sounds "like a chap who has had a few too many at a golf club bar," an enemy of his is an "ocean-going creep," one of his friends is a "carrot-topped Irish fantasist," Lord Halifax is "the beanpole-shaped appeaser," one thing or another is "wonky…bonkers…tootling." This is the Finest Hour as told by Bertie Wooster.

In 1940 Churchill criticized a Foreign Office draft that erred "in trying to be too clever" and was "unsuited to the tragic simplicity and grandeur of the times and the issues at stake." What might he have said about the "genius" Johnson? But then maybe Johnson really is the man for our own age, an age incapable of tragic simplicity and grandeur. Orwell's Newspeak was a language constructed so that it was strictly impossible to express any subversive sentiment. In Borispeak it's equally impossible to say anything serious, and he may indeed never have said, written, or thought a single serious thing in his life.

Although he still leads the Conservative and Unionist Party of Great Britain, that's now a misnomer. It was once a truly national party, throughout the United Kingdom, which could win a majority of seats in Scotland less than seventy years ago, and the right wing of the party always professed a loyalty to unionist Ulster. But the union has begun to fall apart. Johnson supposedly pulled off a coup by negotiating a new deal with Brussels, in which the EU (afflicted by its own

Brexit fatigue) made a few slight concessions, but much the greatest capitulation was Johnson's: he agreed that Northern Ireland should have a customs and regulatory regime different from Great Britain's, avoiding a hard border with the Irish Republic while creating a border in the Irish Sea—the very thing the right-wing Tories and May's Democratic Unionist allies had said would be intolerable.

True to form, Johnson followed treachery with mendacity, denying that he had done what he had done. But in December, for the first time, more nationalist and republican than unionist MPs were returned from Northern Ireland, and the Scottish National Party won forty-eight of fifty-nine seats in Scotland. Almost more startling, a poll last summer of Conservative Party members found that a majority wanted Brexit even if it meant Scotland and Northern Ireland leaving the Union. It is now in no sense a Unionist party—and barely conservative, either.

There was a time when the Tories supported not only the Union but the unity of Europe, and so did their newspapers. Sir Colin Coote, the editor of the Daily Telegraph from 1950 to 1964 and a veteran of the Great War, in which he had been wounded and decorated, was a strong advocate of British membership in the Common Market. One Conservative prime minister, Harold Macmillan, also a former infantryman wounded in the Great War, tried to join, and another, Edward Heath, a veteran of the next war, did so. Even Margaret Thatcher, for all her later battles with Brussels, campaigned to stay in 1975 and ratified the crucial Single European Act, which committed the European Community to establishing a single market.

"Yes, this is a right-wing coup," Mount said when Johnson formed his cabinet, brutally ejecting his enemies, and that was before he purged dissident Europhile MPs from the party, among them two former chancellors of the exchequer, a former attorney general, and Churchill's grandson. Every Tory candidate at the election had to swear to support Brexit, and Johnson now has behind him a parliamentary party as servile as the Supreme Soviet. Farage may never have been elected to Parliament, but it turns out he didn't need to be: his UKIP has metastasized into the "Boris Tories," an English nationalist party that has less affinity with continental Christian Democratic parties like Angela Merkel's CDU than with the Rassemblement National (formerly the Front National) in France and Alternative für Deutschland.

Except in one respect: those European parties of the nationalist right are mostly critical of American power. By contrast, and to put it in the terms of the war they are always invoking, the Tories and the Telegraph are résistants toward Brussels, but pétainistes toward Washington. The Brexiteers' favorite word of contempt has been "vassal" or "vassalage," to describe Britain's supposed subservience to the EU, but they never stop talking about the "special relationship," or nowadays the "Anglosphere," with Roberts insisting that "Britain will be better off as a junior partner of the United States than an EU vassal." This is a tricky claim after we have seen what "junior partnership" means in practice: whatever else Brussels may have done, British troops have never been sent to the Middle East at the behest of Jacques Delors or Jean-Claude

Juncker to fight in criminal and catastrophic wars. In fact, when Roberts says “junior partner,” he appears to mean “vassal.”

Now Donald Trump presents a grave problem for the Anglospheroids, and for Johnson, who desperately needs Trump’s goodwill for an Anglo-American trade deal but knows that the president’s very name is toxic here. As the luck of the calendar had it, the NATO conference in London took place just before the election, and it was most amusing to see the prime minister desperately avoiding any contact à deux with the president. Then came Trump’s assassination of Qassim Suleimani, and we could tell how important the “special relationship” still is from the fact that Johnson was the very first leader Trump chose not to inform of his decision. The crisis found Johnson sunning himself in the West Indies, and on his return, his government was at sixes and sevens. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called on Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab to repeat the president’s demand that America’s allies should renounce the Iran nuclear deal. Like a good vassal, Raab said that the government was “looking very hard” at the deal, but almost simultaneously Johnson spoke to Hassan Rouhani, the Iranian president, to stress his support for it. Then on January 14, Johnson turned around and said the earlier deal was “flawed,” and so “let’s replace it with the Trump deal.” But really, does “Brexit Britain” have any coherent foreign policy at all?

