

On the Brink of Another War – The Trump Presidency Assassinate Iranian Leader

8 January, 2020

Introduction

When **Arch-Duke Franz Ferdinand** of Austria was assassinated in 1914, the world was catapulted into World War I. Alarming, we are now in at a similar precipice, following an individual assassination carried out by order of the President of the USA. In a dramatic drone attack on 3rd January 2020 in Baghdad, Brigadier General **Qassem Suleimani** (or Soleimani), of the Quds (or Qods) and the Iraqi Kataib Hezbollah militia chief - **Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis**, were killed. World tensions rose dramatically. Let there be no mistake, no progressive should mourn Suleimani, a ruthless man of ruthless times. He was an enemy of the progressives in Iran and Iraq and anywhere else. But his violent past was well known, why was he assassinated now? What lies behind the veil around his assassination?

Characteristically, the world's top imperialist nation the USA, sought no consultation with allies. Because President **Trump** is himself well known to be impulsive, this act is seen as yet another example of his individual lunacy. But this ignores deep systemic roots in this crisis. In 1914, an assassination resulted in war because of systemic inter-imperialist rivalry. Today, an underlying systemic drive to control the Middle East, has loosed the dogs of war.

As a massive funeral for Suleimani in Tehran ended, the world waited to see whether and how the Iranian government would respond. The first response came in the final renunciation of the nuclear pact. The second came after the Iranian memorial processions, (8th January 2020) as 22 missiles rained down on two US bases in Iraq, apparently with no casualties. At this point it appears these were deliberately made as harmless as possible, for example with advance warnings being given to the Iraqi forces of when and where the missiles would be coming down. For now – both sides have 'stood down'.

The question is, how did we get here? In large part our answer is that just as the Vietnam War marked a defeat for USA imperialism, the USA also lost the 2003 Iraq war, which was won by Iran. Perhaps to an extent, understanding this will help progressives answer key questions including - how can progressives prevent untold numbers of new deaths in an escalating war? Can the dogs of war be re-chained?

1. The 2003 Iraq Invasion Failed to Achieve USA war aims

Blaming President Trump's individual aggression and lunacy are inadequate explanations of events. Simply because the current war fevers are a legacy of policies of both the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. This can be seen if we recall the 2003 USA-led invasion of Iraq. In reality, the 2003 war was never about removing the fascist **Saddam Hussein** (who was long propped up by the USA), or removing mythical

'Weapons of Mass Destruction'. The USA intended to re-draw the map of the Middle East. The old 1916 **Sykes-Picot** maps¹, were to be modernized by dividing Iraq into three parts, ensuring control.

Today the dominant sections of USA imperialism are trying to reverse that failure. Yes, there is an opposition from the USA Democratic Party to Trump's actions here. But most Democrats ultimately share the same ambition in the Middle East as those in the Republican Party. The opposition now being voiced concerns Trump's timing, which is driven by a naked wish to capitalise on a war effect for re-election, while handily diverting attention from the impeachment process. Thus far Democratic opposition to Trump's latest adventurist provocation surrounds the formal 'legality' of his moves (See '6. Debating the 'legality' of the USA assassination' below).

To substantiate an assertion of an underlying symmetry between Democratic and Republican parties in the Middle East, we return to 2006. In that year then Secretary of State for the Republican President Bush, **Condoleezza Rice** stated at a public meeting:

"What we're seeing here [*in regards to the destruction of Lebanon amidst Israeli attacks on Lebanon*], in a sense, is the growing—the 'birth pangs'—of a 'New Middle East' and whatever we do, we [*United States*] have to be certain that we're pushing forward to the New Middle East [*and*] not going back to the old one."²

What was this "New Middle East" to look like? Well, the Democrat – soon to be Vice President to President Obama, **Joe Biden** offered a 'soft partition plan':

"Biden's so-called soft-partition plan - a variation of the blueprint dividing up Bosnia in 1995 - calls for dividing Iraq into three semi-autonomous regions, held together by a central government. There would be a loose Kurdistan, a loose Shiastan and a loose Sunnistan, all under a big, if weak, Iraq umbrella."³

Let us flip to another Republican now, **John Bolton**. He has consistently advocated for partition of both Syria and Iraq. In 2014, Bolton asserted that Iraq was inevitably "headed toward partition." In 2015, on Fox News, Bolton stated:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sykes-Picot_Agreement

² Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Special Briefing on the Travel to the Middle East and Europe of Secretary Condoleezza Rice (Press Conference, U.S. State Department, Washington, D.C., July 21, 2006). Mahdi Nazemroaya, "Plans for Redrawing the Middle East: The Project for a "New Middle East"; Global Research; <https://www.globalresearch.ca/plans-for-redrawing-the-middle-east-the-project-for-a-new-middle-east/3882>

