

Assassination of Qassem Soleimani: Donald Trump and the Foreign Policy Establishment Want War With Iran

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Everything Donald Trump has done since taking office has brought the United States closer to war with Iran. The assassination of Qassem Soleimani pushes the United States even further down that catastrophic path.

So let me offer this general observation three days into the new year: 2020 isn't wasting any time. Turkey may be about to send soldiers to Libya [1]. North Korea may be planning to do something big and provocative [2]. Southern Yemeni leaders have pulled out of their peace talks with the Yemeni government, potentially reopening that front in the Yemeni war. The Taliban may be about to declare a ceasefire in Afghanistan [3]. . . or, then again, maybe not [4]. Australia is rapidly becoming uninhabitable [5], while its climate change-denying prime minister just sort of sits there and watches [6].

And, now, Donald Trump may have finally started an actual war with Iran.

A story that began Thursday evening with sketchy reports about one or possibly two missile attacks outside Baghdad airport has developed into a confirmed report that the United States has killed Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad. In the same drone strike, the United States also reportedly killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy leader of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Committee (PMC), which is the body that oversees Iraq's myriad militia factions. Although technically the deputy head of the PMC, al-Muhandis was also the leader of Iraq's arguably most influential militia, Kata'ib Hezbollah, which made him arguably the most powerful figure within the Iraqi militia community. His death is a huge escalation in Iraq's latest political crisis, which we'll discuss presently. But obviously his death, and its repercussions, are totally overshadowed by Soleimani's.

If you've been keeping up with the updates for the past couple of months, then you know that Iraq has been teetering on the edge of complete chaos, as protesters angry about corruption, government ineffectiveness, and foreign influence (mostly via Tehran) have been in the streets demanding wholesale political change. The Iraqi government's violent response, most of it probably spearheaded by the Popular Mobilization militias, has left hundreds of people dead and ultimately forced the resignation of Iraqi prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi. But Iraqi politics are so thoroughly broken that Abdul-Mahdi remains in office as caretaker prime minister because Iraqi political leaders have been unable to agree on a replacement. So that's part of the context in which recent events have taken place.

In parallel with the collapse of Iraq politically, the country has experienced an escalation of violence involving the militias. That (probably) includes the killing of protesters, but it also includes sporadic rocket attacks on Iraqi military bases where US forces are stationed, and it also includes sporadic

air strikes, unattributed but probably carried out by Israel (and/or Saudi Arabia, but more likely Israel), targeting militia bases and weapons caches. Militia leaders have blamed the United States for either assisting or, at least, permitting these attacks.

The final piece of context here is the escalating tension between the United States and Iran since the Trump administration tore up the 2015 Iran nuclear deal last year, which has already led to several violent incidents in and around the Persian Gulf. It would be impossible to recap that whole saga here, but the key thing to remember is that the instability that's gripped that region over the past several months all stems from the administration's decision to scrap an international agreement that a) was working and b) offered an easy path toward de-escalating US-Iran tensions and stabilizing the Persian Gulf.

That brings us to December 27, when one of those sporadic rocket attacks hit an Iraqi military base in Kirkuk and killed a US civilian contractor while injuring several US and Iraqi personnel. "Civilian contractor" could cover anything from an office worker to a mercenary security officer who hadn't engaged in combat, as far as I know, but regardless it was a US citizen killed, and the United States determined that Kata'ib Hezbollah — which was founded in 2003 and became one of the principal militias resisting the postwar US occupation in Iraq, and which has sent fighters to aid Bashar al-Assad in Syria — was behind the attack. And so it retaliated, striking five Kata'ib Hezbollah targets in Iraq and Syria over the weekend. Kata'ib Hezbollah said that at least twenty-four of its personnel were killed in the strikes, and al-Muhandis vowed some kind of response.

The initial response came on Monday from the Iraqi government, which angrily condemned the US strikes as, first and foremost, a violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Underpinning that condemnation is a deep and very understandable Iraqi fear that any war between the United States and Iran (and its proxies) is likely to do more damage to Iraq than anywhere else. The US government dismissed the Iraqis' complaints with a complaint of its own, accusing the Iraqi government of failing to protect its personnel.

The bigger response came throughout the day Monday and then on Tuesday, when a mob of Kata'ib Hezbollah fighters and supporters stormed the US embassy in Baghdad. They set fires but were prevented from breaking into the compound by security. Perhaps more importantly, two major players in Iraqi politics — populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani joined the crowd in condemning the US attack. Al-Sadr called on the mob to stop attacking the embassy and said he would use political means to try to force the United States out of Iraq. Neither al-Sadr nor al-Sistani could conceivably be described as "pro-American," but both had been much more concerned about Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs in recent months. Those US airstrikes appear to have changed that.

Now the United States has killed al-Muhandis and Soleimani, one of the most powerful and popular figures in Iran, who has lost some of his sheen over the past couple of years but who is still one of maybe two or three people whose influence within Iran is eclipsed only by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It's obviously far too early to know what the fallout will be, but it is inconceivable that the Iranian government will not retaliate somehow, and that retaliation doesn't need to come in the form of a full-scale war. Its proxies throughout the region, from Pakistan to Lebanon and Israel-Palestine, can undertake plenty of retaliatory attacks against the interests of the United States and its allies.

It's also inconceivable that the Iraqi government will just allow this to stand. Leaving aside Baghdad's political dependence on Tehran, this is the second time in a matter of days that the United States has treated Iraqi sovereignty as a punch line, and this time it's resulted in the assassinations of a high-ranking Iraqi official and a high-ranking Iranian official who was under Iraqi

security guarantees. There's a very strong possibility that the Iraqi government will demand that the US military completely vacate the country, and if the safety of diplomatic personnel and their families in the US embassy in Baghdad was at risk before, that risk has just been magnified considerably.

It must also be stressed that whatever comes next will be the responsibility of a US president who claims to be antiwar, claims to understand what an incredibly stupid, vindictive thing the Iraq War was, and yet may have just provoked an even more catastrophic conflict. Everything he's done since taking office has brought the United States closer to war with Iran, to the glee of a Washington foreign policy establishment that's been after just such a thing for over forty years now.

It is undoubtedly true that, as the parade of supposed experts on my TV last night reiterated over and over, not very many people outside of Iran and a select few spots in the Middle East will mourn Soleimani's passing. But his assassination is not, as Donald Trump will certainly claim in the next few hours, some spectacular feat of American military might. Soleimani wasn't in hiding like Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Killing him was comparatively easy, but it was also extremely stupid. Soleimani now stands as a martyr to US bullying, and his killing will almost certainly make the Middle East less safe.

Derek Davison

P.S.

- Jacobin, 01.03.2020:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/01/iran-united-states-drone-strike-gassem-soleimani-death>
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/world/europe/erdogan-turkey-libya.html>
- [2] <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2019/12/31/north-korea-kim-jong-un-shocking-actua-l-action-us/2787983001/>
- [3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/conflicting-reports-over-a-taliban-truce-off-er-afghans-the-first-chance-for-a-glimpse-of-peace-since-a-2018-cease-fire/2020/01/01/826af6d8-2bea-11ea-bffe-020c88b3f120_story.html
- [4] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/01/taliban-attacks-kill-20-afghan-security-forces-200101133724551.html>
- [5] <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/2020/01/02/793005940/bushfires-in-australia-may-get-even-worse-with-horrible-day-on-horizon>
- [6] <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/jan/02/pm-scott-morrison-defends-climate-policies-and-asks-australians-to-be-patient-over-fires>