

Mideast war threat overshadows Democratic debate

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Tuesday night's Democratic presidential debate in Des Moines, Iowa, the last before the February 3 Iowa caucuses, was dominated by discussion of the war crisis provoked by President Trump's assassination of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani and the devastating legacy of three decades of American wars in the Middle East.

All six candidates on the stage—including the nominal “socialist” Bernie Sanders, who has been appealing to antiwar sentiment at his campaign rallies—criticized Trump's actions from the standpoint of advocating a more carefully considered strategy to defend and advance the interests of American imperialism in the Middle East and throughout the world.

Not one of the candidates called the killing of Suleimani what it clearly was—a criminal action by a criminal president. The word “assassination,” initially used by Sanders and Senator Elizabeth Warren in statements following the drone missile attack that killed the Iranian leader near the Baghdad airport, was not uttered in the course of the two-hour debate. Not one candidate so much as mentioned Suleimani's name.

There was no discussion of the fact that world politics has crossed an ominous line, entering new and uncharted territory, with the most powerful nation in the world killing a top military leader of a country with which it is not at war, and carrying out that action on the soil of a third country in gross violation of its national sovereignty.

Discussion of war and foreign policy, almost completely suppressed in previous debates, took up the first 45 minutes of the January 14 event, which was co-sponsored and moderated by CNN and the *Des Moines Register* newspaper.

Each of the candidates sought to present him- or herself as the most plausible alternative to Donald Trump as commander-in-chief of American imperialism.

Former Vice President Joe Biden touted his own experience—he entered the Senate nearly 50 years ago—and judgment, conceding only that his 2002 vote for the resolution authorizing the war in Iraq was a “mistake.” Biden, at that time chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, played a critical role in ensuring bipartisan support for the US invasion and conquest of Iraq.

The other candidates postured as opponents of the war in Iraq in order to chip away at Biden's frontrunner status, while

offering nearly identical foreign policy perspectives. All of them, including Sanders, supported continuing the US military intervention in the Middle East and Central Asia, differing only on the exact mix of special forces, ground troops and naval and air assets they would deploy.

It was characteristic of the right-wing political framework shared by both the candidates and the debate moderators, led by the apologist for imperialist violence Wolf Blitzer of CNN, that there were no follow-up questions on the killing of Suleimani. The discussion of Iran revolved entirely around the claim that the Iranian regime was seeking to develop nuclear weapons.

The candidates indicated, in virtually identical terms, that the US government had to prevent such a development, and that this was one of the highest priorities of American foreign policy—even though Iran has no ongoing nuclear weapons program and is cooperating with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty.

Biden insisted that the next administration should reconstitute the international coalition that used economic pressure to compel Iran to sign the nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). “The next president has to be able to pull those folks back together, reestablish our alliances, and insist that Iran go back into the agreement,” he said, “which I believe, with the pressure applied as we put on before, we can get done.”

Sanders followed suit, saying, “We have got to undo what Trump did, bring that coalition together, and make sure that Iran never gets a nuclear weapon.”

Former South Bend, Indiana, mayor Pete Buttigieg said, “Ensuring that Iran does not develop nuclear weapons will, of course, be a priority, because it's such an important part of keeping America safe.”

Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota argued that Trump's killing of Suleimani risked provoking an Iranian nuclear breakout, saying, “I would not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon.”

Senator Elizabeth Warren and hedge fund billionaire Tom Steyer did not address the Iran nuclear question directly, but each pledged to use military force when US interests were threatened. Warren said that an “imminent threat” was her criterion—the same language used by Trump to justify the

assassination of Suleimani.

Steyer said, “I would take military action to protect the lives and safety of American citizens,” while adding that he was in general agreement with Biden, the most adamant defender of American military intervention in the Middle East.

More broadly on foreign policy, Klobuchar, Buttigieg and Steyer were generally aligned with Biden, while Sanders and Warren adopted a more critical tone toward military engagements, albeit without any substance.

