

Pompeo and Netanyahu Paved a Path to War with Iran, and They're Pushing Trump Again

By [Gareth Porter](#)

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Though it narrowly averted war with Iran this January, the Trump administration is still pushing for all-out military conflict. The architects of the drive to war, Mike Pompeo and Benjamin Netanyahu, have relied on a series of cynical provocations to force Trump's hand.

The administration of President Donald Trump may escape the most recent conflict with Iran without war, however, a dangerous escalation is just over the horizon. And as before, the key factors driving the belligerence are not outraged Iraqi militia leaders or their allies in Iran, but Trump's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has long sought to draw the US into a military confrontation with Iran.

Throughout the fall of 2019, Netanyahu ordered a series of Israeli strikes against Iranian allies in Iraq and against Lebanese Hezbollah units. He and Pompeo hoped the attacks would provoke a reaction from their targets that could provide a tripwire outright war with Iran. As could have been expected, corporate US media missed the story, perhaps because it failed to reinforce the universally accepted narrative of a hyper-aggressive Iran emboldened by Trump's failure to "deter" it following Iran's shoot-down of a U.S. drone in June, and an alleged Iranian attack on Saudi oil facility in September.

Pompeo and John Bolton set the stage for the tripwire strategy in May 2019 with a statement by national security adviser John Bolton citing "troubling and escalatory indications and warnings," implying an Iranian threat without providing concrete details. That vague language echoed a previous vow by Bolton that "any attack" by Iran or "proxy" forces "on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met with unrelenting force."

Then came a campaign of leaks to major news outlet suggesting that Iran was planning attacks on U.S. military personnel. The day after Bolton's statement, the Wall Street Journal [reported](#) that unnamed U.S. officials cited "U.S. intelligence" showing that Iran "drew up plans to target U.S. forces in Iraq and possibly Syria, to orchestrate attacks in the Bab el-Mandeb strait near Yemen through proxies and in the Persian Gulf with its own armed drones...."

The immediate aim of this campaign was to gain Trump's approval for contingency plans for a possible war with Iran that included the option of [sending as many 120,000 U.S. troops in the region](#). Trump balked at such war-planning, however, [complaining privately](#) that Bolton

and Pompeo were pushing him into a war with Iran. Following Iran's shoot-down of the U.S. drone over the Strait of Hormuz on June 20, Pompeo and Bolton suggested the option of killing Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani in retaliation. But Trump refused to sign off on the assassination of Iran's top general unless Iran killed an American first, [according to current and former officials](#).

The New York Times

White House Reviews Military Plans Against Iran, in Echoes of Iraq War



The aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln last week in the Persian Gulf. As a precaution, the Pentagon has moved an aircraft carrier and more naval firepower to the gulf region. U.S. Navy, via Associated Press

By Eric Schmitt and Julian E. Barnes

May 13, 2019



[Screenshot from The NYT](#)

From that point on, the provocation strategy was focused on trying to trigger an Iranian reaction that would involve a U.S. casualty. That's when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu interjected himself and his military as a central player in the drama. From July 19 through August 20, the Israeli army carried out five strikes against Iraqi militias allied with Iran, blowing up four weapons depots and killing as many Shiite militiamen and Iranian officers, [according to press accounts](#).

The Israeli bombing escalated on August 25, when two strikes on the brigade headquarters of a pro-Iranian militia and on a militia convoy killed the brigade commander and six other militiamen, and a [drone strike on Hezbollah's headquarters](#) in south Beirut blew the windows out of one of Hezbollah's media offices.

Netanyahu and Pompeo sabotage Trump and Macron's attempt at diplomacy

Behind those strikes was [Netanyahu's sense of alarm](#) over Trump toying with the idea of seeking negotiations with Iran. Netanyahu had likely learned about Trump's moves toward detente from Pompeo, who had long been his primary contact in the administration. On August 26, French President Emanuel Macron revealed that he was working to broker a Trump-Rouhani meeting. Netanyahu grumbled about the prospect of U.S.-Iranian talks "[several times](#)" with his security cabinet the day before launching the strikes.

Two retired senior Israeli generals, Gen. Amos Yadlin and Gen. Assaf Oron, [criticized those strikes](#) for increasing the likelihood of harsh retaliation by Iran or one of its regional partners. The generals complained that Netanyahu's attacks were "designed to prod [Iran] into a hasty response" and thus end Trump's flirtation with talking to Iran. That much was obviously true, but Pompeo and Netanyahu also knew that provoking an attack by Iran or one of its allies might cause one or more of the American casualties they sought. And once American blood was spilled, Trump would have no means to resist authorizing a major escalation.

Kataib Hezbollah and other pro-Iran Iraqi militias blamed the United States for the wave of lethal Israeli attacks on their fighters. These militias responded in September by launching a [series of rocket attacks](#) on Iraqi government bases where U.S. troops were present. They also struck targets in the vicinity of the U.S. Embassy.

