

On Iran, It's Time For Europe to Step Up

by Hugh Fitzgerald



By now it should be clear: the killing of Qassem Soleimani, at the time of his death the world's greatest terrorist, has made the world a safer place. In his 25 years of violent activity, Soleimani had shown himself to be a more dangerous terrorist than either Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He extended the tentacles of Iran's malign influence throughout the Middle East, into Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. He gave both military and financial aid to Hezbollah, including 140,000 missiles with which to threaten Israel. In Lebanon, Soleimani helped build up Hezbollah to become a state-within-a-state, always threatening to drag that country into a war with Israel that no one else in Lebanon wanted. Most recently, Hezbollah has supported the government in Beirut against

popular protests, because it has consistently done Hezbollah's bidding. The terror group has helped to violently suppress the protesters, including many Shi'a, against that same government. For Soleimani, Hezbollah was a wholly-owned subsidiary of Iran. Behind the official head of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Hassan Nasrallah, it was Qassem Soleimani who called the shots. In Yemen, Soleimani delivered weapons and money to the Shi'a Houthi, who have been fighting against the Sunni-dominated government. Soleimani's goal was the conquest of Yemen by the Houthis, which would then become Tehran's puppet state, right on the southern border of Saudi Arabia, with Iranian bases inside Yemen able to threaten the KSA. In Iraq, Soleimani had helped create, fund, and supply with weapons several Shi'a militias that dutifully promoted Iranian interests. According to the Iraqi statesman Mithal al-Alusi, Soleimani also bribed Iraqi parliamentarians to vote as Tehran demanded. Everywhere he turned, Soleimani was a force promoting corruption, mayhem, and terrorism in the service of Iran's interests.

When Soleimani was killed, there were many in the Sunni Arab world who rejoiced. The official press of Saudi Arabia celebrated his killing. Other countries – the UAE, Egypt, Bahrain – made clear their own satisfaction, though not quite to the degree expressed in Riyadh. In Iraq, the response was divided, but even some Shi'a were gladdened by the news. Of 22 Arab states, only four – Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Qatar – expressed their condolences on Soleimani's death.

In America many, though not all, Democrats criticized the killing which, some claimed to fear, might well lead to an "escalation" and war. But the Iranian response was noticeably mild. The Iranians lobbed fewer than twenty missiles toward two American bases in Iraq, taking care to warn the Iraqi government several hours before the attack was launched, thereby giving the Iraqis time to inform the Americans, and for U.S. soldiers to seek shelter in bunkers; as a

consequence, no Americans were killed or wounded. "We did not intend to kill," said Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the head of the Revolutionary Guard's Aerospace Force, according to Iranian state media. "We intended to hit the enemy's military machinery." That was the truth. The lie, which Iran's government hoped its own people would believe, was their initial statement that 80 Americans had been killed and 200 wounded in the attack, a figure that was later decreased to "tens of people were killed or wounded." And then, having engaged in that attack that was intended not to kill or wound Americans, Iran announced that it considered the matter closed. No "war" resulted from "warmonger" Trump's order to kill Soleimani. The Iranian rulers are now clearly terrified of what Trump might do in the future; American deterrence has been restored; relative calm now prevails; Soleimani's killing has removed one of the chief sources of conflict in the Middle East.

One might have thought the Europeans would have been at least as enthusiastic as the Sunni Arabs over the death of Soleimani. But they were diffident – even muted – in their praise for the killing. Some of this must surely reflect the deep hostility, among European elites, for Donald Trump himself. Even when he does something that has so obviously benefited the world, the Europeans deny him credit. Some did more than mute their praise; they were actually critical of Americans for the killing.

Since 1979, the Islamic Republic has been at war not just with America and Israel, but with the entire Western Infidel world. The 58 French soldiers who were killed in their barracks in Beirut in 1983 by Hezbollah, working under Iran's direction, ought to have been reason enough for the French to applaud the killing of Soleimani, but there was no applause. The reaction in Paris was decidedly unenthusiastic: "We are waking up in a more dangerous world. Military escalation is always dangerous," France's deputy minister for foreign affairs,

Amelie de Montchalin, said on a radio program. "When such actions, such operations, take place, we see that escalation is underway." As for Germany and the U.K., both said that Iran bore some of the blame for the heightened tensions, but that the important thing was to now avoid an "escalation." German government spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer did describe the strike as "a reaction to a whole series of military provocations for which Iran bears responsibility," pointing to attacks on tankers in the Strait of Hormuz, and on Saudi oil installations, among other events. "We are at a dangerous escalation point and what matters now is contributing with prudence and restraint to de-escalation," she said.

Meanwhile, the British foreign secretary, Dominic Raab, noted that "we have always recognized the aggressive threat posed by the Iranian Quds force led by Qassem Soleimani. Following his death, we urge all parties to de-escalate," he said. "Further conflict is in none of our interests."

