

Trump's Waning Weeks in the White House Could be the Most Dangerous

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Donald Trump has, once again, demonstrated that the waning weeks of his tour in the White House could be the most dangerous during his residency at the executive mansion in the US capital. Free of all constraints and wise council, Trump can now do his utmost to disrupt the international scene and create obstacles to efforts of the incoming administration to reverse some of his most egregious actions on the world scene.

It is no coincidence that Friday's murder of Iran's chief nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was timed to take place during the US interregnum. He was the fifth nuclear expert to be killed over the past decade, presumably by Israeli agents and since 2017 with Trump's active or tacit blessing. He would assuredly give this to Israel after being advised by his hawkish inner circle not to bomb Iran's main nuclear plant at Nantaz before leaving office. Therefore, the murder of Fakhrizadeh amounted to Israeli compensation for Trump for being balked in his desire to demonstrate his military might: a last hurrah for a chief executive who has disrupted the international order.

Both Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would like to boost tension with Iran and even ignite a limited military clash ahead of the January 20th inauguration of Democrat President-elect Joe Biden. He has committed to reversing Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 agreement for lifting punitive sanctions on Iran in exchange for dismantling 80 per cent of its nuclear programme. Both Trump and Netanyahu seek to scupper Biden's plan. During the previous Obama administration, Biden and his candidate for Secretary of State Antony Blinken played key roles in the lengthy negotiations which ended in the deal.

Trump pulled out of the nuclear deal in May 2018 and has since imposed increasingly damaging sanctions on Iran with the aim of forcing Tehran to capitulate to a dozen demands it cannot accept. Ahead of the assassination of Fakhrizadeh, Israel conducted a series of strikes on targets in Syria, killing a number of Iran-deployed militiamen fighting on behalf of the Syrian government. Fakhrizadeh was, of course, the second major Iranian figure assassinated this year.

The first, Al Quds Corps commander Qassem Soleimani was murdered by a US drone in Baghdad in January. This was followed up in August by the sabotage of Iran's Nantaz nuclear plant which destroyed late model centrifuges used to enrich uranium.

Despite of the provocative US/Israeli interventions, Iran has refrained from retaliating while the other five signatories of the nuclear deal — Britain, France, China, Russia, and Germany, have held their breath and urged restraint. This region is, after all, the backyard of Europe and Russia and the main land bridge between China and Europe. Therefore, events in Iran

have a major international dimension as well as a regional dimension.

Trump may gain a certain amount of satisfaction from the murder of Fakhrizadeh as the US campaign of “maximum pressure” designed to wreck that country’s economy and force Iran to capitulate to the US has failed. Consequently, the five other signatories argue that returning to the deal is the best bet as it limits Iran’s nuclear programme and subjects its nuclear sites to intrusive inspections. They also insist that allowing Iran to re-join the international community and opening Iran to foreign business and investment will ultimately compel Iran to moderate policies the West and its Arab allies oppose. Once there is progress in the effort to re-enter the nuclear deal, Biden seeks to negotiate other agreements with Iran in order to curb its development of ballistic missiles and counter some of its activities in this region. He rejects the stick and stick policy adopted by Trump and Netanyahu and favours the Obama administration’s carrot and carrot approach which kept Iran’s nuclear programme in check, provided Tehran with opportunities to grow its economy and regain respectability on the international scene.

Despite calls for revenge strikes for the killing of Fakhrizadeh from hardline Iranian politicians and members of the public, Tehran has so far kept its cool and pledged to retaliate in its own good time. Iran has acted on this policy by dispatching Quds force commander Esmail Ghaani to Beirut to urge Iran’s Lebanese ally, Hizbollah, and to Baghdad to press pro-Iranian militia commanders not to take any action that would escalate tension and provide Israel with a pretext to launch a major military operation. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been preparing for the day could do just this since taking office in 2009. While Israel has not claimed the Fakhrizadeh assassination, Netanyahu openly declared him an enemy of Israel during a 2018 presentation. Since Iran has urged restraint disappointing both Trump and

Netanyahu, either the US or Israel followed up the assassination with drone attack that killed an Iranian military commander as he crossed from Iraq into Syria.

Nothing deters them. The murder of Fakhrizadeh drew sharp condemnation from the UN, European Union (EU), Britain, and Germany; and in the region, Jordan, the Emirates, Lebanon, Qatar, Oman, Syria and Turkey. The EU has called on both the Biden administration and the Iranian government to promptly address US re-entry into the nuclear accord and sanctions relief. Re-engagement would dramatically reduce tensions and end the threat of another devastating war hanging over this region.

Some US experts fear Biden’s efforts to revert to the nuclear deal could be undermined by the killing of Fakhrizadeh and non-stop Israeli/US provocation. Others argue that this could put pressure on both sides to expedite US re-entry. This could involve a simple decree from Biden, just as the US exit was effected by a Trump decree. At this stage, the US would not demand amendments to the deal as this would be likely to necessitate lengthy negotiations. Once the US was back in the deal, Biden would have to begin lifting US sanctions which have prevented Iran from benefitting from the deal. While this could involve a battle with both houses of an anti-Iran legislature, Biden would be able to rely on a cooperative Treasury Secretary as it is the treasury department which implements sanctions.

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Featured image: President Donald J. Trump and Vice President Mike Pence participate in an expanded bilateral meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Monday, Jan. 27, 2020, in the Oval Office of the White House. (Official White House Photo by D. Myles Cullen)

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