

The Soleimani killing

by GWYNNE DYER

If the Iranians played the game the same way that Donald Trump does, then their revenge for the American assassination of Iran's leading general, Qassem Soleimani, would be a simple tit-for-tat. Just kill U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the man who actually organised the hit and then boasted about it.

If Pompeo was too hard to get at, the Iranians could get even by murdering any one or two of a hundred other senior U.S. officials. Probably two, because the U.S. drone that hit Soleimani's car coming out of Baghdad airport also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of Kata'ib Hezbollah, the most powerful pro-Iranian militia in Iraq. An eye for an eye, and so forth.

Tit-for-tat is clearly the game Trump thought he was playing. That's why he warned late on Saturday on Twitter that the U.S. has identified 52 Iranian sites, some 'at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture?', and warned they would be 'HIT VERY FAST AND HARD' if Tehran retaliates for Soleimani's murder.

But that's not the game the Iranians are playing at all. It's a much longer game than tit-for-tat, and their targets are political, not personal.

Tehran's first response has been to announce that it will no longer respect any of the limits placed on its nuclear programmes by the 2015 nuclear treaty, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Donald Trump pulled the United States out of that treaty in 2018, and Iran has given up hope that the other signatories (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and Germany) would defy the United States and go on trading with Iran. It signed the deal in order to end the sanctions, but all the sanctions are effectively still in place

Tehran didn't say that it is now going to start working on nuclear weapons, but it will resume producing enriched nuclear fuels in quantities that would make that possible. Iran knew that it was going to have to pull the plug on the JCPOA eventually, but Trump's assassination of Soleimani lets it do so with the open or unspoken sympathy of almost every other country in the world

And there's a second, less visible benefit for Iran from Soleimani's murder. It greatly strengthens Iran's political influence in Iraq, which has been deteriorating quite fast in recent months.

Ever since the U.S. invasion in 2003, Iraq has been the scene for intense competition for influence between the United States, which dominated the country militarily, and Iran, whose state religion, the Shia version of Islam, is also the faith of the majority of Iraqis.

There are still about 5,000 American troops in Iraq, but they are now vastly outnumbered by local pro-Iran Shia militias, who did the heavy lifting during the 2014-17 military campaign to crush Islamic State militants in northern Iraq. Lately, however, the pro-Iran faction has been losing ground.

When popular protests broke out in September against the huge corruption of Iraqi politicians and the impoverishment of the general population, the pro-Iran militias started killing the protesters. That was General Soleimani's idea, and a very serious mistake on his part: the street protests began to target Iranian influence as well.

But Soleimani's murder has largely erased that resentment: he is now yet another Shia martyr to the cause. The prime minister of Iraq showed up at his huge funeral procession in Baghdad on Saturday, and an extraordinary session of the Iraqi parliament on Sunday passed a resolution demanding the expulsion of U.S. troops from Iraq.

The Iraqi political elite may or may not carry through on that policy, but there is genuine outrage that the United States, technically

an ally, would make an airstrike just outside Baghdad airport without telling Iraq. All the worse when it kills an invited guest of the Iraq government who is the second most important person in Iraq's other main ally, Iran. This is what contempt looks like, and it rankles.

In just one weekend Iran has had two big diplomatic wins thanks to Soleimani's assassination. The Iranians will certainly go on making deniable, pin-point attacks on US assets and allies in the Gulf in retaliation for the U.S. sanctions that are strangling the country's economy, but they may feel that they have already had their revenge for Soleimani.

Iran doesn't want an all-out war with the United States. The U.S. could not win that war (unless it just nuked the whole country), but neither could Iran, and it would suffer huge damage if there were a flat-out American bombing campaign using only conventional bombs and warheads.

Apocalyptic outcomes to this confrontation are possible, but they're not very likely. The Iranians will probably just chug along as before, staying within the letter of the law most of the time, cultivating their allies in the Arab world, and waiting for Trump to make his next mistake in their favour.

He's reliable in that, if in nothing else.