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OBSERVER

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K O V I E W

## Envoys' visit

**L**AST week, the government once again brought Delhi-based foreign diplomats on a visit to Kashmir with the opposition slamming it as a "guided tour" facilitated by New Delhi to exhibit normalcy in the state-turned union territory. The two-day trip comprised more than a dozen envoys, including from the United States. The delegation met politicians, civil society groups, journalists and business heads, among others. Earlier the government had organised a similar tour for far-right members of the European Parliament. Both such visits have run into their share of controversies. The move has come under criticism for trying to portray normalcy in Kashmir where the internet remains suspended for more than five months and Kashmir's top political leadership, including three former chief ministers, still remain in detention.

However, diplomats from Australia and several Gulf nations refused the visit due to what government said "scheduling" reasons. But diplomats from European Union countries refused the government invite as they wanted access to common people and visit areas which have not been included in the trip.

In New Delhi, the BJP's main opposition, the Congress party criticized the government for taking the foreign envoys to Kashmir but refusing to allow its own citizens into the region. Congress leader Manish Tewari said that the government's attempt to demonstrate that everything was normal in Kashmir was "far from reality".

The visit has also been opposed by the local Kashmiri parties like National Conference and the PDP, whose senior leaders are under detention. Reacting scathingly to the visit, the NC said the diplomats had been "brought to Kashmir on a guided tour, where access has been severely limited to those handpicked individuals who will toe the government line". The PDP said the visit of the envoys was the government's way of normalising the situation and dared the government to let them meet the detained leaders.

The BJP has remained unfazed by such criticisms and defended the visit by showing the world that Kashmir was normal following the revocation of Article 370 on August 5. The BJP has highlighted the absence of protests in Kashmir as a sign of normalcy in the UT.

The fact, however, remains that while the situation in Kashmir has remained largely calm, government hasn't been commensurate with relaxation of restrictions. Internet continues to be shut which is causing immense hardships to people and has virtually wrecked the parts of economy. Similarly, the government has refused to restore prepaid phones. So, the situation can only be called normal if the government also keeps its side of the bargain by easing curbs in response to normalcy on the ground.

OTHER OPINION

## At last, internet access as a fundamental right

**O**n Friday, the Supreme Court declared that access to the internet is protected under Article 19 of the Constitution. In response to a plea against the suspension of internet services in Jammu and Kashmir since last August, a three-judge bench of the Court affirmed that the right to freedom of speech and expression, as guaranteed to all citizens under the first section of that article, covers the right to go online. In effect, even if left unsaid, this would make net access a fundamental right. This would mark a major advance for a country that has attracted opprobrium from around the world for the sheer number of internet clampdowns imposed. It would also update a crucial aspect of democratic existence to the information age, place India in the league of progressive jurisdictions, and begin to harmonize our legal outlook with that of the United Nations Human Rights Council, which upheld net access as a human right in 2016. It's clear that nobody's voice should be muzzled, after all, and barring self-expression online amounts to exactly that.

The apex court's expansion of our basic rights did not emerge from a cyber vacuum. It was foreshadowed by a similar announcement last year by the Kerala high court, which ruled that no one should arbitrarily be deprived of web connectivity, and also a Supreme Court ruling in 2017 that accorded privacy the status of a fundamental right under Article 21, which assures everyone the right to life and liberty. Of course, such rights do have "reasonable restrictions" under specified circumstances. It is a well-settled principle that individual freedoms are granted only so long as they do not violate the rights of others. Freedom of speech, for example, must not clash with other imperatives like law and order. As the classic logic has it, no one should be allowed to falsely shout "fire" in a closed hall and cause a stampede. Hate speech that promotes enmity between different groups is explicitly banned under Section 153A of the Indian Penal Code. As for the internet, the Court's Friday judgement gave administrations space to restrict its access on the condition that it's proportionate to the problem identified. While this formulation seems fuzzy and could provide enough scope for administrations to justify internet snap-offs in various cases, it is still significant that the rationale used for such actions would be open to judicial scrutiny. In other words, it cannot be done at an administrator's whim.