³ Helene Cooper, 'Biden plan for 'soft partition' of Iraq gains momentum', New York Times; July 30, 2007. At <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/30/world/americas/30iht-letter.1.6894357.html>. Max Fisher, "Why DC loves Biden's terrible plan to divide Iraq Aug 5, 2015. <https://www.vox.com/2015/8/5/9097133/iraq-biden>; and, Ben Connable, 'Commentary: Partitioning Iraq: Make a Detailed Case, or Cease and Desist'; May 16, 2016; '6 At War on the Rocks'; and, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/05/partitioning-iraq-make-a-detailed-case-or-cease-and.html>

“I think our objective should be a new Sunni state out of the western part of Iraq, the eastern part of Syria run by moderates or at least authoritarians who are not radical Islamists.” A few months later, Bolton - in a New York Times op-ed - detailed his plan to create the Sunni state out of northeastern Syria and western Iraq, which he nicknames “*Sunni-stan*.” He asserts that such a country has “economic potential” as an oil producer, would be a “bulwark” against the Syrian government and “Iran-allied Baghdad”, and would help defeat Daesh (ISIS). Bolton’s mention of oil is notable, as the proposed area for this Sunni state sits on key oil fields that U.S. oil interests, such as ExxonMobil and the Koch brothers, have sought to control if the partition of Iraq and Syria comes to pass.”⁴

To summarise, both the Democratic party and the Republican party backed the war on Iraq. Their joint 2003 war goals were to dominate the Middle East, and to achieve it, they had decided that a division of Iraq was in order. But they experienced a hard rock which blocked them fully achieving their goals.

2. Who was Suleimani?

As is now well known, the Qud Force was led by Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani (or Soleimani). The Quds force became under Suleimani – a potent weapon against USA:

“Since (*its foundation it*) has given aid to a variety of militant Islamist groups opposed to America’s allies in the region, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The help has gone not only to Shiites but also to Sunni groups like Hamas—helping to form an archipelago of alliances that stretches from Baghdad to Beirut.”⁵

Even while they condemn the act itself (illegal under international law and a violation of Iraq’s sovereignty), progressives should not mourn the death of Suleimani. He vehemently hated those fighting a clerical oppressive theocracy. This imposed medieval restrictions on women including the veil. As well as other causes, this prompted dangerous struggles against the ruling class. Suleimani was vehemently opposed to any compromises towards democratic rights:

“**Khamenei**.. provides the guiding vision for Iranian society. The Supreme Leader, who usually reserves his highest praise for fallen soldiers, referred to Suleimani as “a living martyr of the revolution.” Suleimani is a hard-line supporter of Iran’s authoritarian system. In July, 1999, at the height of student protests, he

⁴ Whitney Webb, ‘Regime Change, Partition, and “Sunnistan”’: John Bolton’s Vision for a New Middle East’; March 30th, 2018; MintPress News, <https://www.mintpressnews.com/regime-change-partition-and-sunnistan-john-boltons-vision-for-a-new-middle-east/239714/>

⁵ Dexter Filkins; “The Shadow Commander- Qassem Suleimani”; September 23, 2013; The New Yorker; <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>

signed, with other Revolutionary Guard commanders, a letter warning the *reformist* President Mohammad **Khatami** that if he didn't put down the revolt the military would—perhaps deposing Khatami in the process. “Our patience has run out,” the generals wrote. The police crushed the demonstrators, as they did again, a decade later.”⁵

More recently, the anti-Iranian rebellion in Baghdad (See section 4 below) faced repression from both of the assassinated men:

“In Tahrir Square (*of Iraq*), “martyr” posters instead often showed the bloodied corpses of the more than 500 killed, mostly protesters, since anti-government demonstrations began Oct. 1. Many blame these killings on groups linked to the two commanders killed Jan. 3.”⁶

In summary, both were definitely bad men, hostile to any shade of progressive steps. But the USA habit of assassinating their opponents although not new (see 6 below, and the **Church Commission**), portends further bloody consequences for the peoples of the Middle East.

3. In what way did the USA 2003 war plans fail?

Indeed the USA did successfully remove their newly inconvenient vassal Saddam Hussein. But they were unable to entirely fulfill their plans.

It is true, they did achieve the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Governments in the North – thus effecting a partial division of Iraq.

It is also true that the USA managed to ensure that they left in place only a weak Iraqi government.

But crucially, it under-estimated the degree and organisation of the Shi'ia opposition to a USA military presence in Iraq. Simply put, Iraq became a killing-zone for USA forces on the ground. Iraqis, whether Sunni or Shi'ia – fought hard against an occupying USA force. Moreover the Iranian state role of close collaboration with the Iraqi Shi'ia militias became swiftly evident, as Iranian Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) devastated Iraq further. This development was led by the Iranian foreign military arm Qud.