Amid those vulgar evocations of the war against the Third Reich, two splendid nonagenarian Englishmen who knew that war firsthand died in November: Field Marshal Lord Bramall, a former head of the British army, and Sir Michael Howard, the great historian, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, and professor at Yale. In another life, both had won the Military Cross leading infantry platoons, Bramall with the 60th Rifles in Belgium, Howard with the Coldstream Guards at Salerno. Both were committed Europeans and Remainers, and there’s a bitter contrast between such men and the saber-rattlers of the Europhobic right, whose bellicose sub-Churchillian rhetoric is in inverse ratio to their experience of gunfire.

Not long after the referendum, I had lunch in a Berkshire pub with Michael Howard and Mark James, his civil partner. Michael raised his glass with the words, “To Hell with Brexit,” and he returned to the subject, as well as our new prime minister, when I last saw him, physically frail but completely lucid. Max Hastings was a close and loyal friend of Michael’s and was with him when he died, just after his ninety-seventh birthday. He has recorded one of the last things Michael said, about the “extraordinary bathos” with which his long life was ending. Michael’s earliest memory was of the general strike in 1926; he remembered the rise of Hitler; he was a schoolboy in 1940, a soldier two years later, before his illustrious career. And now his story was ending “under the prime ministership of Boris Johnson”—spoken with awed contempt. What can one add?

—January 16, 2020

1
“Britain: The Implosion,” June 25, 2015. ↩

2
“The Ham of Fate,” August 15, 2019. ↩

The Middle East: Trump Blunders In
Steven SimonFEBRUARY 13, 2020 ISSUE
An Iraqi protesting the use of his country in the conflict between the US and Iran, Najaf, January 2020
Haidar Hamdani/AFP/Getty Images
An Iraqi protesting the use of his country in the conflict between the US and Iran, Najaf, January 2020
1.
The assassination of Qassim Suleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards’ expeditionary unit, the Quds Force, on January 3 has left almost everyone, at home and abroad, confused about President Trump’s policy toward Iran. On December 27, rocket fire at an Iraqi base near Kirkuk, in northern Iraq, killed a US contractor. There had been a rash of such attacks at bases across the country. Shortly afterward, the administration announced that Kataeb Hezbollah (KH), one of the largely Shia militias that form part of Iraq’s military infrastructure, was responsible for the attack. No evidence for this assessment has been publicly disclosed, although it is not inherently implausible. US aircraft subsequently bombed five KH installations, killing twenty-five fighters in what a Pentagon spokesman called “precision defensive strikes.” Predictably, Iraqis objected to US air strikes against a militia that was composed of Iraqis and had fought ISIS, and they demonstrated in the hundreds around the American embassy in Baghdad.

A US drone strike then killed Suleimani; Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a prominent Iraqi Shia politician and the founder of KH; and several others as they were leaving the Baghdad airport. The US also attempted but failed to kill Abdul Reza Shahlai, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard’s liaison to Houthi forces in Yemen. Suleimani was on his way from Beirut to Riyadh, where he was reportedly planning to discuss ways to reduce Saudi-Iranian tensions. The administration insisted, however, that his stop in Iraq was intended to set in motion a broad assault by Iranian proxies against Americans in Iraq and elsewhere. No information to support this claim has yet been released, either to Congress or to the public.

The targeted killing of a senior Iranian official appeared to come out of the blue. Trump’s preferred approach to the Middle East had previously seemed in some ways not unlike President Obama’s. Both presidents rejected the “endless war” paradigm. Both thought the Arab-Israeli peace process was at a dead end. Neither wished to be entangled in the Syrian civil war, although Obama hedged by approving a huge secret program to arm and train so-called moderate opposition groups. Both wanted to flee Afghanistan. Here again Obama hedged, apparently against his better judgment. Trump did not, and it looks like the current US force

there of eight thousand will soon be halved in tandem with progress in negotiations with the Taliban. And despite the Obama administration's sincere support for the Arab Spring revolutions, there was not much it could do to advance them in the absence of congressional approval of a large increase in foreign aid. But Trump has gone further than failing to fund the revolts by deriding the spirit that animated them.

Although Obama and Trump are obviously dissimilar in temperament, values, and intellectual capacity, they share a declining sense of the purpose and effectiveness of American engagement, and especially of military intervention, in the Middle East. Neither is or was motivated to compete with Iran, Russia, or Turkey for control of territory that he assesses to be of little relevance to critical US interests or, in the case of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to be places where the US is likely to enjoy preponderant influence without going to war for it. As Obama completed his second term, it was unclear whether his administration's approach was a fluke or the harbinger of a trend. Until recently, Trump's rhetoric and actions had pointed in the latter direction. His allegedly preemptive attack near the Baghdad airport, however, was an audacious gamble that clearly carried the risk of war.

