

With Soleimani Gone, the World is Much Safer Today

by Hugh Fitzgerald



As everyone knows, Iran is reeling from the economic sanctions reimposed by the Trump Administration. Iranian oil sales abroad have plummeted in one year by 90%, from 2.46 mbd. to .24 mbd. Iran itself predicts that its oil revenues will fall again, by another 70% in the next Iranian fiscal year. Iran's GDP continues to contract, by 4.8% in 2018 and again by 9.5% in 2019; in 2020, it is again expected to fall by another 12-15%. The unemployment rate, meanwhile, rose from 14.5% in 2018 to 16.8% in 2019, and is estimated in 2020 to rise to 20%. The rial has sunk from an exchange rate of 40,000 to one USD to 120,000 to one USD.

Until the very end of December, the Administration looked as though it was content to let economic sanctions wreak havoc in Iran. It did not respond militarily when Saudi oil installations were hit by Iran. The lack of any response to

that attack disturbed Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. They needn't have worried. When a single American contractor was killed in Iraq, the Americans responded on December 29 with attacks on the Iranian-allied Shi'a militia in Iraq and Syria – the Kataeb Hezbollah, who were responsible, killing 25 and wounding more than 50. Then, after Iraqi Shi'a in response attacked the American Embassy, the Americans prepared to reinforce the compound with hundreds of Marines, warning Iran that it would hold it responsible for any further attacks. On January 3, the Americans killed the leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), Qassem Soleimani, in a spectacular strike at Baghdad's airport, just as Soleimani had descended from a plane. Secretary of State Pompeo announced that Soleimani had been preparing "imminent attacks" on Americans. President Trump tweeted that Soleimani should have been "taken out five years ago." The killing of Soleimani signaled to everyone that the American policy had definitely changed; Iranian attacks, or even plans for such attacks on America and its allies, would be met with devastating force. Qassem Soleimani was not just a general; he was Iran's most important military figure and the world's foremost terrorist. American intelligence was spectacular; its information allowed the American drone to identify and take him out at the airport.

Ayatollah Khamenei has now promised a "harsh revenge." But what can Iran do other than issue its usual blood-curdling threats? If it attacks any Americans – diplomats, contractors, military – or if it plans such an attack, it can now expect an immediate forceful response, many times more powerful than anything the Iranians can muster. President Rouhani and Ayatollah Khamenei do not dare to test the Americans – their belligerence is purely verbal. They know that they're not dealing with that milquetoast Carter in the White House, who was always hoping that perhaps the American hostages in the embassy, gosh darn it, would be let free (as they were, after 444 days, on the same day Reagan replaced Carter). They are

dealing with Donald Trump, who now terrifies Tehran.

The Russians are furious at this display of American military resolve. They issued a statement: "The short-sighted acts of the US, the assassination of General Soleimani, lead to a sharp escalation of the military-political situation in the Middle East region and serious negative consequences for the entire international security system." What "negative consequences" result from the killing of the world's most powerful terrorist? Weren't there far more "negative consequences" if he had been left alive to carry out his plots? The government of France claimed that the world has been made "less safe" because of Soleimani's death. Was the world "less safe," Monsieur Macron, because of the deaths of Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi? Secretary Pompeo replied on CNN: "Yeah, well, the French are just wrong about that. The world is a much safer place today. And I can assure you that Americans in the region are much safer today after the demise of Qasem Soleimani." Anyone of common sense – that leaves out most of our media and political elites in the Western world – would have to agree.

The US strike that killed Qassem Soleimani was aimed at deterring Iranian aggression and "setting the conditions for de-escalation," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Fox News. "We don't seek war with Iran, but we at the same time are not going to stand by and watch the Iranians escalate and continue to put American lives at risk without responding in a way that disrupts, defends, deters, and creates an opportunity to de-escalate the situation," he added later in the interview on Friday morning.

The Americans are not looking for war, as half the world appears to believe, but they will not any longer permit Iran to get away with attacks against Americans without being held to account.

In the Middle East, our allies have had their previous fears of American inaction allayed. Prime Minister Netanyahu has praised the killing: "Trump is worthy of full appreciation for acting with determination, strongly and swiftly. We stand fully by the United States in its just battle for security, peace and self-defense." Saudi Arabia and the UAE have as yet made no statements but must be similarly delighted at this blow to Iran's ability to wage war. Even in Iraq there have been crowds – mainly Sunnis – celebrating the death of Soleimani, but reports claim that many Shi'a, too, have joined in, for they have been enraged at Iranian interference in Iraq's affairs, as was shown by the attack in late November, when Shi'a protesters burned down the Iranian consulate in Najaf.