The problem for Netanyahu and Pompeo, however, was that none of those strikes killed an American. What's more, U.S. intelligence officials knew from [NSA monitoring of communications](#) between the IRGC and the militias that Iran had explicitly forbidden direct attacks on US personnel.

Netanyahu was growing impatient. For several days in late October and early November, he met with his national security cabinet to discuss a new Israeli attack to precipitate a [possible war with Iran](#), according to reports by former Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren. Oren hinted at how a war with Iran might start. "[P]erhaps Israel miscalculates," he suggested, "hitting a particularly sensitive target," which, in his view, could spark "a big war between Israel and Iran."

But on December 27, before Netanyahu could put such a strategy into action, the situation changed dramatically. A barrage of rockets slammed into an Iraqi base near Kirkuk where U.S. military personnel were stationed, killing a U.S. military contractor. Suddenly, Pompeo had the opening he needed. At a meeting the following day, Pompeo led Trump to believe that Iranian "proxies" had attacked the base, and pressed him to "[reestablish deterrence](#)" with Iran by carrying out a military response.

In fact, U.S. and Iraqi officials on the spot had reached no such conclusion, and the investigation led by the head of intelligence for the Iraqi federal police at the base was just beginning that same day. But Pompeo and his allies, Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Chairman of Joint Chiefs Gen. Mark A. Milley, were not interested in waiting for its conclusion.

A deception brings the US and Iran to the brink of war

The [results of a subsequent Iraqi investigation](#) revealed that the rocket barrage had been launched from a Sunni area of Kirkuk with a strong Islamic State presence, and that IS

fighters had carried out three attacks not far from the base on Iraqi forces stationed there in the previous ten days. US signals intercepts found no evidence that Iraqi militias had shifted from their policy of avoiding American casualties at all cost.

Kept in the dark by Pompeo about these crucial facts, Trump agreed to launch five airstrikes against Kataib Hezbollah and another pro-Iran militia at five locations in Iraq and Syria that killed 25 militiamen and wounded 51. He may have also agreed in principle to the killing of Soleimani when the opportunity presented itself.

Iran responded to the attacks on its Iraqi militia allies by approving a violent protest at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad January 31. The demonstrators did not penetrate the embassy building itself and were abruptly halted the same day. But Pompeo managed to persuade Trump to authorize the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, Iran's second most powerful figure, presumably by hammering on the theme of "reestablishing deterrence" with Iran.

Soleimani was not only the second most powerful man in Iran and the main figure in its foreign policy; he was idolized by millions of the most strongly nationalist citizens of the country. Killing him in a drone strike was an open invitation to the military confrontation Netanyahu and Pompeo so desperately sought.

During the crucial week from December 28 through January 4, while Pompeo was pressing Trump to retaliate against Iran not just once but twice, it was clear that he was coordinating closely with Netanyahu. During that single week, he [spoke by phone with Netanyahu on three separate occasions](#).

What Pompeo and Netanyahu could not have anticipated was that Iran's missile attack on the U.S. sector of Iraq's sprawling al-Asad airbase in retaliation would be so precise that it [scored direct hits](#) on six U.S. targets without killing a single American. (The US service members were saved in part because the rockets were fired after the Iraqi government had [passed on a warning](#) from Iran to prepare for it). Because no American was killed in the strike, Trump again decided against further retaliation.

Towards another provocation

Although Pompeo and Netanyahu failed to ignite a military conflict with Iran, there is good reason to believe that they will try again before both are forced to leave their positions or power.

In an article for the Atlantic last November, former Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren, channeled Netanyahu when he [declared](#) it would be "better for conflict [with Iran] to occur during the current [Trump] administration, which can be counted on to provide Israel with the three sources of American assistance it traditionally receives in wartime," than to "wait until later."

Oren was not the only Israeli official to suggest that Israeli is likely to go even further in strikes against Iranian and Iranian allies targets in 2020. After listening to Israeli army Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi speak in late December, Haaretz military correspondent Amos Harel [reported](#) that the Israeli army chief conveyed the clear impression that a "more serious confrontation with Iran in the coming year as an almost unquestionable necessity." His interviews with Israeli military and political figures further indicated that Israel would "intensity its efforts to hit Iran in the northern area."

Shockingly, Pompeo has exploited the Coronavirus pandemic to impose even harsher sanctions on Iran while intimidating foreign businesses to prevent urgently needed medical supplies from entering the country. The approaching presidential election gives both Pompeo and Netanyahu a powerful reason to plot another strike, or a series of strikes aimed at drawing the US into a potential Israeli confrontation with Iran.

Activists and members of Congress concerned about keeping the US out of war with Iran must be acutely aware of the danger and ready to respond decisively when the provocation occurs.

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[The Globalization of War: America's "Long War" against Humanity](#)

Michel Chossudovsky

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