The killing also perpetuated the inconsistency of US policy toward the Middle East and its tendency to overreach. As the United States under Trump lurches between withdrawal of its troops from Iraq and Syria and sending more, between reasonable restraint in its use of force and then suddenly assassinating a regional leader, it has worsened the anarchic conditions that have waxed and waned in the region since the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the Gulf War that followed six months later. In the intervening years the US destroyed an already fragile society and unleashed sectarian violence in Iraq, prolonged a devastating civil war in Syria while inadvertently arming jihadists, negotiated then revoked a historic nuclear deal with Iran and sought to provoke a civil war there by strangling its economy, whipsawed its Kurdish allies in the fight against ISIS, helped Saudis and Emiratis wreak havoc in Yemen, and along with its NATO allies contributed to the fragmentation of Libya. In the process, it has left the long-standing competition between Israel and Iran for regional primacy unmediated and unresolved.

The overthrow of the Saddam regime in Iraq, which opened the door to Iran's influence there, is at the root of the current crisis, but its proximate origins lie in the US withdrawal from Iraq that was initiated by President George W. Bush. In 2008 Bush signed an agreement stipulating that all US combat forces would leave by 2011, and it was implemented by President Obama. Washington had by then begun to reassess its policy in the region. The US was no longer as reliant on Middle Eastern oil as it once had been; the Arab Spring revolts, while inspiring admiration and hope, also revealed American irrelevance or, in the case of Libya, incompetence; and America's long war in Iraq and against jihadism had done more harm than good. The emergence of a resurgent Russia and an ambitious China also suggested that the Middle East should no longer be a priority for US military power and diplomacy.

It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that in endorsing Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's removal from power just as US forces were on their way out of Iraq, Obama warned:

The United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria. It is up to the Syrian people to choose their own leaders, and we have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement. What the United States will support is an effort to bring about a Syria that is democratic, just, and inclusive for all Syrians. We will support this outcome by pressuring President Assad to get out of the way of this transition, and standing up for the universal rights of the Syrian people along with others in the international community.

This was more cautious than President George H. W. Bush in February 1991 exhorting "the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside." At the time, his administration had no intention, let alone plan, to help Iraqis carry out such an insurrection and, when it came, Bush limply explained that to intervene would bog the US down in another Vietnam. In both Iraq and Syria, the outcome was catastrophic for those waiting for salvation from America.

The bitter experience of the Syrian Kurds conformed to the underlying shift in US interests as well as the prevailing disorder in Washington's policy process. US Central Command, along with then defense secretary Jim Mattis, had assured Kurdish fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces that the United States would not abandon them, despite Trump's clearly expressed desire to get out of Syria; he initially ordered US troops to withdraw in December 2018. The pushback in Washington against that decision reflected decades of Kurdish lobbying, the Kurds' reputation as combatants in the war against ISIS, and lingering American guilt over the betrayal of the Iraqi Kurds by George H.W. Bush decades before. Trump retreated, but only temporarily, until last October. There are still some US troops in Syria working with their Kurdish co-combatants to defeat ISIS, but the Kurdish forces have been pushed away from the border by the Turkish army and its unruly Sunni Arab protégés.

Iran's response to Trump's campaign of maximum pressure has injected even greater uncertainty into the situation. Like Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama, Trump came into office seemingly determined to humble Iran, in his case convinced that it had been enriched and emboldened by his predecessor. By the time both Clinton and Obama left office, they were attempting to fashion a working relationship with the Iranian regime. Bush, by contrast, cooperated with Tehran in Afghanistan but was then bled by it in Iraq, having brought a large army to Iran's border amid sloganeering about how "real men want to go to Tehran" and "the road to Tehran runs through Baghdad." Trump combined toothless belligerence with economic sanctions designed to destroy Iran's economy and weaken its regime, similar to his approach to North Korea but without the alternating eruptions of insult and bonhomie.

Targeting Suleimani was thus a dramatic departure for Trump as well as for US policy more generally. It would also seem to have been prohibited under Executive Order 12333, which forbids US employees to assassinate or conspire to assassinate foreign officials. Although it is

up to the president whether to comply with it, in one form or another this order, which originated in the congressional reaction to CIA assassination plots uncovered in the 1970s by the Church Committee, has been adopted by every administration from Gerald Ford's to Obama's. It has been observed until now mainly because no one has thought it would be a good idea to legitimize assassination, given how hard it is to protect US public figures. With the US now having publicly justified assassination as a legitimate means of deterrence, not just against Iran but more broadly, it remains to be seen who exploits the precedent.