Undoubtedly Qassem Suleimani was a ruthless, bloody and effective soldier. We hear a lot about this, and it is basically all true. Again, progressives do not need to mourn Suleimani. However, most media seem to forget, that the USA directly negotiated with Suleimani and Quds. Actually the USA benefited from Suleimani, at least on three key points.

⁶ Shelly Kittleson; “Iraqi armed factions vow revenge for Shiite commanders’ killings”; For Iraq Pulse; at al-Monitor; Jan 5 2020; at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/soleimani-assassination-iran-iraq-us-pmu.html#ixzz6AKgukmIV>

First, from the days of 9/11, the Iranian state had assisted the USA in combatting the Sunni forces of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Even then the negotiations were conducted under Suleimani's control. Rhetoric forced a pause in USA-Iran cooperation, when in January 2002, President Bush called Iran part of the 'Axis of Evil'. It seemed as though there was to be only enmity between Iran and the USA. The history of the 1953 coup of the USA against the Iranian nationalist **Mossadeq** was a constant reminder of USA malignant intent to Iranian nationalism.

However, immediately after the 2003 Iraqi invasion, the USA forces faced a withering attack as an occupying army. For a second time, the USA negotiated with Suleimani to decrease the Iraqi Shi'ia attacks on the USA and for aid against the Sunni al-Zakawri attacks on the USA army. Finally, even to the extent of deciding which Iraqis should be placed in an Iraqi government:

Ryan Crocker, then a senior State Department official (later USA Ambassador to Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries), was negotiating with Iran. He has acknowledged 'a negotiation' between Tehran and Washington':
"After Saddam's regime collapsed, Crocker was dispatched to Baghdad to organize... the Iraqi Governing Council... he negotiated indirectly with Suleimani. ... Crocker passed him the names of prospective Shiite candidates, and the two men vetted each one. Crocker did not offer veto power, but he abandoned candidates whom Suleimani found especially objectionable.
"The formation of the Governing Council was in its essence a negotiation between Tehran and Washington," (Crocker) said." ⁵

It soon became evident, that Suleimani had managed to dictate the withdrawal of all USA troops from Iraq:

"On December 22, 2010, **James Jeffrey**, the American Ambassador to Iraq, and General **Lloyd Austin**, the top American commander there, issued a note of congratulations to the Iraqi people on the formation of a new government, led by Prime Minister **Nuri al-Maliki**. The country had been without a government for nine months, after parliamentary elections ended in an impasse. The composition of the government was critical; at the time of the election, there were still nearly a hundred thousand American troops in the country, and U.S. commanders were still hoping to leave a residual force behind. "We look forward to working with the new coalition government in furthering our common vision of a democratic Iraq," the two men said. What Jeffrey and Austin didn't say was that the crucial deal that brought the Iraqi government together was made not by them but by Suleimani. In the months before, according to several Iraqi and Western officials, Suleimani invited senior Shiite and Kurdish leaders to meet with him in Tehran and Qom, and extracted from them a promise to support Maliki, his preferred candidate. ...

Most remarkable, according to the Iraqi and Western officials, were the two conditions that Suleimani imposed on the Iraqis...The second was that Maliki and his coalition partners insist that all American troops leave the country. "Suleimani said: no Americans," the former Iraqi leader told me. "A ten-year relationship, down the drain." ⁵

Thirdly and more recently, Iranian forces were critical to fighting off ISIS attacks:

"The Treasury Department placed him on a sanctions blacklist in 2011, accusing the commander of complicity in what American officials called a plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to Washington. But the United States also has found itself in the awkward position of cooperating with General Suleimani in Iraq, where the Americans and Iranians have both worked to reverse gains made by the Islamic State. He was in the northern Iraqi city of Tikrit in 2015, commanding Iraqi Shiite militias attempting to recapture it from Islamic State fighters before American warplanes belatedly joined that campaign." ⁷

In summary: Iran effectively controlled the Shi'ia dominated Iraqi government. Iran empowered the Iraqi Shi'ia militias. Effectively, Iraq was under Iranian control. Not USA control.

What can this be called other than a defeat for the USA?

3. The Iranian state extends aid to Bashir Assad of Syria

But Iranian dominance was unstable, since the USA would not accept it in the long term. Then as the so-called Arab Spring hit Syria, the Syrian revolution began. This began a firm challenge to the hereditary fascist regime of **Bashir Assad**. By 2013 Assad was in serious danger of losing power.

