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by CHARLES PIERSON  
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## US Isolationist Forces Strike the Middle East



This photo released by the Iraqi Prime Minister Press Office shows a burning vehicle at the Baghdad International Airport following an airstrike in Baghdad, Iraq, early Friday, Jan. 3, 2020. The Pentagon said Thursday that the U.S. military has killed Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, at the direction of President Donald Trump. (Iraqi Prime Minister Press Office via AP)

If any good comes out of the US assassination of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani it may be to finally put to rest the lunatic notion that President Donald Trump is an isolationist.

“US Isolationism Leaves Middle East on Edge as New Decade Dawns” ran the headline in the December 29 London Guardian. Awkwardly for the Guardian, this story ran just hours before the news came that US airstrikes had hit targets in Iraq and Syria which the US declared belonged to Iranian-backed militia group Kataib Hezbollah. The December 29 strikes were in retaliation for rocket attacks two days earlier which the US blamed on Kataib Hezbollah and which killed an American contractor and wounded several American service members and Iraqi personnel. Then on January 3, Major General Qassem Soleimani, a top commander in Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps, ascended into heaven, helped there by President Donald Trump and a US drone. As thousands of US troops head to the Middle East, Iran has promised to avenge Soleimani’s death. These are the fruits, not of isolationism, but of Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign on Iran. Before I saw the Guardian story I had hoped we had heard the last of the “Trump Is an Isolationist” meme. We’ve been buffeted with Trump’s alleged isolationism for the past three years in mainstream publications like the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and the flagship journal of the American foreign policy establishment, Foreign Affairs. These organs of elite opinion, together with writers like the former neoconservative turned liberal internationalist Robert Kagan, New York Times columnist Bret Stephens, and French public intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy, to name but a few, lament that Trump has “abdicated” America’s global leadership role. Trump’s abandonment of Syria’s Kurds in October breathed fresh life into these charges.

This is nonsense. Trump is not dismantling the American Empire. He is not pulling the US back from the world. Fresh proof of this came as recently as December 21 when President Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act, the \$738 billion defense budget for Fiscal Year 2020. (By the way, can the Guardian explain to me what’s isolationist about a \$738 billion Pentagon budget? Is all that money just for coastal defense?) Progressive Democrats and antiwar Republicans had inserted several antiwar amendments in the House version of the bill. The amendments would have ended US assistance to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in their genocidal war on Yemen; required Congress’ approval for war on Iran; and revoked the 2001 and 2002 Authorizations for the Use of Military Force which the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations have all stretched beyond their original circumstances in order to make war anywhere in the world. The fact that these antiwar amendments were cut from the final form of the NDAA is proof positive that the US has no intention of disengaging from the Middle East.

An amendment that would have ended most arms sales to the Saudis also bit the dust. But maybe that's a good thing? Arming the kingdom means the Saudis can defend themselves without the aid of US troops, right?

Wrong. Massive US arms sales have done nothing to reduce the Saudis' need for US troops, a need the US is only too glad to satisfy. The Washington Post estimates that 3,000 US troops are in Saudi Arabia. According to the Wall Street Journal, some 60,000 to 80,000 US troops were in the Middle East even before December 29. 14,000 of those troops were dispatched to the region since May, supposedly to counter Iran. Nearly 3,000 more troops are being sent to join them. 750 more US troops were sent to Iraq on New Year's Day, in response to attacks on the US Embassy by pro-Iran demonstrators on December 31.

The US remains heavily involved with Saudi Arabia, even as US need for Saudi oil drops. Since it came into office, the Trump Administration has been attempting to negotiate the sale of two nuclear reactors to the kingdom, a process begun by the George W. Bush and Obama Administrations.

Trump did announce in October that he was withdrawing US troops from Syria. That sounds like a move in an isolationist direction, doesn't it? It does, but Trump reversed the decision to withdraw, although he did considerably remove US troops in the path of the invading Turks. Trump has said that US troops will remain in Syria to "secure" the country's oil.

George Orwell said that some ideas are so stupid that only intellectuals believe them. Witness our foreign policy eminences' belief that the US follows an isolationist policy in the Middle East or anywhere else. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, from which all of Iraq's present problems derive, was not isolationism. We need to shake the mistaken belief that US policy is isolationist and institute a genuinely noninterventionist policy toward the Middle East and the world.

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