If by killing Suleimani the administration was engaging in the subtle, time-honored, and usually futile process of "signaling," the Iranians did not take the hint to "back off or worse things will happen." Iran declared that it would confine its response to military targets, and on January 8 it struck two US bases in Iraq with sixteen short-range ballistic missiles. Though there were no casualties, scores of US and Iraqi military personnel as well as civilian workers could have been killed. In the postmortems of the attack, the US, followed by Iran, depicted the missile strikes as cleverly designed to avoid US casualties, thereby supplying the Trump administration with an off-ramp while satisfying Iranian amour-propre. (Tehran was having it both ways, telling domestic audiences that it had taken American lives.)

This narrative seems too convenient to be credible, but it is not inconceivable. The missiles launched by Iran are not accurate enough for its decision-makers to have been certain that only unmanned facilities would be struck. They must have assumed, therefore, that the attacks might well draw blood and, if they did, that Trump might well escalate the conflict. It appears that whatever the reliability of Iranian missile guidance systems, precautions taken on the bases to shelter personnel after advance warning of the attacks and sheer luck prevented the immediate outcome from being more serious.

If, on the other hand, the administration wanted a war with Iran because it believed a war would be short and would end in victory and a parade down Constitution Avenue, then it must have assumed that killing Suleimani could provoke one, leaving the US the undisputed master of the Persian Gulf region. This is not as outlandish as it sounds, for two reasons. First, striking Iranian nationals transforms a proxy war into exactly the kind of war that proxy wars are designed to avoid, because it puts the contending principals into direct conflict, which in turn makes escalation much harder to control. The deliberate targeting of Suleimani in Iraq and Shahlai in Yemen has done exactly this. Second, the US has the capacity to carry out a coordinated, sustained air campaign that would be highly destructive and capable not only of destroying Iran's nuclear facilities and much of its industrial and energy infrastructure, but also of locating and killing its political, military, and intelligence leaders and dismantling their ministries, whose destruction would weaken the regime's ability to monitor and suppress dissent or nip revolt in the bud.

The assumption that a comprehensive aerial assault could bring about a revolution against the Iranian regime is not necessarily deluded. Indeed, scattered protests in Iran over the shooting down of Ukrainian International Airlines 752 led to exuberant claims by commentators that this

vivid demonstration of regime incompetence would lead to the overthrow of the clerical leadership. The belief that the brittleness of the regime, the pressure of economic sanctions, and the thwarted desires of an enormous youth population will combine to produce regime change if given a short, sharp shove is strong both inside and outside Washington. It could, however, go disastrously wrong. Like the Saddam regime did in Iraq in 1991, Iran's clerical leadership, Revolutionary Guard Corps, and loyal domestic militias could ride out the war and reimpose control through unrestrained brutality. If they failed, emerging rivals could end up fighting for leadership as economic activity came to a grinding halt, warlords asserted local authority, and violence spiraled.

The manner in which the options were presented to Trump raises additional questions about his decision. According to participants, the president was shown a memo in the canonical Beltway form of three alternatives, ritually characterized as (a) nuke 'em; (b) surrender; (c) "my option," so that the decision maker is herded toward (c) by two others that are patently unfeasible or absurd. In this case, the options were probably something like kill Suleimani, refrain from responding to the rocket attack that killed the contractor, take out a few Iranian military assets in the Gulf, and work with the Iraqi government to end the attacks against US bases. No one, at least in the pre-Trump world, ever expected a president to choose the most extreme option. Whacking Suleimani first appeared on a menu of options prepared in the summer of 2019 to maximize pressure on Iran. According to a former senior administration official who was involved in developing them, it "was not something that was thought of as a first move." Not long afterward, John Bolton resigned as national security adviser, and for a time assassination faded from view, only to be revived in the current crisis.

As criticism of the assassination mounted, press accounts began to appear that pointed the finger at Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for persuading the reluctant Trump to give the order. There can be little doubt, based on his long-standing views of Iran's Islamic government, that Pompeo endorsed the move. But from what we know of the president's impulsiveness, it would come as no surprise if he needed little encouragement to check the "kill" box, especially since Trump, vacationing at Mar-a-Lago, was brooding over perceptions of him as weak, according to officials involved in the deliberations.

Would the US have been willing to carry out the scorched-earth campaign that Trump promised in retaliation for an armed Iranian response to Suleimani's death? It seems unlikely. There would have been resistance from the Pentagon, as there was in the virtually immediate reaction to Trump's threat to destroy culturally significant sites in Iran. The spectacle of the United States systematically battering what is actually a weak country would spur international outrage that would force an early cease-fire. Under an attack of such intensity, Iran would target US interests and its allies in the region. Israel would likely find itself under a missile barrage from Lebanon, many Iraqis would lash out, and the Iranian regime would be sure to take the fight to capitals on the Arab side of the Gulf, where there would be only a slender appetite for a war that the US had instigated. The US would indeed be the undisputed master, but of a smoking, shattered landscape.1

To the extent the US cared about its legacy in Iraq and its enormous investment—hundreds of billions of dollars and thousands of Americans killed or wounded—in Iraq's future, the assassination of Suleimani and Muhandis was a profound mistake. On January 8, Ayatollah Khamenei made clear that Iran's goal is to expel the US from the region. By killing Suleimani and provoking the Iraqi parliamentary vote demanding the removal of American troops, Trump may have granted Suleimani a posthumous victory and fulfilled the wish of his nemesis in Tehran. If, however, the US has written off Iraq because it is nothing more than a staging ground for Iran's regional aggression, then there is no legacy to protect.