Neither France, nor Germany, nor the U.K., nor any of our other European allies, came out with full-throated approval of the Soleimani killing. They all warned, in unison, of the threat of "escalation." It was their word of the day. None suggested that precisely because Trump had scared Iran's rulers with his bold act that there would be no "escalation."

And those Europeans had long had their own reasons to want Soleimani dead. The French knew, from the Beirut attack in 1983 by Hezbollah that killed 58 French soldiers, that the Iranians were their mortal enemies, but made no plans to retaliate. The British concluded that Soleimani, using Iraqi Shi'a militias, had been running a violent campaign against British troops in Basra in 2007. The SAS planned his assassination, but that plan was cancelled because David Miliband, then the British Foreign Secretary, was worried about possible consequences in the region.

In the European media, Soleimani was described as a

“government official,” “widely admired” and “legendary.” These are not the epithets one expects for the world’s most dangerous terrorist. There was also, in some of the coverage, a harping on American “aggression” in the Middle East, suggesting a moral equivalence between Soleimani and his American enemies. But where is that equivalence to be found? Soleimani helped the dictator Assad to kill half-a-million of his own people, and to cause another five million to flee the country. The Americans, on the other hand, were in Syria in order to help put down the Islamic State, and to support the democratic opposition to Assad. In Iraq, Soleimani helped Shi’a militias to make war on Sunnis, while the Americans spent hundreds of billions trying to lessen the fissures between Shi’a and Sunnis in that country, and to help create a Western-style democracy, a forlorn but noble hope.

Democratic presidential candidates were, like many Europeans, critical of Trump for the killing of Soleimani. Joe Biden compared the killing of Soleimani to “throwing a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox.” Bernie Sanders said, with his accustomed hyperbole, that “Trump’s dangerous escalation brings us closer to another disastrous war in the Middle East that could cost countless lives and trillions more dollars. Trump promised to end endless wars, but this action puts us on the path to another one.”

Just as many Europeans make a moral equivalence between Palestinian terrorists and the Israelis who are defending themselves against those same terrorists, there were some in Europe who used the occasion of Soleimani’s killing to deplore both America and Iran. Some of this undoubtedly reflects the widespread contempt in Europe for President Trump, and also may reflect fear of Iran, and what its operatives might do on the European continent. The European feeling seems to be that they must not antagonize the ayatollahs. The European Council President, Charles Michel, said that the “cycle of violence, provocations, and retaliations which we have witnessed in Iraq

over the past few weeks has to stop.” A “cycle of violence” implies equal responsibility; for Michel there seems to be no moral difference between Soleimani’s responsibility for the deaths of tens, or even hundreds, of thousands of people, and the killing of Soleimani himself. And Michel has plenty of company.

Then there is Agnes Callamard, the United Nations’ special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, who said in a post on Twitter that the killing of Soleimani “most likely” violated international law. “Use of lethal force is only justified to protect against an imminent threat to life,” Callamard wrote. Use of drones for targeted killings outside active hostilities was “almost never likely to be legal.” Did the recent acts by Iran not constitute active hostilities? The attacks on Saudi oil facilities, on oil tankers in the UAE, the seizure of a British oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz, the shooting down of an American drone, the killing of an American contractor in Iraq, Iran’s part in the attempt to storm the American Embassy in Baghdad, the kidnapping of Western nationals – all of this surely qualifies as “active hostilities.” And Callamard deliberately ignored the American claim that Soleimani was planning attacks that constituted “an imminent threat to life.” One wonders if this “UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings” objected to the deaths of Osama bin Laden and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (who committed suicide to avoid being killed by the Infidels).

The Iranian lobby seems to be quite effective in Brussels. Indeed, Federica Mogherini, until recently the former EU Foreign Minister (“High Representative of the Union for Security and Foreign Affairs) hardly reacted, when she was still in that position, to the popular protests in Iran against the government. She let a week of these protests go by before commenting on the violent repression of protesters: “In the spirit of openness and respect that is at the root of our relationship,” she said “we expect all concerned to refrain

from violence and to guarantee freedom of expression.” What had Iran done to deserve the EU’s “openness and respect”? Its hanging of homosexuals? Its torture and murder of political prisoners? Its endless “Death to America” and “Death to Israel” rallies? Its support for such terrorist groups as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad? And why does she say that we “expect all concerned to refrain from violence,” when all of the violence she deplored came only from the Iranian government itself, and not from the protesters? And how can Mogherini ask “all concerned...to guarantee freedom of expression”? Only one side, the Iranian government, can “guarantee” such a freedom, but it is that very government that has stifled freedom of expression in Iran for the past 40 years. But Mogherini could not bring herself to demand that “the Iranian government must refrain from violence and guarantee freedom of expression.” That would be taking sides. That would be unfair.

