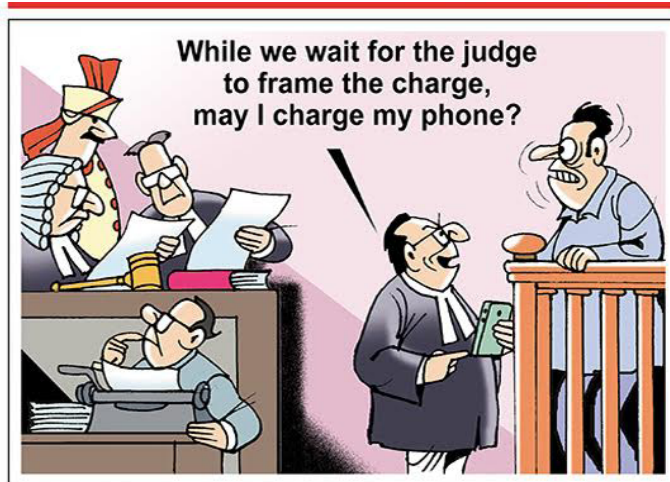


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NO HOLDS BARRED



It has become commonplace to compare the assassination of Soleimani to the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which led to World War I. This is chilling. If the U.S. starts a full-scale war against Iran, what will be the reaction of the other major powers in Eurasia, namely China and Russia? Both China and Russia have condemned the assassination, and both have called for calm.

# Why US Fears Iran

VIJAY PRASHAD

However, Iran responds, the Iranian officials—such as Zarif and Salami—are correct that U.S. influence in the region has deteriorated and will deteriorate further. The U.S. can continue to thrash about with its superior military force, and it will continue to have bases that ring Iran. But what it can do with that power is unclear.

MAJOR General Hossein Salami, the chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of Iran, said on January 4 that his country would take “strategic revenge” against the United States for the assassination of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani. The assassination of Soleimani, Salami said, will be later seen as a “turning point” in U.S. interference in West Asia.

Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif reacted strongly to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s suggestion that Iraqis were “dancing in the street” to celebrate the assassination. On Twitter, Zarif posted pictures of the funeral procession for Soleimani and wrote, “End of US malign presence in West Asia has begun.”

Both the military and the diplomatic wings of Iran’s government are in agreement that it is not Iran that will be weakened by the assassination of Soleimani, but that the United States will suffer the consequences of this action.

#### Why the U.S. Fears Iran

Why does the United States of America—the country with the largest military force in the world—fear Iran? What can Iran do to threaten U.S. interests?

To understand U.S. fears about Iran, it is important to recognize the ideological threat that Iran poses to Saudi Arabia.

Until the Iranian revolution of 1979, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were on an even keel. Both were monarchies, and both were subordinate allies of the United States. Whatever historical animosity remained between the Shia and Sunni—two branches of the Islamic tradition—were on mute.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 shook up the region. The crown of the monarch was set aside, as a specifically religious republic was created.

The Saudis have long said that Islam and democracy are incompatible; this is precisely what the Islamic Republic rejected, when it created its own democratic form of Islam. It was this Islamic republicanism that swept the region, from Pakistan to Morocco. Fears of Islamic republicanism brought shudders into the palaces of the Saudi royal family, and into the U.S. higher establishment. It was at this point that the U.S. President Jimmy Carter said that the military defense of Saudi Arabia’s monarchy was a paramount interest of the U.S. government.

In other words, the U.S. military would be used to protect not the people of the Arabian Peninsula but the Saudi monarchy. Since the main threat was Iran, the U.S. turned its entire arsenal of military and information war against the new Islamic Republic.

The Saudis and the West egged on Saddam Hussein to send in the Iraqi army against Iran in 1980; that bloody war went on till 1988, with both Iran and Iraq bled for the sake of Riyadh and Washington. Soleimani and his successor Brigadier General Esmail Gha’ani both fought in the Iraq-Iran War. Both Saddam Hussein and later the Afghan Taliban held Iran tight inside its borders.

#### American Wars, Iranian Victories

U.S. President George W. Bush broke the wall around Iran. The United States prosecuted two wars, which were essentially won by Iran. First, the U.S. in 2001 knocked out the Taliban and delivered an advantage to pro-Iranian factions, who joined the post-Taliban government in Kabul. Then, in 2003, the U.S. took out Saddam Hussein and his Ba’ath Party; the pro-Iranian Dawa Party succeeded Saddam. It was Bush’s wars that allowed Iran to extend its influence from the Hindu Kush to the Mediterranean Sea.