Some in the Trump administration have always had a suspicion that Iraq is an enemy in league with Iran, a view that is linked to resentment about Iraqis'—and particularly Shias'—ingratitude toward America's "generous" sacrifices on their behalf. This ahistorical petulance was exhibited most recently by Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, who in his justification for Suleimani's assassination recalled how

the American people have been extraordinarily generous with their lives and with their treasure to the people of Iraq, to help them move forward. So, you know, we'd certainly be very disappointed if there was some sort of adverse decision by the Iraqi parliament, the Council of Representatives, with respect to our continued ability to assist the people of Iraq.

Ryan Crocker, a former US ambassador to Iraq, bemoaned Shias' disloyalty to their US saviors. "No one" in Iraq, he told The New York Times, "is going to speak up for us, despite all we've done and in spite of the mistakes…. All we've given Iraq, and the Shia in particular, were things they could never have dreamed of before 2003."

Qassim Suleimani
Qassim Suleimani; drawing by Pancho
That the president has been stewing in these grievances is clear from his reaction to the nonbinding vote in the Iraqi parliament on January 5 to expel US forces from the country: "We have a very extraordinarily expensive air base that's there. It cost billions of dollars to build. We're not leaving unless they pay us back for it." Unless the US exits Iraq on a "very friendly basis," Trump said, he "will charge them sanctions like they've never seen before ever." Given that approximately 200,000 Iraqis died as a consequence of Operation Iraqi Freedom,2 the recipients of all that largesse might take a skeptical view of Trump's crass collection notice.

The parliament vote spurred US Central Command, in a shambolic policy process, to send a letter to the Iraqi government stressing US respect for Iraqi sovereignty and proposing to discuss the mechanics of US withdrawal. Once the letter had been circulated in the media, it was dismissed by the Pentagon rather awkwardly as a draft that should not have been sent. On January 9, when officials in Baghdad acted on it by formally requesting that Washington send a delegation to Baghdad to negotiate the US departure. The US refused on the grounds that the

United States was “a force for good in the Middle East.” US troops have thus reverted to being an occupation force.

These resentments help explain the willingness of the administration first to acquiesce in Israeli airstrikes against Iranian targets in Iraq and then to carry out its own, regardless of the continuing presence there of five thousand US troops mostly engaged in training activities. Strikes in Iraq, regardless of the justification, will further hamstring its weak government and corrode whatever goodwill the US has cultivated. For the foreseeable future, Iraqi politicians who had learned to walk the fine line between Iran and the US will have little choice but to be seen as on Iran’s side. The rare public denunciation by a revered cleric reflects Iraq’s deep alienation from the United States: in his letter of condolence to Iran’s Supreme Leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani extolled “the unique role [Suleimani] has played for many years in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and all his efforts and sacrifices related to it are unforgettable.”

In a larger sense, the administration’s policy toward Iran remains unclear. In April 2017 Trump declared that Iran was not living up to the “spirit” of the nuclear deal, insofar as compliance made it possible for Tehran to expand its regional influence. In May 2018 he withdrew from the deal and reimposed sanctions on Iranian oil sales and other transactions. Last September, he was beseeching Iranian president Hassan Rouhani for a meeting in New York to discuss renewed nuclear talks. Not long after, the administration looked the other way as Iran attacked or seized tankers in the Persian Gulf, shot down a $220 million US military drone, and pounded oil installations in Saudi Arabia.

The lack of a US response left open the question of whether Trump was rethinking his policy toward Iran, perhaps sensing that maximum pressure was not going to win maximum cooperation. Then, rather abruptly, the US switched gears and targeted a leading Iranian official to preempt attacks whose scale and timing have been depicted differently by Trump, Pompeo, and Esper. They appear to agree on little more than that the Iranians were planning something somewhere at some point, and have not addressed the question of how killing Suleimani would stop attacks that were literally imminent. And it should be noted that Trump, apparently indifferent to the self-defense justification for the assassination, has declared that whether or not the attacks were imminent was simply unimportant “because of his horrible past,” while the State Department’s security team has stated it was never aware of any threat at all. This muddle only highlights the question of what changed between Trump’s restrained posture last fall and now.

One can think of a number of explanations, but the one that leaps to mind is impeachment. Killing Suleimani does not appear to leave the US better off strategically, but it does appear to leave Trump better off politically, by pushing impeachment out of the headlines, dominating the news cycle with images of him as a decisive wartime leader, dividing the Democratic Party on foreign policy issues, and mobilizing a Republican base that tends to admire toughness. The assassination was plotted in an uncommonly narrow circle to minimize dissent. Nonetheless, there were participants who have since said that they saw no evidence of Suleimani’s alleged

plans to attack the US in Iraq, despite the administration's public assertions about a "sinister" scheme. According to a senior administration official, "The DoD was not all in agreement that killing the second most popular person in Iran at an international airport in Iraq was a good idea."