It would be worth the government's while to formulate clear guidelines on internet shutdowns that are in consonance with the Court's ruling, and these should be put out for public discussion. Apart from the conditions under which people can be placed under a cyber curfew, perhaps a limit could be put on how long such a spell can last. Most of Kashmir has been under an internet blackout now for more than five months, which is long enough to throw commercial and social life out of gear. In today's times, normalcy can hardly be said to have returned to the Valley without the net switched back on. The Court's verdict had instructions for the restoration of internet access to hospitals, educational institutions and other establishments that provide essential services in the Union territory, but didn't call for an immediate lifting of the ban. For that, the rationale offered by the government would have to be reviewed closely.

--The Mint

# Killing Soleimani Reflects US Desperation in Middle East

RAMZY BAROUD | CARAVAN DAILY

**B**Y killing top Iranian military commander, Qassem Soleimani, American and Israeli leaders demonstrated the idiom 'out of the frying pan into the fire.'

US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are both politically and legally embattled – the former has just been impeached and the latter is dogged by an Attorney General indictment and investigation into major corruption cases.

Despairing, out of options and united by a common cause, both leaders were on the lookout for a major disruption – that would situate them in a positive light within their countries' respective media – and they found it.

The assassination of the Iranian major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and commander of its Quds Force, Soleimani, on January 3, along with several Iranian military leaders by a US drone was a testament to the degree of US and Israeli desperation.

Although there has been no official confirmation or denial of the Israeli role in the US operation, it is only logical to assume indirect or even direct Israeli involvement in the assassination.

Over the last few months, the possibility of a war against Iran has once more gained momentum, topping the agenda of Israel's foreign policy makers. Politically beleaguered Netanyahu has repeatedly and tirelessly asked his friends in Washington to increase pressure on Teheran.

"Iran is increasing its aggression as we speak," Netanyahu claimed on December 4, during a meeting with US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. "We are actively engaging in countering that aggression."

One can only assume what "active engagement" from the overtly militant Israeli point of view can possibly mean in this context.

Moreover, the fingerprints of the Israeli intelligence, the Mossad, are unmistakably present in the assassination. It is plausible that the attack at Soleimani's convoy near the Baghdad International airport was a joint CIA-Mossad operation.

It is well-known that Israel has more experience in targeted assassinations in the region than all Middle Eastern countries combined. It has killed hundreds of Palestinian and Arab activists this way. The assassination of Hezbollah's top military leader – the movement's second in command – Imad Mughniyah in February 2008, in Syria, was only one of numerous such killings.

It is no secret that Israel is itching for a war against Iran. Yet all of Tel Aviv's efforts have failed to bring about US-led war similar to



**Soleimani was an Iranian commander, but his massive network and military alliances in the region and beyond made his assassination a powerful message sent by Washington and Tel Aviv that they are ready and unafraid to up their game. Judging by past experiences, it is likely that Washington will regret assassinating the Iranian general for many years to come.**

the Iraq invasion in 2003. The most that Netanyahu could achieve in terms of US support in that regard was a decision by the Trump administration to renege on the US commitment to the international community by withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear Treaty in May 2018.

That coveted Israeli war seemed assured when Iran, after various provocations and the slapping by Washington of yet more sanctions, shot down a US unmanned aerial vehicle that, as Iran maintained, violated the country's airspace, on June 20, 2019.

Even then, the US response fell short of achieving the all-out war that Netanyahu has been so frantically seeking.

But much has happened since then, including a repeat of Netanyahu's failure to win a decisive election, thus securing another term in office, compounding the Israeli Prime Minister's fully justified fear that he could eventually find himself behind bars for operating a massive racket of bribes and misuse of power.