Mogherini’s recent successor as the EU’s Foreign Minister is Josep Borell, is even worse. He is a Spanish socialist who has been involved in several financial scandals, including insider trading and failures to declare income. As one of his former colleagues said, Borell is “a fine example of ineffectual, corrupt, and empty leadership.” He also happens to be rabidly pro-Iranian. This past year he celebrated the “achievements” of the Islamic Republic during the 40 years of its existence; he has been a frequent visitor to Iran, always full of praise for the police state known as the Islamic Republic. Given his record of financial finagling, it’s not implausible to suspect that during those trips to Iran he has received expressions of “gratitude in greenbacks.” Sometimes it really is all about the benjamins.

The killing of Soleimani was a remarkable achievement. Now it should be followed up by cleaning out the Augean stables of pro-Iranian officials, whether at the E.U. (as Mogherini and Borell), or at the U.N. (Agnes Callamard), or in foreign

ministries of European states. America has shown that even the most dangerous Iranian terrorist can be taken down, and Iran's leadership can be made sufficiently scared so that any retaliation they take will be deliberately mild and ineffectual. The U.K.'s Prime Minister is now Boris Johnson, a man who is both pro-Israel and alarmed about Islam; there is an opportunity, beginning with the U.K., to start this cleansing operation. Britain has recently been the main European target of Iranian plots. In 2015, the British government discovered a Hezbollah bomb factory near London. This should not be a surprise. Iran has always regarded the U.K. as an enemy, going back to resentment of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company's power within Iran, and of the British role in orchestrating, along with the Americans the 1953 coup against Mossadegh. In 2016, Ayatollah Khomeini said that "for centuries, Britain has always been the source of wickedness and evil among nations of our region. The strikes that these Britons have blown [sic] against the lives of our neighbors are incomparable to others."

In recent years, Iran has kidnapped British citizens (with dual nationalities), unleashed a cyber-attack in 2017 on the British Parliament, which affected dozens of MPs, and disrupted 9,000 email accounts; the victims included Theresa May, who was then the Prime Minister. Iran seized a British oil tanker in July and held it for two months. This January an Iranian government plot to kidnap anti-regime Iranian journalists from London and fly them back to Iran was revealed. And the British government has also been infuriated by the arrest of the British ambassador to Iran, who had made the mistake of visiting one of the anti-regime protests. The British demanded his immediate release and Iran complied, but the Islamic Republic's indifference to the accepted international norms regarding treatment of diplomats will remind many people of the siege of the American embassy back in 1979.

It's time for Europe, beginning with the U.K., to press the advantage that Trump's boldness has achieved. Europe's leaders too, should emulate Trump's praise on social media of the students protesting in Iran. They are not protesting against the regime, as has been reported, only because of its incompetence, in its shooting down of the Ukrainian airliner, and its lies, in denying it had done so. The students are also enraged at the corruption and mismanagement of the economy. They know that Ayatollah Khamenei has amassed billions of dollars for himself. They are tired of the mindless hatred promoted by the regime. In taking care not to step on representations of the American and Israeli flags, and booing those few who do, the students have shown they are fed up with such nonsense. They cry "Death to the Dictator" and "Our Enemy is Here." The protests on the streets of Iran are becoming ever bigger and bolder. The forces of repression have gone beyond tear gas and rubber bullets; they now have also been resorting to live fire, kindling still more popular rage. Meanwhile, the Iranian economy continues to tank. The rial sinks, while unemployment soars. Oil revenues have dropped by 90% in less than two years. There is no rescue in the offing. Iran's only Arab allies are the two pariah states of Syria and Qatar.

Thanks to Trump, Soleimani is dead and the Iranians leaders are full of dread. Now is the time for Europeans to join in what the Americans have started. They should follow America's, and now Britain's, lead, and ban both wings of Hezbollah – its military and its so-called "political wing" – as inseparable parts of the terrorist group (and Iranian proxy) that it has always been. Close down Hezbollah offices. Seize the foreign assets, wherever possible, from all those who are connected to Hezbollah, including Iranian officials. Reduce imports from, and exports to, Iran, to an absolute minimum. Deny Iranian planes landing rights in Western airports. Increase the Farsi-language programs beamed into Iran, providing accurate coverage both of world events, and of what is going on in Iran

itself. Fill social media with stories, including video, of the protests in Iranian cities. Post online details of the private fortunes of Ayatollah Khamenei, and of all the other top officials who have made out like gangbusters – or more exactly, like gangsters.

With that kind of effort across the board, let's see how long the criminals in Iran manage to hold onto power. Three years? Two years? One year? Even less?

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