It isn't impossible that Suleimani was preparing to carry out an Iranian offensive against US forces in Iraq to sideline an Iraqi protest movement that had mushroomed in recent months against, among other things, Iran's outsized role in Iraq's affairs. Such an offensive would have aimed to provoke a US response that would shift popular anger onto Washington—which is precisely what killing him did. In any case, Suleimani was too prominent a figure and too closely aligned with the Supreme Leader for Iran to forego some kind of retaliation.

For the moment, the Trump administration will feel that it has protected the president's political flank by displaying a willingness to fight. This will enable the US, in theory, to press for renewed talks, provided that Iran does not foreclose that option by killing Americans, which now seems unlikely in the short term. The day before Trump spoke to the nation from the White House on January 8 to announce a cessation of military action, unspecified new economic sanctions, demands to negotiate a new nuclear deal, and, bizarrely, his best wishes for Iran's leaders, Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, tweeted that Iran was not going to carry out additional attacks.

The cycle of violence that began with Iran's missile strikes on Saudi oil facilities could be interpreted as the US and Iran switching to broadly congruent strategies. In this view, Iran's troubling but successful challenge to the United States to escalate or retreat following those attacks was matched with an equally troubling provocation—Suleimani's assassination—that essentially dared Iran to escalate or retreat. This is more or less the old game of chicken. The US shrugged its shoulders after the Saudi attacks, while in the second round, Iran engaged in missile theatrics that resulted in no American deaths and then declared an end to its military retaliation for Suleimani's killing.

Still, this confrontation was not cost-free. Its most likely result will be a weakened Iraqi government and more suffering for its population, greater Iranian influence in Baghdad, and a deeper wedge between the US and its European allies. It is conceivable that Iran will focus on diplomatically isolating the US and extract economic assistance from the EU, Russia, and China. The EU has already invited Zarif to Brussels for consultations that will no doubt include the offer of aid in return for Iran's restraint and resumed adherence to its nuclear obligations. As part of its overall response to Suleimani's assassination, Iran had announced on January 5 that it was abandoning limits on uranium enrichment it had accepted under the terms of the nuclear deal, although it would evidently continue to submit to inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The EU has now complicated matters by triggering the nuclear deal's dispute mechanism because it "could no longer leave unanswered the increasing Iranian violations of the nuclear agreement." This process will likely drag on for months. As tensions began to

subside, it appeared that the only clear benefit from them will accrue to Trump's reelection campaign, which underscores the president's instinct for using public goods for private gain.

As the odor of high explosives dissipates, then, we face the prospects of a nuclear-armed Iran, an Iraq that is less stable than at any time since ISIS erupted in 2014 and where Iran's influence will grow while that of the US recedes, the eventual loss of US access to bases in Iraq, the suspension of anti-ISIS operations, a growing divide between the US and its European allies, new opportunities for Russian and Chinese aggrandizement, and an energized President Trump. Although Iran remains a striking, if not inexplicable, exception to his charm offensive toward authoritarian rulers, Trump's approach to policy is so scattered, impulsive, and unfettered by process that one could envisage the Iranian foreign minister denied a visa to address the United Nations in 2020, then eventually chatting with the president in the Oval Office, should Trump be reelected. Between now and that hypothetical encounter, however, there is plenty of room for renewed violence.

2.

The evolution of American policy in the region has been profoundly unsettling for Israel. Unlike with the Arab Gulf states—to which it has low-key or clandestine ties and which no longer pose a conventional military threat—Israel does not have the option of détente with Iran. Although there is an ongoing debate about the relationship between the disconcertingly radical way Iran speaks about Israel—replete with threats to obliterate it—and actual Iranian intentions, there is no mistaking a persistent Iranian effort to position itself to attack the Jewish state. Iran's posture recalls the earlier campaign of Arab states bordering on Israel and of the pre-Oslo Palestinian strategy toward Israel, which was to maintain pressure, accept defeat in war without conceding defeat, and prepare for the next round. Each cycle was presumed to chip away at Israel's resolve, self-confidence, and, ultimately, capacity for self-defense. The objective was not victory in the short term, which was seen as unlikely, but over the long term. Israel's costly victory in the 1973 war and the peace with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994—coupled with the collapse in 1989 of Syria's Soviet arms supplier and bankroller—buried this Arab strategy. The so-called first-tier states eventually absorbed the enduring fact of their military inferiority and accepted Israel's presence in the Middle East.