Trump, too, has his own political woes, thus his own reasons to act erratically and irresponsibly. His official impeachment by the US House of Representatives on December 18 was the last of such bad news. He too needed to up the political ante.

If there is one thing that many Democratic and Republican lawmakers have in common is their desire for more Middle East military interventions and to maintain a stronger military presence in the oil and gas-rich region. This was reflected in the near-celebratory tone that US officials, generals, and media commentators have used following the assassination of the Iranian commander in Baghdad.

Israeli officials too were visibly excited. Immediately following the

killing of General Soleimani, Israeli leaders and officials issued statements and tweets in support of the US action.

For his part, Netanyahu declared that "Israel has the right to defend itself. The US has the same right exactly." "Soleimani," he added, "is responsible for the deaths of innocent US citizens and many others. He was planning further attacks."

The last statement in particular, "he was planning further attacks," points to the obvious joint intelligence and information sharing between Washington and Tel Aviv.

Benny Gantz, mistakenly celebrated for being a "centrist", was no less militant in his views. When it comes to matters of national security, "there is no coalition and opposition," he stated.

"The killing of Soleimani is a message to all the head of global terror: on your own heads be it," the Israeli general, responsible for the death of thousands of innocent Palestinians in Gaza and elsewhere, also added.

Iran will certainly respond, not only against American targets but Israeli targets as well, for Teheran is convinced that Israel has played a major role in the operation. The pressing questions are more about the nature and the timing of the Iranian response: How far will Iran go to send even a stronger message back to Washington and Tel Aviv? and could Teheran communicate a decisive message without granting Netanyahu his wish of an all-out war between Iran and the United States?

Recent events in Iraq – the mass protests and attempt by unarmed protesters to storm the US embassy in Baghdad on December 31 – were, to some extent, a game changer. Initially, they were understood as an angry response to US airstrikes on an Iranian-backed militia group on

Sunday, but the protests had unintended consequences as well, particularly dangerous from a US military and strategic perspective. For the first time since the phony US "withdrawal" from Iraq under the previous administration of Barack Obama in 2012, a new collective understanding began maturing among ordinary Iraqis and their representatives that the US must leave the country for good.

Acting quickly, the US, with palpable Israeli giddiness, assassinated Soleimani to send a clear message to Iraq and Iran that demanding or expecting an American withdrawal is a red line that cannot be crossed – and to the whole Middle East that the evident US retreat from the region will not be duplicated in Iraq.

Soleimani's assassination was followed by yet more US airstrikes on Iran's allies in Iraq, as to also emphasize the level of US seriousness and willingness to seek violent confrontation as a matter of course.

While Iran is now weighing in its responses, it must also be aware of the geostrategic consequences of its decisions. An Iranian move against US-Israeli interests would have to be convincing from the point of view of Iran and its allies, yet, again, without engaging in an all-out war.

Either way, Iran's next move will define the Iranian-US-Israeli relations in the region for years to come and will further intensify the ongoing regional and international "Great Game", on full display throughout the Middle East.

Soleimani's assassination could also be understood as a clear message to both Russia and China as well, that the US is prepared to set the whole region on fire, if necessary, in order to maintain its strategic presence and to serve its economic interests – which mostly lie in Iraqi and Arab oil and gas.

This comes at the heel of a joint Russian, Chinese and Iranian naval drill in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Oman, starting on December 27. The news of the military exercises must have been particularly alarming to the Pentagon, as Iran, which was meant to be isolated and browbeaten, is increasingly becoming a regional access point to the emergent and resurfacing Chinese and Russian military powers respectively.

Soleimani was an Iranian commander, but his massive network and military alliances in the region and beyond made his assassination a powerful message sent by Washington and Tel Aviv that they are ready and unafraid to up their game.

The ball is now in the court of Iran and its allies.

Judging by past experiences, it is likely that Washington will regret assassinating the Iranian general for many years to come.