In the U.K., Jeremy Corbyn – who needs to be pulled off the political stage as soon as possible – predictably denounced the Americans: he claimed that "the US assassination" of the general "is an extremely serious and dangerous escalation of conflict in the Middle East with global significance. The UK government should urge restraint on the part of both Iran and the US, and stand up to the belligerent actions and rhetoric coming from the United States."

Note how Corbyn describes the killing of Soleimani as "a serious and dangerous escalation of conflict." Wasn't Iran's attack on Saudi oil installations a "serious and dangerous escalation of conflict"? And surely the recent killing of the American contractor was another a "serious and dangerous escalation"? Corbyn has nothing to say about the reason for Soleimani's killing – his plotting major attacks on Americans. And he ends by denouncing "the belligerent actions and rhetoric" coming from the United States, but says nothing about Iran's "belligerent actions" through its proxies in Yemen (Houthis), Lebanon (Hezbollah) and Iraq (Shia militia), its threats to commercial shipping in the Gulf of Hormuz, and its direct attack on Saudi oil installations. Nor does Corbyn

mention the blood-curdling rhetoric that has been coming out of Tehran for decades, with threats to destroy Israel and, more recently, to do the same to the United States. Has Corbyn managed not to see those endless rallies where tens of thousands of Iranians vent their fury with shouts of “Death to Israel” and “Death to America” as they stomp on, or set on fire, Israeli and American flags? How’s that for “belligerent rhetoric”? Has the United States – or Israel – ever engaged in anything like that “belligerent rhetoric” against Iran?

Now that the Iranians have huffed and puffed about the “harsh revenge” they intend to take, what can they do? If they so much as touch a hair on the head of an American in the Middle East, they can expect immediate and deadly retaliation. Instead of targeting a single man (and also taking out others who met Soleimani as he came down the plane at the airport), the Americans will target Iranian bases in Iraq and Syria, Hezbollah bases in Lebanon, Houthi bases in Yemen. They could strike more directly at Iran by sinking Iranian warships in the Gulf, or bombing a few Iranian oil installations in Khuzestan, and warning Iran that should Iran try to attack the oil installations in Saudi Arabia or those of any other American ally, the rest of Iran’s oil installations would be wiped out. They could attack bases inside Iran, destroying Iranian warplanes on the ground, missile warehouses, command-and-control centers.

The Iranians can engage in asymmetrical warfare, but will they? Through the terrorist group Hezbollah, Iran could attack American and Israeli embassies and consulates throughout the world. Iran could supply the anti-American forces in Afghanistan, that is the Taliban, with weaponry to attack the American troops that remain, though Iran would then be aiding they very group, the Taliban, that years ago tried to wipe out the Shi’a Hazara, who were saved only the arrival of the Americans in the country. In the Gulf, Iran’s war ships are no match for those of the United States, but Iran has invested

heavily in small swift boats, that can attack much larger American warships by swarming them; even if only a few from each swarm survive to attack an American warship, those few can inflict considerable damage.

But while this asymmetrical warfare is certainly possible, Iran now fears, as it never had to before, the way Americans will react. And it is now clear that any aggression plotted or carried out by Iran is likely to lead to a warfare of another kind – that is, repeated and crushing blows by the American military against Iran and its proxies. That will only lead to more disasters for Iran. The Americans who, having upped the ante when they killed Qassem Soleimani, will surely continue to inflict ever greater damage until Iran quiets completely down. If Iran is found to have given more aid to Hezbollah, and instructed it to murder Americans abroad, American attacks on the many Hezbollah bases and missile warehouses in Lebanon could wipe out the terror group's effective presence in that country. Any damage inflicted by Iran on our Gulf Arab allies – their oil installations, pipelines, ships – could lead to direct attacks on Iran itself. Aside from leveling Iranian military bases, warplanes, warships, missile factories and warehouses, the Americans could actively encourage, and supply with war materiel, several of the disaffected non-Persian minorities in Iran – the country is only 60% Persian – including the Arabs in Khuzestan, the Kurds in northwest Iran, the Azeris in north-central Iran, and the Sunni Baluchis in the far east of Iran, on the border with Pakistan's Baluchistan. It would be difficult for the Iranian military to suppress all of these separatist groups at the same time, and fight as well the Americans attacking Iranian proxies and Iranian bases.

While the Internet is full of doomsday articles about the “danger to world peace” that the killing of Soleimani has supposedly caused, with so many talking heads on television anxiously expecting Iran's “harsh revenge” – I suggest quite a

different outcome. Iran may announce that it is transferring some more weapons to the Houthis in Yemen or to the Iraqi Shi'a groups with which it is allied, or to Hezbollah. After all, Tehran has got to seem to be doing something after such a blow. But there will be no attack by Iranian forces, or its proxies, on any Americans in the Middle East. The "harsh revenge" Iran threatens will amount to nothing. Trump's hopeful audacity has paid off.

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