It was then that the USA more clearly moved against Suleimani who had been a key Iranian leader, and had supported Assad:

"The U.S. Department of the Treasury has sanctioned Suleimani for his role in supporting the Assad regime, and for abetting terrorism... If Assad fell, the Iranian regime would lose its link to Hezbollah, its forward base against Israel. In a speech, one Iranian cleric said, "If we lose Syria, we cannot keep Tehran." ⁵

But the USA was hindered in its ability to become heavily involved in Syria. It therefore adopted a curious and reticent strategy of offering a minimal and ineffective 'support' to the anti-Assad forces. Largely the USA worked through the Kurdish forces who had long been compliant to the needs of the USA forces. This history goes back to the 1960's

⁷ Rick Gladstone; Iranian General Locks Horns With Trump, Escalating Threat-Filled Feud": *New York Times* July 26 2018at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/26/world/middleeast/suleimani-iran-trump.html>

days of the **Barzani** clans. In this 'half-way' paralysis, the USA watched as the Iranian state and Russia came to be the effective controller of events.

As is now widely accepted, the Iranian and Russian forces became key opposing imperial forces against the USA. We are unable here to discuss the ancillary developments in the Middle East (for example Yemen). However in all sectors, the Russian and Iranian forces played huge roles against USA vassals. This was of course irksome to the USA.

Then came new developments that made the USA leap into the adventure of a provocation to Iran, by the assassination of Suleimani.

4. Resurgence of mass movements in both Iraq and Iran.

Astonishingly after all the sectarian history, recently yet again an 'Iraqi' national consciousness asserted itself. It took the form of an uprising, especially directed against the Iranian hegemony over Iraq. Moreover it was a joint Shi'ia and Sunni rebellion. In light of its significance, it is worth citing an admittedly lengthy report:

"After weeks of mass protests in Iraq, there are signs that the government's patience is waning. Its current response — a mixture of spending and reform promises combined with violent security measures (at least 320 have been killed and approximately 15,000 injured) — has not placated the demonstrators. Scared by the threat to its interests, the political elite is shifting to sticks alone to quell the protests.

"An incremental crackdown may temper protesters in the short term, but it is unlikely to break the spirit of Iraqi demonstrators. Something has happened in Iraq these past few weeks... Iraqis' patience with a self-serving, inept ruling elite is over. They are no longer scared to demand their rights, ... As an Iraqi protester from Baghdad told Al-Monitor, it is a "wakeup call. And there are no more red lines."

... In Baghdad's Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the demonstrations, where protesters have displayed their collective spirit and capabilities in ways that are quintessentially Iraqi....

The demonstrators are showing they are a nation in search of a homeland, and in Tahrir Square, they have shown the world how they want it to be.

While the streets of Baghdad are in disrepair, Tahrir Square boasts a trash service and volunteer street cleaners. Services that the Iraqi state has failed to provide comprehensively, despite multibillion-dollar budgets, have been established: health care, electricity and water. ... Outdoor buffets offer free food, and the square has at least one newspaper that publishes the protesters' demands. Signs display an Iraqi humor that has persisted in the face of adversity. The scene has a carnival air similar to the amusement parks all over the country. People dance. They recite poetry and sing historic, patriotic, modern and religious songs. Nearly every wall is covered with murals and clever

graffiti depicting protest scenes and slogans. Halls and paintings that have sat in disrepair for years have been brought back to life.

This is rule by the people for the people. Protesters are seizing their country, which was wrenched from them by a corrupt government. In doing so they reaffirm their Iraqiness in the most positive ways. They have even set up reverse checkpoints that welcome citizens but exclude the armed forces. Communities intermingle; different sectors of society stand side by side. Patriotism is on full display. Iraqi flags are everywhere. Women are highly visible. There is a clear rejection of sectarianism, as “Iraqi” identity is emphasized. Everyone helps each other by whatever means — money, chaperones, medical care, internet. There is even a laundry service. And those who cannot or will not protest help in other ways, through donations and supplies.

... It is a show of what Iraqi society could be — al-Iraq al-Musagher (mini Iraq) set on an iconic roundabout.

None of this comes as any surprise to those familiar with Iraq and its people. ...Despite their travails, most shared a deep patriotism, one that trumped the religious and communal identities that the mainstream political parties have deployed since 2003 to cement their power. “I never knew if I was Sunni or Shiite growing up” is a common refrain when identity is brought up in conversation.”⁸

To counter it, the pro-Iranian militias took the pretext of a missile launch tit-for-tat war between the USA and the Iranian militia, to surround and lay siege to the American embassy in Baghdad. This was designed to distract attention from the anti-Iranian demonstrations in Tahir Square.