The United States, Saudi Arabia,

and Israel used several mechanisms to push Iran back into its borders. They first went after Iran’s regional allies: first sanctions against Syria (with the 2003 Syria Accountability Act in the U.S. Congress), and then a war against Lebanon (prosecuted by Israel in 2006 to weaken Hezbollah). Neither worked.

In 2006, the U.S. fabricated a crisis over Iran’s nuclear energy program and pushed for UN, European Union, and U.S. sanctions. This did not work. The sanctions regime ended in 2015. Attempts to intimidate Iran failed.

#### Trump’s Incoherence

Trump left the 2015 nuclear deal, and then said that he would get the U.S. a better deal from Iran. The Iranians scoffed.

Trump ratcheted up the economic war against Iran. This hurt the Iranian people, but with Chinese help, Iran has managed to survive the contraction of its economy.

Trump’s policy toward Iran is known as “maximum pressure.” It was this that led to the recent fracas, including the assassinations of Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a leader of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Units (Hashd al-Sha’abi).

After the assassination, the U.S. sent an envoy to Tehran. The brief from Trump was simple: if Iran does not retaliate, the U.S. will remove part of the regime of sanctions. Soleimani’s life was the price to pay to reduce sanctions. Trump wants to make a deal. He does not understand Iran. His is a policy that is both naïve and dangerous. But it is rooted in the Carter Doctrine, and therefore in the U.S. establishment’s policy framework.

#### What Will Iran Do?

Iran will not accept Trump’s tawdry deal. It has already set aside its policy of “strategic patience” for a much more forthright “calibrated response” policy.

If the U.S. wants to leave the nuclear deal, then Iran will start to process uranium.

If the West threatens Iranian shipping, then Iran will threaten Western shipping.

If the U.S. attacks Iranian interests, then Iran will attack U.S. interests.

Now, the U.S. has assassinated a senior Iranian military leader—who was traveling from Beirut to Baghdad on a diplomatic passport; will Iran offer a proportionate response?

Where will this U.S. policy of “maximum pressure” lead? Iran has said that it would not bow down to the U.S. pressure.

It has become commonplace to compare the assassination of Soleimani to the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which led to World War I. This is chilling. If the U.S. starts a full-scale war against Iran, what will be the reaction of the other major powers in Eurasia, namely China and Russia? Both China and Russia have condemned the assassination, and both have called for calm.

However, Iran responds, the Iranian officials—such as Zarif and Salami—are correct that U.S. influence in the region has deteriorated and will deteriorate further. The U.S. can continue to thrash about with its superior military force, and it will continue to have bases that ring Iran. But what it can do with that power is unclear. This power was not able to subdue Iraq, nor was it able to overthrow the government in Syria, and nor could it create anything near stability in Libya. The attitude toward the U.S. is dismissive on the streets of West Asia, even as the Saudi monarchy continues to flatter U.S. presidents into its worldview.

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A BABOON-faced thug with hair dyed orange threatens — and then repeats his threat — to destroy the world’s precious architectural heritage. He is not Mullah Omar, who ordered blowing up the 1,500-year-old Bamiyan Buddhas. Nor is he from among the ISIS fanatics who levelled the Tomb of Jonah and, later, the 800-year-old Al-Nuri Mosque in Mosul. This man is the president of a country that for decades has preached human rights and rule of law to the world.

Could Trump actually carry out his threat against 52 identified sites inside Iran? While temperatures went down after Iran made only a token missile strike instead of a real one, the long-term danger persists. The Orange Godzilla will certainly have a wide range of choices: the massive architectural complexes of ancient Persepolis, the Pink Mosque of Shiraz, the Tomb of Cyrus the Great, Imam Reza’s shrine in Mashad, and much more.

Today, I am proudly Iranian in siding against a global bully that flouts accepted canons of law and decency. Outrage at America’s overseas rampages is joining together peoples with hugely different thoughts and beliefs. Vicariously I too have joined the millions thronging Iran’s streets and public squares. In choosing to do so I will forget — but for one day and no more — that Iran’s theocratic government crushes civil liberties, has helped prop up Bashar al-Assad’s murderous government in Syria, and seeks to make atomic weapons.