## The myriad interpretations of Sufi anthem 'Mast Qalandar'

SHAHZAD SHARJEEL

**I**F one hails from the subcontinent, it is hard never to have heard the throbbing beat of "dama dam mast qalandar" – a Sufi anthem whose following has transcended geographical boundaries thanks to the popularity of fusion music and technological advancement. Hundreds of singers have rendered it in genres ranging from qawwali to film songs. It is believed to have been originally written by Amir Khusro in the 13th century and then added to by Bulleh Shah in the 17th century.

Recently, it was claimed on a TV show that Saghar Siddiqui penned the famous song. Now Saghar was a tremendous poet who went uncelebrated and totally ignored. He deserves appreciation and acknowledgement without any doubt. However, he was too big a poet to be laden with someone else's creation. Probably what caused this confusion is that he may have written the lyrics for one of the two movies featuring this song in 1956 and 1969. In the latter year, it was sung by Madam Noor Jehan who truly immortalised it.

It happens many a time that folklore is adapted for contemporary us-

age and minor tweaks make it more accessible and attractive for audiences. To that extent, Saghar, or anyone else for that matter, would deserve accolades as it is no mean feat to make a change, no matter how minor, in an already phenomenally popular work of art without taking something away from the beauty of the original.

It is important to differentiate between dhamal, the tune and the lyrics of the song set to it. Since this region has been a melting pot, in all likelihood the tune predates the song as dhamal, a stomping beat, is accompanied by an ecstatic whirling and stamping that has come to be associated with a particular type of dance performed in a trance-like state at Sufi shrines. Its appeal is so widespread that both dhamal and the song's refrain "dama dam mast qalandar" have entered the sociopolitical lexicon to connote meanings far from its original intent. Among its myriad usages, "dhamal" is used to signify "intense" and "dama dam" to warn "the end is nigh".

It was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who first used the term "dama dam mast qalandar" in 1973 to predict the political turmoil ahead. Subsequently, the late Pir Pagaro used it to relay his master's voice to the elected governments that their days were num-

bered. It is also attributed to ZAB that right before the orders for his judicial murder were to be pronounced by the presiding judge, he murmured "Qalandar pat rakh jaan" (O Qalandar, help save my honour). This attribution is weak on two counts. One, it has not been corroborated sufficiently, and two, ZAB most likely was not so conversant with Sindhi to have used "pat" for honour.

While tracing the genesis and evolution of the anthem, it should be kept in view that Jhuley Lal is a different saint from Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. His real name was Udero Lal while the latter was named Usman Marwandi. Udero was a Hindu saint and his mausoleum complex in Tando Adam, district Sanghar in Sindh, has a unique distinction of being administered jointly by the Muslim and Hindu community. The references to "jhula" (cradle) as in "jhuley lal" or "jhuley lalan" are reminders of the legend of Udero Lal and how as an infant he is believed to have performed miracles from his jhula.

There is nothing wrong in combining reverence for two or multiple mystics who spread the message of love and peace. Like Shahbaz Qalandar, Udero Lal enjoys a huge following among people from various faiths, but very few people realise

that the references to "jhuley lal" in folk music may actually pertain to him, and the song as we know it today may be an amalgam of devotion to various mystics, a definite case of "the more the merrier".

As a noun, "dhamal" means a loud melody that is not just heard, but felt under the feet – of earthshaking variety, you may say. It is used as an adjective, especially in India to signify something very exciting, very intense, eg "the match had a dhamal ending". The spontaneous dance that Pakistanis all over the country break into when surprised by something good coming their way is what we are referring to here – yes, those index fingers in the air, shoulders raised whirl is dhamal!

Given the rising political temperature and the excitement it causes among those vying for power, it seems we are poised for a rather extended dama dam season as the next general elections are not due before 2023. Incidentally, the economy too can be explained within the ambit of this piece through a proverb that reflects our predicament so perfectly that it cries out to be shared: "pai na paisa paley; dhamal pendhi challey" (not even a coin in the pocket, but the gait is earthshaking).

Dawn