Inside Iran itself, in November 2019, a very similar democratic movement had also launched massive demonstrations. While sparked by economic demands arising from undue hikes in the cost of petrol, they rapidly escalated into street battles. An estimated 1500 deaths occurred as the Iraqi Revolutionary Guard put down the revolts:

“Reuters is reporting the death toll from Iran’s brutal crackdown on anti-government protests in November was significantly higher than previously reported, with as many as 1,500 people killed during the two weeks of demonstrations. The figure was provided by Iranian Interior Ministry officials. It says the victims included at least 400 women and more than a dozen teenagers. Reuters also says the orders for the crackdown came directly from Iran’s Supreme Leader **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei**, who reportedly told a gathering of

⁸ Christine McCaffray van den Toorn; “Iraq on display”; *al-Monitor*; November 22, 2019; <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/11/iraq-protests-government-leadership-crackdown.html>

high-level officials, “The Islamic Republic is in danger. Do whatever it takes to end it. You have my order.”

Both risings obviously shook the Iranian government.

This led observers such as President Trump and **Mike Pompeo**, to place hopes on their abilities to shake the Iranian theocracy. They aimed to strengthen the anti-Iranian rebels, both in Iran and in Iraq.

5. The Trump Government moves to assassination

In 2015, President **Barack Obama** had negotiated a deal with the Iranian Government, which was supported by a trade deal with the European Community – to ensure that the Iranian government would halt nuclear development. However President Trump withdrew from this agreement, much to the dismay of the EU partners. Since then Trump has increasingly pushed to tighten sanctions against the Iranian government. The current exacerbation of the relations between Iran and the Trump Presidency of the USA thus goes back to 2018. As **Phyllis Bennis** (Institute for Policy Studies, Washington DC) points out:

“This crisis goes directly back to the Trump administration decision, implemented in 2018, to abandon the Iran nuclear deal. That’s what destroyed the potential for a diplomatic, rather than war-based, approach in the region.”¹⁰

The Trump Presidency had probably decided some time ago to assassinate Suleimani. They had first signaled this by designating the Revolutionary Guards as a ‘Terrorist organisation:’. This was the first time that a part of a foreign state had been so labeled in. Since it had wide ramifications, the move was opposed by some in the USA military. Their opposition was based on a fear that USA forces could also be so designated. But the move was pushed through by Secretary of State Pompeo and National Security adviser Bolton:

“Some American officials said the broad designation potentially covers 11 million members of the Iranian group and affiliated organizations, including the large Basij volunteer militia. In its statement about the new designation, the State

⁹ *Democracy Now*; “Reuters: up to 1,500 dead in Iran’s bloody crackdown against nov. protests; Dec 23, 2019”; https://www.democracynow.org/2019/12/23/headlines/reuters_up_to_1_500_in_iran_s_bloody_crackdown_against_nov_protests

¹⁰ Panel at *Democracy Now*: “U.S. Killing of Soleimani Helps Hard-Liners in Iran”; January 03, 2020; https://www.democracynow.org/2020/1/3/right_wing_populists_will_sweep_the

Department sharply criticized the Quds Force, an elite unit of the Revolutionary Guards led by Qassim Suleimani. That unit and Mr. Suleimani are already under sanctions from lesser terrorism designations. Top American intelligence and military officials, including Gen. **Joseph F. Dunford Jr.**, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, opposed Mr. Trump's action, which they argued would allow Iranian leaders to justify operations against Americans overseas, especially Special Operations units and paramilitary units working under the C.I.A. But Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and John R. Bolton, the national security adviser, pushed for it, a Trump administration official said. The fighting among the senior administration officials intensified (after New York Times reports)."¹¹

Moving back to the present time, Trump and Pompeo wanted to further spur anti-Iranian government rebellion in both Iraq and Iran. They decided to launch the assassination of Suleimani. They seized on the pretext of the pro-Iranian militia demonstrations and encirclement of the USA embassy in Baghdad. Pushed largely by Pompeo, the USA hoped to ignite anti-Iranian moves further. But they severely miscalculated:

"Washington had hoped his killing in a Baghdad drone strike Friday would deal a blow to Iran and its network of proxies -- but the plan appears to have backfired by uniting pro-Iran factions under an "axis of resistance". "The strike unified the resistance forces and made combatting the United States a priority," said Qassem Qassir, a Lebanese expert in Islamic movements. The assassination was a strategic mistake, and the response will be across the region -- not just limited to Iraq," said Qassir. Indeed, pro-Iran factions in Iraq have seized on the strike to secure a political and popular revival.

Kataeb Hezbollah, a vehemently anti-American armed faction in Iraq, said the strike was "the beginning of the end of the US presence in the region".

Iraqi populist cleric **Moqtada Sadr** swiftly reactivated his Mahdi Army, the notorious militia that fought US troops after the American-led invasion of 2003. "The Iraqi factions of the resistance must hold an immediate meeting to form the International Resistance Regiments," he tweeted, telling his fighters to "be ready".

