

Disruptive Assassinations: Killing Qassem Soleimani. Trump Promises “Bombing 52 Iranian Sites”

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On the surface, it made not one iota of sense. The murder of a foreign military leader on his way from Baghdad airport, his diplomatic status assured by the local authorities, evidently deemed a target of irresistible richness. “General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region.” The [words from the Pentagon](#) seemed to resemble the resentment shown by the Romans to barbarian chiefs who dared resist them. “This strike was aimed at deterring future Iranian attack plans. The United States will continue to take all necessary action to protect our people and our interests wherever they are around the world.”

The killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force in a drone strike on January 3, along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iraq’s Popular Mobilisation Forces, or *Hash a-Shaabi* and PMF Kata’ib Hezbollah, was packaged and ribboned as a matter of military necessity. Soleimani had been, according to the Pentagon, “responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more.” He was accused of being behind a series of attacks on coalition forces in Iraq over the last several months including attacks on the US embassy in Baghdad on December 31, 2019.

US President Donald J. Trump had thrown caution to the wind, [suggesting in a briefing](#) at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida that an option on the table would be the killing of Soleimani. The Iran hawks seemed to have his ear; others were caught off guard, preferring to keep matters more general.

A common thread running through the narrative was the certainty – unshakable, it would seem – that Soleimani was on the warpath against US interests. The increased danger posed by the Quds Force commander were merely presumed, and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was happy to do so [despite not being able](#) to “talk too much about the nature of the threats. But the American people should know that the President’s decision to remove Soleimani from the battlefield saved American lives.” (Pompeo goes on to insist that there was “active plotting” to “take big action” that would have endangered “hundreds of lives”.) How broadly one defines the battlefield becomes relevant; the US imperium has decided that diplomatic niceties and sovereign protections for officials do not count. The battlefield is everywhere.

Trump was far from convincing in [reiterating the arguments](#), insisting that the general had

been responsible for killing or badly wounding “thousands of Americans over an extended period of time, and was plotting to kill many more... but got caught!” From his resort in Palm Beach, Florida, he claimed that the attack was executed “to stop a war. We did not take action to start a war.”

Whatever the views of US officialdom, seismic shifts in the Middle East were being promised. Iraq’s prime minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi [demanded](#) an emergency parliamentary session with the aim of taking “legislative steps and necessary provisions to safeguard Iraq’s dignity, security and sovereignty.” On Sunday, the parliament did something which, ironically enough, has been a cornerstone of Iran’s policy in Iraq: the removal of US troops from Iraq. While being a non-binding resolution, the parliament [urged](#) the prime minister to rescind the invitation extended to US forces when it was attacked by Islamic State forces in 2014.

Iranian Armed Forces’ spokesman Brigadier General Abolfazl Shekarchi [promised](#) setting “up a plan, patiently, to respond to this terrorist act in a crushing and powerful manner”. He also reiterated that it was the US, not Iran, who had “occupied Iraq in violation of all international rules and regulations without any coordination with the Iraqi government and without the Iraqi people’s demands.”

While the appeals to international law can seem feeble, [the observation](#) from the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions Agnès Callamard was hard to impeach. “The targeted killings of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Humandis are most [likely] unlawful and violate international human rights law: Outside the context of active hostilities, the use of drones or other means for targeted killing is almost never likely to be legal.” To [be deemed lawful](#), such targeting with lethal effect “can only be used where strictly necessary to protect against an imminent threat to life.”

The balance sheet for this action, then, is not a good one. As US presidential candidate Marianne Williamson [observed](#) with crisp accuracy, the attack on Soleimani and his companions had little to do with “whether [he] was a ‘good man’ any more than it was about whether Saddam was a good man. It’s about smart versus stupid use of military power.”

An intelligent use of military power is not in the offing, with Trump [promising](#) the targeting of 52 Iranian sites, each one representing an American hostage held in Iran at the US embassy in Tehran during November 1979. But Twitter sprays and promises of this sort tend to lack substance and Trump is again proving to be the master of disruptive distraction rather than tangible action.

Even Israeli outlets such as [Haaretz](#), while doffing the cap off to the idea of Soleimani as a shadowy, dangerous figure behind the slayings of Israelis “in terrorist attacks, and untold thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, Lebanese and others dispatched by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Quds Force,” showed concern. Daniel B. Shapiro even went so far as to express admiration for the operation, an “impressive” feat of logistics but found nothing of an evident strategy. Trump’s own security advisers were caught off guard. A certain bloodlust had taken hold.

Within Congress, the scent of a strategy did not seem to come through, despite some ghoulish cheers from the GOP. Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) and chairman of the House

Intelligence panel, [failed to notice](#) “some broad strategy at work”. Michigan Democrat Rep. Elissa Slotkin, previously acting assistant secretary of defence and CIA analyst, [explained](#) why neither Democratic or Republic presidents had ventured onto the treacherous terrain of targeting Soleimani. “Was the strike worth the likely retaliation, and the potential to pull us into protracted conflict?” The answer was always a resounding no.

By killing such a high ranking official of a sovereign power, the US has signalled a redrawing of accepted, and acceptable lines of engagement. The justification was spurious, suggesting that assassination and killing in combat are not distinctions with any difference. But perhaps most significantly of all, the killing of Soleimani will usher in the very same attacks that this decision was meant to avert even as it assists Iranian policy in expelling any vestige of US influence in Iraq and the broader Middle East. It also signalled to Iran that abiding by agreements of any sort, including the international nuclear deal of 2015 which the US has repudiated, will be paper tigers worth shredding without sorrow.

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