Just as the old Arab strategy was fading, the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran gave it a new lease on life. The Iranians have pursued it through their support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, where, in effect, Iran now shares a border with Israel, and it also supports terrorist groups and Hamas in Gaza. Syria, which in the past was used as a transshipment point for Iranian supplies intended for Lebanese Hezbollah, has evolved into something like a second front conjoined with the long-standing Lebanese one. Gear that Iran delivers to Hezbollah by road transits Iraq, thereby bringing targets in that country into Israel's gunsights. In recent years Suleimani advanced Iranian goals through his command of the Quds Force, entrepreneurial diplomacy, and force of personality.

Ideology drives Iran's opposition to Israel: its existence is an affront to the divinely ordained moral order that in the regime's view should govern the universe, or at least the regional structure of interstate relations. This has placed Israel in an awkward position: adjustments to its foreign policy or plausible concessions could not address the underlying motivations of Iranian animosity. This naturally increases Israel's anxiety regarding Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons. For some Israelis, it suggests that deterrence—the dynamic of mutual terror that made nuclear war between the US and Soviet Union unlikely—would not apply to a nuclear standoff between Israel and Iran. Others point to the highly ideological nature of the US-Soviet rivalry to argue that in the end, deterrence prevailed despite the fierce commitment of both sides to their respective worldviews. The Iranians tend to talk about this in ways that stoke Israeli fears, emphasizing, for example, that while Iran could withstand a nuclear assault and survive, Israel (almost seventy-five times smaller) would be decimated by a single weapon.

The nuclear deal signed in 2015 had promised to allay this threat for upward of fifteen years, and it might still, but the US withdrawal from the agreement and its maximum pressure campaign have discouraged Iranian adherence. US policy has also boosted popular skepticism among Iranians about the deal, which in turn complicates the ability of its supporters to keep it alive, let alone enter into a new round of negotiations. The assassination of Suleimani, which resulted in Iran's announcement that it would resume enrichment, no doubt contributed to this skepticism, while leading Iranian policymakers to ask themselves whether the US would have killed Suleimani quite so cavalierly if Iran had nuclear weapons. Broadly speaking, Israelis who have confidence in deterrence—Israel is thought to have eighty to ninety nuclear warheads deliverable by missile, plane, or submarine—believe the nuclear deal was a step in the right direction; those who doubt that Iran is deterrable believe it was a disaster and that whatever can be done to disarm Iran must be done. This argument will probably permeate Israeli decision-making as long as Iran is ruled by mullahs and the Revolutionary Guards.

Israel's defense doctrine, formulated by its first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was geared to the kind of long war that its Arab adversaries envisaged, in which Israel faced serious disadvantages. It was poor, sparsely populated, and lacked defensible borders, strategic depth, and in the 1950s a reliable source of heavy weapons, armor, and aircraft. Ben-Gurion identified three pillars to offset these liabilities: "Deterrence, early warning, and military decision." In addition, he advocated "a defensive strategy to be executed offensively, by transferring the battle to enemy territory."3 Deterrence hinged on military decision: the defeat of the enemy's army in battle was crucial in deterring renewed attack. Early warning—advance notice of the enemy's intention to attack—was essential to military decision (i.e., victory) because it enabled Israel to strike first or parry the enemy's initial thrust. This, in turn, was essential to transferring the battle to enemy soil, a necessity given Israel's slender geographic width before the 1967 war. There was no hinterland to which defenders could withdraw. This of course changed, for a time at least, after 1967. But Israel's settlement program in effect erased this advantage by transforming what had been strategic depth into vulnerable home ground.

Ben-Gurion thought that Arab rejection of Israel would last for a century or even longer. During this long war, Israel would need to cultivate a great-power backer, develop its economy, and acquire the ultimate deterrent in the form of nuclear weapons. In the conventional military sphere, the deterrent effect of military decision would lengthen the time between wars both by diminishing the enemy's combat capability, which would have to be rebuilt, and by denying the enemy its strategic objective. Against Palestinian guerrillas, the strategy was somewhat different: deterrence would be achieved through disproportionate punishment. In each case, the deterrent effects would be cumulative.

This strategy has now been upended by Iran. Ben-Gurion's vision was already showing signs of wear. In none of its recent wars has Israel been able to force a military decision. In theory it could do so against, say, Hezbollah or Hamas. In practice, that would isolate Israel diplomatically and impose severe economic costs. Against Iran, however, there is not even the theoretical possibility of a decisive military victory. Iran is simply too big and too far away. The other factor that has eroded Ben-Gurion's strategy is the emergence of precision-guided weapons in the armories of weak states including Iran or of nonstate groups, such as Iran's Hezbollah ally. Israel has faced a threat for over a decade from Hezbollah's arsenal of less-than-precise missiles and rockets, which includes over 100,000 such weapons deployed in private homes and civilian installations, including schools and hospitals. It is estimated that a small percentage of the total were fabricated as precision weapons or converted to serve that function. An assault incorporating barrages of these missiles could conceivably target Israeli airports, military facilities, communications and energy grids, hospitals, and ports with a degree of accuracy that has not been possible until now.