Qais al-Khazali, a paramilitary leader and bitter rival of Sadr's, echoed his calls for fighting units to mobilise following the strike on Soleimani."¹²

"Iraq's parliament passed a resolution Jan. 5 calling on the government to expel

¹¹ Edward Wong and Eric Schmitt "Trump Designates Iran's Revolutionary Guards a Foreign Terrorist Group": April 8, 2019

¹² Author AFP at *al-Monitor*; "Meant to cripple Iran's clout, US strike unites its allies"; January 6, 2020; at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2020/01/iraq-iran-us-unrest-shiite.html>

US troops from the country, a day after a funeral procession for Iranian Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani and Kataib Hezbollah chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis took place in the capital and other Iraqi cities. The resolution seems unlikely to actually end the US troop presence in Iraq, however, US Secretary State Mike Pompeo responded: "We're confident the Iraqi people want the United States to continue to be there." ⁶

Meanwhile many are fearful of yet another opening for the fanatics of ISIS to wreak further havoc. As the Iranian history expert **Ervand Abrahamian** puts it:

"Meanwhile, I think the person who's having the best laugh at this moment is the former caliph, **al-Baghdadi**, in his grave, because what the killing of Suleimani has done has actually provided a wonderful opportunity for ISIS to recover. There will be a resurgence of ISIS very much in Mosul, northern Iraq. And that, paradoxically, will help Iran, because the Iraqi government will have no choice but to rely more and more on Iran to be able to contain ISIS. After all, ISIS was contained earlier by the U.S., the Kurds and Iran. Trump has pulled — These very militias... And these pro-Iranian Iraqi militias... And Trump has pulled out of north Iraq, of the area where ISIS was, pulled the rug out from the Kurds, and now he's declared war on the pro-Iranian militias. And the Iraqi Army has not been in the past capable of dealing with ISIS. So, the obvious thing is now, the Iraqi government, how are they going to deal with the revival of ISIS? Possibly they could turn to Russia, but I think Russia has its hands full in Libya and Syria, so they will have no choice but to actually rely more and more on Iran. So, Trump has actually undermined his own policy, if he wants to eliminate Iran's influence in Iraq." ¹⁰

6. Debating the 'legality' of the USA assassination

Meanwhile, there has been considerable discussion within the USA as to whether this was a 'targeted killing'; or an "assassination":

"Much of the discussion in the aftermath of the killing of Maj. Gen. Qasim Suleimani last week has focused on the legality of the attack: whether or not his death was carried out by "assassination" or "targeted killing." Administration officials have chosen the latter, following the war-on-terror playbook." ¹³

Does it matter what the killing is labeled as? Well, in one sense no. But in another sense the distinction is important for those trying to 'justify' it under international and USA law. Perhaps we should be surprised to learn that the USA has 'executive orders' that prohibit assassination. This was enunciated following the uproars after USA intelligence agency attacks upon **Patrice Lumumba** and **Fidel Castro**, as an expert on national security law tells us:

"In 1975, the **Church Committee**, a select Senate committee, launched an investigation into the activities of the United States' intelligence agencies,

spurred on by reports of covert assassination attempts on foreign leaders, among them failed attempts against Patrice Lumumba of Congo and Fidel Castro of Cuba. The committee found that assassination was “incompatible with American principle, international order, and morality.” Its final report recommended a ban on assassination in the absence of war and except in cases of imminent danger. Though no such law was passed by Congress, President **Gerald Ford** issued an executive order in 1976 banning political assassination.

Since that executive order, some presidents have claimed the authority to circumvent the ban when they deemed it necessary. **Ronald Reagan**, reportedly claiming to act “in good faith” and within the context of an “approved operation,” launched a failed attack on the Lebanese cleric **Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah**. The **Clinton** administration, in considering plans for targeting **Osama bin Laden**, determined it would be an act of self-defense, and therefore not an assassination.”¹³

But our surprise is markedly reduced, when we learn that hypocritical acts of “good faith” assassination were condoned, and moreover – “assassination” was not defined!

“As a legal matter, Executive Order 12333 bans government officials from engaging or conspiring in assassinations, but neither it nor any federal law defines the term.”¹⁴

In any case, a new term was invented to reduce offense – ‘targeted killing’. Once more, this ‘defence’ was not unique to Republican presidents. In fact Obama made much use of this ‘extenuation; for murders:

“After the attacks of Sept. 11, “targeted killings” became the new rubric employed to bypass the ban on assassinations — a term which had conveniently escaped definition either by the Church Committee or subsequent presidential authorizations. Under Presidents **George W. Bush** and **Barack Obama**, executive authority to carry out these targeted killings expanded.

