

US Violated Unspoken Rule of Engagement with Iran

As'ad AbuKhalil analyzes the Trump administration's decision to escalate hostilities with Iran and its regional allies.

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Something big and unprecedented has happened in the Middle East after the assassination of one of Iran's top commanders, Qasim Suleimani.

The U.S. has long assumed that assassinations of major figures in the Iranian “resistance-axis” in the Middle East would bring risk to the U.S. military-intelligence presence in the Middle East. Western and Arab media reported that the U.S. had prevented [Israel](#) in the past from killing Suleimani. But with the top commander's death, the Trump administration seems to think a key barrier to U.S. military operations in the Middle East has been removed.

The U.S. and Israel had noticed that Hizbullah and Iran did not retaliate against previous assassinations by Israel (or the U.S.) that took place in Syria (of Imad Mughniyyah, Jihad Mughniyyah, Samir Quntar); or for other attacks on Palestinian and Lebanese commanders in Syria.

The U.S. thus assumed that this assassination would not bring repercussions or harm to U.S. interests. Iranian reluctance to retaliate has only increased the willingness of Israel and the U.S. to violate the unspoken rules of engagement with Iran in the Arab East.

For many years Israel did perpetrate various assassinations against Iranian scientists and officers in Syria during the on-going war. But Israel and the U.S. avoided targeting leaders or commanders of Iran. During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the U.S. and Iran collided directly and indirectly, but avoided engaging in assassinations for fear that this would unleash a series of tit-for-tat.

But the Trump administration has become known for not playing by the book, and for operating often according to the whims and impulses of President Donald Trump.



Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei consoles one of General Soleimani's sons. (Fars News Agency, CC BY 4.0, Wikimedia Commons)

Different Level of Escalation

The decision to strike at Baghdad airport, however, was a different level of escalation. In addition to killing Suleimani it also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a key leader of Hashd forces in Iraq. Like Suleimani, al-Muhandis was known for waging the long fight against ISIS. (Despite this, the U.S. media only give credit to the U.S. and its clients who barely lifted a finger in the fight against ISIS.)

On the surface of it, the strike was uncharacteristic of Trump. Here is a man who pledged to pull the U.S. out of the Middle East turmoil — turmoil for which the U.S. and Israel bear the primary responsibility. And yet he seems willing to order a strike that will guarantee intensification of the conflict in the region, and even the deployment of more U.S. forces.

The first term of the Trump administration has revealed the extent to which the U.S. war empire is run by the military-intelligence apparatus. There is not much a president — even a popular president like Barack Obama in his second term — can do to change the course of empire. It is not that Obama wanted to end U.S. wars in the region, but Trump has tried to retreat from Middle East conflicts and yet he has been unable due to pressures not only from the military-intelligence apparatus but also from their war advocates in the U.S. Congress and Western media, D.C. think tanks and the human-rights industry. The pressures to preserve the war agenda is too powerful on a U.S. president for it to cease in the foreseeable future. But Trump has managed to start fewer new wars than his predecessors — until this strike.

Trump's Obama Obsession

Trump in his foreign policy is obsessed with the legacy and image of Obama. He decided to violate the Iran nuclear agreement (which carried the weight of international law after its adoption by the UN Security Council) largely because he wanted to prove that he is tougher

than Obama, and also because he wanted an international agreement that carries his imprint. Just as Trump relishes putting his name on buildings, hotels, and casinos he wants to put his name on international agreements. His decision, to strike at a convoy carrying perhaps the second most important person in Iran was presumably attached to an intelligence assessment that calculated that Iran is too weakened and too fatigued to strike back directly at the U.S.

Iran faced difficult choices in response to the assassination of Suleimani. On the one hand, Iran would appear weak and vulnerable if it did not retaliate and that would only invite more direct U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iranian targets.

On the other hand, the decision to respond in a large-scale attack on U.S. military or diplomatic targets in the Middle East would invite an immediate massive U.S. strike inside Iran. Such an attack has been on the books; the U.S. military (and Israel, of course) have been waiting for the right moment for the U.S. to destroy key strategic sites inside Iran.

Furthermore, there is no question that the cruel U.S.-imposed sanctions on Iran have made life difficult for the Iranian people and have limited the choices of the government, and weakened its political legitimacy, especially in the face of vast Gulf-Western attempts to exploit internal dissent and divisions inside Iran. (Not that dissent inside Iran is not real, and not that repression by the regime is not real).

Nonetheless, if the Iranian regime were to open an all-out war against the U.S., this would certainly cause great harm and damage to U.S. and Israeli interests.

Iran Sending Messages

In the last year, however, Iran successfully sent messages to Gulf regimes (through attacks on oil shipping in the Gulf, for which Iran did not claim responsibility, nor did it take responsibility for the pin-point attack on ARAMCO oil installations) that any future conflict would not spare their territories.

That quickly reversed the policy orientations of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which suddenly became weary of confrontation with Iran, and both are now negotiating (openly and secretly) with the Iranian government. Ironically, both the UAE and Saudi regimes — which constituted a lobby for war against Iran in Western capitals — are also eager to distance themselves from U.S. military action against [Iran](#). And Kuwait quickly [denied](#) that the U.S. used its territory in the U.S. attack on Baghdad airport, while Qatar dispatched its foreign minister to Iran (officially to offer condolences over the death of Suleimani, but presumably also to distance itself and its territory from the U.S. attack).

The Iranian response was very measured and very specific. It was purposefully intended to avoid causing U.S. casualties; it was intended more as a message of Iranian missile capabilities and their pin point accuracy. And that message was not lost on Israel.

Hasan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbullah, sent a more strident message. He basically implied that it would be left to Iran's allies to engineer military responses. He also declared a war on the U.S. military presence in the Middle East, although he was at pains to stress that U.S. civilians are to be spared in any attack or retaliation.

Supporters of the Iran resistance axis have been quite angry in the wake of the

assassination. The status of Suleimani in his camp is similar to the status of Nasrallah although Nasrallah — due to his charisma and to his performance and the performance of his party in the July 2006 war — may have attained a higher status.

It would be easy for the Trump administration to ignite a Middle East war by provoking Iran once again, and wrongly assuming that there are no limits to Iranian caution and self-restraint. But if the U.S. (and Israel with it or behind it) were to start a Middle East war, it will spread far wider and last far longer than the last war in Iraq, which the U.S. is yet to complete.

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