These new circumstances have produced a revised Israeli security strategy known as "the campaign between the wars," or by its Hebrew acronym, Mabam. According to its originator, former IDF chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot, the assumption of Israel's classic defense strategy—that military decision was crucial to deterrence—could no longer be relied upon either to deter Israel's foes or delay their decision to renew hostilities. There was no longer the option of simply waiting until the next war. Deterrence, he argued, must constantly be reinforced between major wars through continuous attacks meant to grind down the enemy's capabilities and push the moment it feels ready for another round farther into the future. War would, of course, be inevitable, but the interregnum between wars would be lengthened. This would buy time for the development of innovative military capabilities and, in the best of all worlds, diplomatic progress.

Such a strategy, which might best be described as a permanent offensive, has resulted in at least 158 strikes against targets in Syria since 2013, in which about two thousand missiles or bombs were delivered by Israeli warplanes. The number could well be much higher. It is a campaign of growing reach and audacity that has encompassed targets Israel assessed as related to Iran, as far away as Beirut and the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon to the northwest; Bu-kamal on the Iraqi-Jordanian border; and Anbar province in Iraq, which Israel has apparently attacked from northeastern Syria. Given that the US controls Iraqi airspace, the Trump

administration evidently decided that acceding to Israel's strikes there outweighed its interest in Iraq's stability or the pretense of regard for its sovereignty.

Astute observers such as Amos Yadlin, a former deputy commander of Israel's air force, and Assaf Orion, former deputy chief of the IDF planning branch, recognize that Mabam carries considerable risk for Israel of provoking the very attack it seeks to deter. There is the possibility of escalation should Tehran decide to respond more effectively than it has in the past, perhaps killing Israeli civilians in the process, thereby necessitating an Israeli response that could intensify in unforeseen ways. In that event, the missile capabilities targeted under Mabam could morph from a potential threat to disaster very quickly. For the Israelis, there is also the danger of alienating a future US administration by collaborating with Trump's in the destabilization of Iraq, or dragging the US into a regional war with Iran that would not serve American interests.

It is important to note that Mabam is broadly accepted in Israel as a necessary revision of the country's national security doctrine. No likely Israeli government, whether of the center, the right, or a power-sharing arrangement between the two blocs, would scale back, let alone abandon, this strategy. The main contenders for political power are highly motivated to outdo one another's commitment to Israel's security. Beyond this consideration, however, the leading politicians in Israel now are probably persuaded of the virtues of the new strategy and were part of the national security establishment that drew it up.

Suleimani's death is unlikely to alter the pattern of Israel and Iran deploying remarkably similar strategies of persistent mutual military provocations that are prone to unexpected, swift escalation. If the US also continues to carry out air strikes, they will only increase the risk, especially given widespread regional perceptions that Washington and Jerusalem are interchangeable.

Ideally, the US would continue to help Israel maintain a qualitative military edge over Iran, work to ensure that Iran's path to a nuclear weapon was blocked by a binding, verifiable multilateral agreement, and build on that agreement to set limits to Iran's ballistic missile program, while Israel combined diplomacy and military operations to keep its borders secure. Dealing with Iran's apparent ambition to extend the ring of missiles on Israel's northern border into Syria will ultimately require Russian and Syrian cooperation. For Israelis, relying on the use of force to limit Iran's military presence on Syrian soil is preferable to working, even through an intermediary, with the Syrian regime, which is divided on the issue, with the weight of opinion clearly in favor of preserving its relationship to Iran rather than bargaining with Israel. The US and Russia might be able to tip the balance in favor of a diplomatic resolution, but Iran would have to participate in such negotiations, and actions like Suleimani's assassination will not induce it to.

For the foreseeable future, Israel will have to carry out strikes, particularly in Syria, that it considers essential to its security. The US must be supportive, but at the same time discourage overreach or disproportionate attacks that might force an escalation of hostilities. With the US

participating in such attacks, however, it is not well positioned to temper Israeli zeal. That will probably have to wait until a Democratic administration takes office.

In the meantime, the people of the region will be further ground down by constant violence. In Iraq, the efforts of a desperate population to wring better conditions from a corrupt and incompetent political system have been brutally shut down by the fighting between the US and Iran. In Syria, the jockeying of foreign states for advantage and combat operations intended to wrest the last part of Syrian territory from the grip of jihadists, combined with the refusal of Western states, particularly the US, to aid in the reconstruction of Syria because it would facilitate Assad's rule, perpetuate the immiseration of its people. These geopolitical imperatives will continue to drive the despoliation of the region and its people.

—January 16, 2020

1
See my "Iran: The Case Against War" in these pages, August 15, 2019. ↩

2
The Iraq Body Count project figure of documented civilian deaths from violence is 184,776–207,645, through December 2019. (This includes reported civilian deaths due to coalition and insurgent military action, sectarian violence, and increased criminal violence.) ↩

3
See Charles Freilich, Israeli National Security: A New Strategy for an Era of Change (Oxford University Press, 2018). ↩