Mr. Bush authorized some 50 strikes, but the policy came into its own under Mr. Obama. His administration’s lawyers reasoned that despite the ban on assassinations, “targeted killings” against non-state actors outside the zone of active hostilities and in cases of imminent threat were lawful as acts of self-defense in the context of the war on terror, thus authorizing a program that resulted in hundreds of strikes, causing the deaths of thousands of suspected terrorists and an untold number of civilians. The program has taken on renewed energy under President Trump.

Defending the policy, Mr. Obama reassured the American public that

¹³ Karen J. Greenberg; “Killing Qassim Suleimani Was Illegal. And Predictable. This was the inevitable outcome of a dangerous ‘war on terror’ policy.” Jan. 6, 2020; *NYT*; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/opinion/qassim-suleimani.html>

¹⁴ Charlie Savage; “Iran and Presidential War Powers, Explained”; Jan. 6, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/us/politics/war-powers-resolution-iran.html>

levelheaded decision makers would be behind the decisions leading to targeted strikes... Further, Mr. Obama claimed the use of targeted strikes would reduce the risk of “creating more enemies” that boots on the ground would otherwise engender. But by all accounts, the killing of General Suleimani has brought on the opposite: It was an attack launched by a disrespect for law and custom and it has led to threats of violent reprisals. The uptick has already begun, as the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has labeled General Suleimani a martyr in the wake of his death, calling for “severe revenge.”¹³

“The Obama administration also developed the idea that what counts as an “imminent” threat — which permits violent acts undertaken in self-defense — can be stretched for terrorists who are continuously planning attacks from the shadows, so that they can be struck during any fleeting opportunity even if they pose no literally imminent threat at that moment.”¹⁴

Suffice it to say that Trump has taken the process even one step further, by attacking a state player, indeed killing a likely future Iranian state leader. As some legal experts see it, this is tantamount to a declaration of war:

“The killing of General Suleimani has taken the United States into new territory. For starters, General Suleimani, ... wasn’t a non-state actor — a basic premise of the targeted killing policy that was designed for members of terrorist organizations. He was a senior figure in a sovereign government’s military. The distinction is an important one. The policy of a war designed for non-state actors has now slipped into a conflict between nation-states... A policy that attempted to cordon off the war on terror from the rules of war, that depended on “trust me” government, and that rationalized the expansion of executive authority without congressional approval, set the foundation for last week’s killing and its unleashing of threats of violent retaliation. The United States and Iran are now in a state of war by another name.”¹³

7. What Happens Now? An on-going near-boiling kettle

At the time of writing, an overt war has been avoided, but a stand-off remains.

A mere four months ago Iran demonstrated it had a potent weaponry skill when it attacked the Saudi oil installations:

“American military and intelligence officials were stunned at the precision, scale and sheer boldness of what they later concluded was an Iranian attack. Four months ago, a swarm of low-flying armed drones and cruise missiles struck oil tanks in the central hub of the Saudi petroleum industry, catching Washington by surprise and temporarily knocking out 5 percent of the world’s oil supply. Almost

no country in the region — Israel may be the exception — could have defended against it.”¹⁵

And yet its counter-attack following the assassination was both muted and ineffective:

“The Iranian attack on American military posts in Iraq early Wednesday — the only direct attack on the United States or its allies claimed by Iran since the seizure of the American Embassy in 1979 — relied on ballistic missiles and inflicted little damage.”¹⁵

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that both Trump and Khamenei have stepped back from the brink of an overt war. As Trump himself put it:

“Both President Trump and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have avoided for now, a full-blown escalation into war.

“Iran appears to be standing down, which is a good thing for all parties concerned and a very good thing for the world,” Mr. Trump said”¹⁶

Meanwhile the New York Times characterized the missile attack as “intended to save face rather than inflict casualties”. This is consistent with statements by Khamenei:

“Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country’s supreme leader, hailed Iran’s missile strike as a “slap in the face” of the United States and suggested that it would not be the end of the clash. “What matters is that the presence of America, which is a source of corruption in this region, should come to an end.”¹⁶

At least three essential questions remain.

Firstly, that of the nuclear capacity of Iran. Iran has expended much effort to maintain its nuclear limitation agreement, against severe unilateral pressure exerted by the USA. In the wake of the assassinations, Iran announced it was no longer voluntarily going to abide by the terms. This against Trump’s on-going threats to escalate the sanctions on Iran.