To their credit, US Democrats and the liberal Western media have also joined the chorus condemning Trump’s intent to put Iranian cultural sites under the crosshairs. Their reaction has forced Trump to step back, even if ever so slightly. But when it comes to discussing America’s ‘right’ to assassinate officials of a rival country, only mealy mouthed mumbles can be heard.

Outrage at America’s overseas rampages is joining together peoples with hugely different thoughts and beliefs.

Because the story brings out starkly the corruption of justice by power, let’s ponder upon a tale of two generals.

Maj Gen Qassem Soleimani’s assassination by drone was punishment, tweeted Trump, for a “terrorist leader who had just killed an American, & badly wounded many others, not to mention all of the people he had killed over his lifetime”. Trump goes on to claim that Soleimani was planning to attack US targets but has so far provided no evidence.

## Today, I Am Proudly Iranian

PERVEZ HOODBHOY/DAWN

For now, let’s withhold judgement whether this Iranian general stands guilty as charged. If guilty, one should not be surprised. Every Iranian military officer would be expected to respond to enemy actions, in particular last week’s American attack upon Iranian assets inside Iraq which left 24 Iranians dead. Soleimani could likely have planned or ordered the counterattack which killed an American contractor.

Now compare Soleimani with another general — this time an American general — who was hell

that the data might be fakery. Powell’s solemn declaration was recorded into posterity: “My colleagues, every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. These are not assertions. What we’re giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence.”

Powell’s pack of lies ushered in one of the most dreadful periods of recent world history. Evening after evening, an obscene display of military power — Operation Shock and Awe — titillated American TV audiences. Iraqi defenders were routed soon

“The world has inched closer towards a Hobbesian dystopia where the might-is-right ‘principle’ holds increasing sway. Trump’s America no longer feels itself bound to international treaties, agreements, laws and statutes. In a world governed by thugs and bullies, there will be endless cycles of violence, retribution, and ugliness.”

bent upon making his case for war at the United Nations. On Feb 5, 2003, charged by president George W. Bush with creating global enthusiasm for the forthcoming invasion of Iraq, Gen Colin Powell famously waved a sheaf of papers purportedly containing conclusive evidence of Iraq’s hidden weapons of mass destruction.

Rubbishing warnings from other UN delegates

after hundreds of missiles crashed into Baghdad. Half a million Iraqis were killed, Shia-Sunni fratricide continued for years, the militant Islamic State group was born, and Iraq’s centuries old architectural heritage was looted.

As for the alleged WMDs, who doesn’t know that story? Victorious American soldiers scoured Iraq from end to end searching for them. None were

found because none had existed. Nevertheless, the lies delivered solemnly by Powell paved the way for invasion. How can his not be a war crime?

But the side with more guns and bombs protects its own, even the guilty ones. Gen Soleimani lies dead while Gen Powell is said to be playing golf, writing his memoirs, and leading a quiet life of retirement. When asked about his infamous speech, Powell called it “painful” and something that “will always be a part of my records”. For a mega crime that led to a country’s devastation, that’s not even a token apology.

So, does Powell deserve assassination? Should the Statue of Liberty and Washington Monument be put upon somebody’s list of targets? I certainly hope not. These would be serious crimes. Fortunately, no such thing is likely to happen.

That Trump is desperately seeking to distract from ongoing impeachment proceedings cannot be denied. But the purpose of assassinating Iran’s national hero was possibly to elicit a suicidal response. American airpower can quickly level Iran’s critical infrastructure and bomb the country to its knees. Israel, Saudi Arabia and UAE would be thrilled if that happens. Iran would then join the list of the neighbourhood’s neutered or destroyed countries — Iraq, Syria and Libya.

At least for now, the Iranian leadership has been smart enough to avoid this trap. Earlier, by negotiating the JCPOA nuclear agreement, they showed pragmatism. When the US decided to tear it up, their response was measured. What lies ahead cannot be foretold.

The world has inched closer towards a Hobbesian dystopia where the might-is-right ‘principle’ holds increasing sway. Trump’s America no longer feels itself bound to international treaties, agreements, laws and statutes. In a world governed by thugs and bullies, there will be endless cycles of violence, retribution, and ugliness. So far, it is mostly proxies that have battled each other in the shadows. They have largely abided by an unwritten rule not to kill the other side’s functionaries, diplomats, ambassadors and public figures. With Soleimani’s assassination this could now change, because Iran knows well how to play that game. Suddenly, the world is a more dangerous place.

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The writer teaches physics in Lahore and Islamabad.