Biden was the most categorical about reestablishing the aggressive interventionism of the Obama administration, defending actions such as the US-NATO bombing of Libya and unrestricted drone warfare across the Middle East and North Africa, claiming these were legal under existing congressional authorizations.

“I would leave troops in the Middle East in terms of patrolling the Gulf,” he said, “And with regard to this idea that we can walk away and not have any troops anywhere, including special forces, we—there’s no way you negotiate or have been able to negotiate with terrorists. You have to be able to form coalitions to be able to defeat them or contain them.”

Biden and Klobuchar both attacked Trump’s withdrawal of US troops from the Syrian-Turkish border, which gave a green light to the Turkish military incursion that has driven Syrian Kurdish forces away from the border region. Klobuchar added that “when it comes to Iraq right now, I would leave our troops there, despite the mess that has been created by Donald Trump.”

Buttigieg opposed “an endless commitment of ground troops” to the Middle East while backing the continued deployment of special forces equipped for counterterrorism and cyberwarfare. He also called for congressional action on a new Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) that would apply to current conditions of drone warfare and US operations against Iran.

Warren presented herself as an advocate for the military, emphasizing her work on the Senate Armed Services Committee. “I work with our generals, with our military leaders, with our intelligence, but I also visit our troops,” she said. “I visit our troops around the world. I’ve been to Afghanistan, to Iraq, to Jordan, to South Korea. I’ve been to lots of places to talk with our troops. ... You know, I have three brothers who were in the military, and I know how much our military families sacrifice.”

Sanders recalled his opposition to the war in Vietnam and to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, but did not repeat his remarks of last week about wars in the Middle East being waged by the children of the working class rather than the children of billionaires. And he admitted that his own vote in 2001 for the AUMF that approved the US war in Afghanistan was a mistake, excusing it by the fact that only a single Democrat, Barbara Lee of California, voted against it.

And as the debates segued from military conflict to trade war,

he voiced the most strident economic nationalism, attacking Trump from the right on both China and Mexico, and pointing out that, unlike Biden, he had opposed every trade agreement reached by US administrations, going back to the passage of NAFTA under Bill Clinton.

The remainder of the debate, extending more than an hour, was a desultory affair, and the moderators and candidates spoke on subjects such as health care, child care, education, impeachment (barely five minutes!), climate change and electability without saying anything of interest.

Among the topics not raised were economic inequality—supposedly Sanders’ signature issue—poverty, and more generally the social crisis in America, as well as immigration, where Trump’s fascistic and racist demagoguery will be a main theme of his reelection campaign.

Also remarkable given the circumstances—the final debate before the Iowa caucuses initiate actual voter participation in the Democratic nominating contest—there was not a single reference to the entry into the race of billionaire Michael Bloomberg, who has already spent more than \$200 million, more than all other candidates combined.

While the moderators and candidates said nothing about this brazen effort to buy the nomination, they did make time for a political stink bomb against Sanders, a #MeToo-style provocation in which Warren claimed that Sanders had told her in 2018, in a one-on-one meeting with no other witnesses, that a woman could not win the upcoming presidential election.

Sanders has roundly denied Warren’s account, and he did so again when asked at the debate. This led to the following extraordinary exchange with moderator Abby Phillip of CNN.

PHILLIP: So Sen. Sanders—Sen. Sanders, I do want to be clear here, you’re saying that you never told Sen. Warren that a woman could not win the election?

SANDERS: That is correct.

PHILLIP: Sen. Warren, what did you think when Sen. Sanders told you a woman could not win the election?

(LAUGHTER)

The audience laughed at Phillip’s brazen disregard for Sanders’ denial. She did not ask Warren to respond to it, but rather continued with the question as it had been drawn up ahead of time, hoping to provoke a conflict along gender lines that would pit the two supposed “left” candidates for the Democratic nomination against each other, to the benefit of their more right-wing opponents, who have the backing of the Democratic Party establishment and the bulk of the corporate media.



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