Secondly the Iranian government has made it clear that the main goal remains for them, to achieve the removal of the USA forces from the Middle East, as Khamenei said above, and as Iran’s President reiterated:

“President **Hassan Rouhani** of Iran made clear that his country still saw its mission over the long run as driving the United States out of the Middle East after

¹⁵ David D. Kirkpatrick and Ronen Bergman; “Its Missiles Did Little Damage, but Iran Has More Potent Weapons”; January 8, 2020; *NYT*; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/world/middleeast/irans-weapons-military.html>

¹⁶ Peter Baker; “Trump Backs Away From Further Military Conflict With Iran”; *NYT* January 8, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/08/world/middleeast/trump-speech.html>

the killing of General Suleimani. “Our final answer to his assassination will be to kick all US forces out of the region,” Mr. Rouhani wrote on Twitter.”

Of course, the USA is unlikely to move out its troops in the Middle East. There are still a massive number of forces there, and more are being sent in light of possible Iranian counter-reactions:

“The Pentagon has directed about 4,500 additional troops to the region atop the roughly 50,000 already there. Here’s how it breaks down. There are between 45,000 and 65,000 American military personnel — the number can vary by the day — now deployed in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf nations, including around 5,500 troops in Iraq and 600 in Syria. In response to Iranian attacks and provocations since May, the Pentagon deployed about 14,000 additional troops to the Persian Gulf region, including roughly 3,500 more to Saudi Arabia... Roughly 2,000 American troops are in Turkey, mostly based at Incirlik Air Base... Bahrain is home to the headquarters of the United States Navy’s Fifth Fleet, which commands warships patrolling the region. In Qatar, the sprawling Al Udeid base is home to around 10,000 troops. It is the headquarters for American air operations in the region, and hosts a fleet of midair refueling tankers, along with reconnaissance aircraft.”¹⁷

Naturally given his adopted position as the USA’s poodle (It is rather toothless to be still a ‘bulldog’) Prime Minister Johnson has expressed unequivocal support for Trump’s assassination order, and avoided questions on the ‘legality’ of the assassination.¹⁸

The attitude of the European Community meanwhile weakly argues that a variant of the nuclear agreement with Iran is needed. Yet it has been unable to convince Trump of this, nor to alleviate the crippling sanctions facing Iran.

Meanwhile Germany’s **Angela Merkel** meets Russia’s **Vladimir Putin** today (9 January, 2020), as they try to set themselves up to be seen as mediators. However Russia is clearly partisan as a military ally of Iran’s, and Germany will struggle to be seen as an ‘honest broker’. However, Germany has already markedly trimmed sail, by criticizing Iran saying Soleimani’s killing was “justified”. **Steffen Seibert**, the chancellor’s spokesman, said: “It was preceded by Iranian actions,” citing attacks on Saudi Arabian oil facilities, tankers in the Strait of Hormuz and the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. “We have always stressed, and perhaps this is an opportunity to do so once more, that we see these

¹⁷ Thomas Gibbons-Neff; “How U.S. Troops Are Preparing for the Worst in the Middle East”; *New York Times*; Jan. 6, 2020; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/world/middleeast/troops-iran-iraq.html>

¹⁸ The Guardian 8 January 2020; at; <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2020/jan/08/johnson-endorses-suleimani-assassination-in-pmq-s-but-dodges-question-of-legality-video>

regional activities by (Iran) in particular in a very critical way and that they play a negative role in this region,” Seibert said.¹⁹

Although NATO has temporarily suspended Iraq training programs²⁰, this does not mean that NATO forces will not re-enter the scene.

Conclusions

The diplomatic manoeuvres will continue. However the contending major imperialisms in the area – the USA and Russia continue to seek their predominance. Meanwhile their allies, nowadays with a considerable agency of their own – Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey – all are jostling for their own power.

In this ferment the reactionary Islamic fundamentalist forces will continue to be used as convenient by each of these contending powers. We should not forget the history that the Taliban were initially fostered and supported in Afghanistan, by the USA, to fight the Russian state occupation.

This seething background is what has inspired the workers and peoples movements of Iraq, Iran and Lebanon in the last year. While inspiring examples, they have been brutally suppressed. The assassination of Soleimani has only served to make the Iranian progressive task even more difficult.

The progressive non-sectarian people of the Middle East cannot rely on their current leaders. They have made spontaneous moves already which are of huge importance.

An urgent task of progressives is to build a non-sectarian and united anti-war movement that can mobilise worldwide.

Yet Marxist-Leninists also know that without a determined and seasoned ML-ist party in each of these states, the path will be even more difficult.

- Hari Kumar, January 2020

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¹⁹ Associated Press; “Merkel to meet Putin in Moscow for talks on Mideast crises”; Jan 6, 2020; *The Washington Post*; at https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/germanys-merkel-to-meet-putin-in-moscow-on-saturday/2020/01/06/0a5fcd9c-3072-11ea-971b-43bec3ff9860_story.html

²⁰ Sarah Wheaton; ‘NATO suspends Iraq training mission’; 1/4/20, 2:32 PM CET *Politico*: <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-suspends-iraq-training-mission/>