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**Provocations in the Middle East**

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The recent assassination of Iranian scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh has sent tremors through the region. The scientist, considered the godfather of the Iranian nuclear programme, was killed in Tehran

Though Fakhrizadeh was not the first scientist to be eliminated in this way, he was definitely the most important figure among the Iranian scientific community. A decade earlier, a number of Iranian men of science allegedly affiliated with the country’s nuclear programme were attacked and exterminated. The string of assassinations was blamed on Israeli intelligence at that time and this killing has also created doubts about the hands of the Zionist state.

The assassination may have created a ripple of excitement in Tel Aviv but it has sparked a wave of concern across the Middle East. This is the second high-profile assassination, the elimination of General Qassem Soleimani being the first under the Trump administration. Given this second assassination was carried out days after a reported meeting between Saudi, Israeli and American officials, it has prompted many Iranians to point their fingers towards the axis. It may be mentioned that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Natanyahu had talked about this Iranian scientist in 2018, urging his nation to remember this name.

The international community has adopted a criminal silence over the assassination, asking the victim to show restraint instead of condemning the incident. From the United Nations to the European Union, all international bodies are more interested in preventing Tehran from undertaking retaliatory actions than taking notice of this illegal assassination that is likely to strengthen the position of hardliners in the theocratic state and put the doves in a defensive position. If the international community had taken a principled and moral position over Soleimani's killing, another illegal murder would not have taken place. Despite the fact that the special rapporteur of the UN had declared the murder illegal in its report, no action was taken against the perpetrator. Such indifference on the part of the world may have encouraged rogue elements within the Zionist state to carry out such a blatant attack.

Many critics believe that the victory of Joe Biden and his plan to revive the Iranian nuclear deal has created consternation among those that want to destabilize the Middle East. Such elements are jittery now, trying to provoke Iran in a bid to derail efforts for the revival of the deal. It is believed that the incoming secretary of state Antony Blinken is also an ardent supporter of the deal. Such a scenario offers a bleak future for those who want to see the Middle East in perpetual turmoil, benefitting only a few corporations, war mongers, ultra conservatives and anti-peace elements; of course, such steps by a Biden administration augurs well for all those who are wary of the constant belligerence and the threat of war.

The region has already suffered a lot because of the machinations of the military industrial complex and Zionist lobbies. Proxies of Iran and Saudi Arabia added to the woes of the people in countries like Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and Iraq. More than 2.5 million are estimated to have perished following the illegal invasion of Iraq and the ensuing insurgencies and sectarian frenzy that gripped the country after the attack.

The effects of Iraq’s war did not remain confined to the invaded country but engulfed Syria and other parts of the region too, triggering a race of regional hegemony. This invasion in a way is also responsible for the destruction of Syria that lost more than 555,000 souls besides witnessing one of the biggest migration and displacement of the modern times, with around 11 million people living as internal or foreign refugees. The destruction has also caused over $200 billion loss to the hapless country.

Tehran and Riyadh are not only vying for influence in Iraq and Syria but their race for regional hegemony is also plaguing other parts of the world. In countries like Pakistan, their tussle is damaging the social fabric of society while Yemen and Lebanon are living in a constant fear of death and destruction because of this cold war between the Arabs and the Persians. This latest killing of the Iranian scientist is likely to heat up war fronts in Yemen and create more problems for the people of Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

Iran may not directly respond to these provocations but a meticulous use of proxies in the region cannot be ruled out. Tehran may not be in a position to directly hit Israel nor would it dare attack US troops in Iraq but it could imperil the interests of Saudi Arabia in the region.

Barring a few hardliners, most of Iranian leaders have demonstrated political sagacity while dealing with American and Israeli provocations. It is clear that elements in Israel and America want to lure Iran into taking some incendiary actions that might give them an excuse to launch their onslaught against the Islamic Republic. This was their aim when Soleimani was targeted but the theocratic state foiled their designs by staying calm and showing restraint. The Iranian nation patiently waited for Trump's drubbing, which has seriously disturbed pro-Israeli lobbies and hardliners in the US administration. This Trump defeat seems to have created a ray of hope. It may open the door of talks and negotiations that could help Iranian people get relief and succour from the international community.

The outgoing president of the ‘mighty state of America’ will leave no stone unturned in pushing the region towards a conflagration. He might come up with bizarre plans of targeting Iranian nuclear installations. Hardliners in Trump’s camp like Pompeo might suggest extreme steps to teach Iran a tough lesson but Iran will still have to demonstrate political prudence. Only pragmatism will help the Iranians defeat these machinations of such war-mongers. Any plan to pick a confrontation will not only create problems for the Iranian people but those of the whole region as well.

Iran, therefore, should assure the international community that it believes in diplomacy and peaceful means of solving problems. It should reign in its proxies, preventing them from taking any retaliatory actions because in international matters a spark could turn out to be extremely combustible. Even the slightest move to avenge the attack could provide an opportunity to Israel and its regional collaborators to exploit the situation

Tehran should put its case before the international audience, and highlight the plans of those who want to destabilize the region by carrying out provocative actions. It should come up with viable solutions for the conflicts in Yemen and Syria and make efforts to end the rifts that exist between the Shias and the Sunnis in Iraq.

There is no harm in offering an olive branch to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States as well. An offer of no war and a non-interference pact could go a long way in mitigating these apprehensions. If the regional states turn down such an offer, it would boost the Iranian position, exposing their anti-peace designs. Therefore, it is important that all peaceful efforts be made to stabilize a region that has witnessed nothing but chaos and instability for decades. Political wisdom is all that is required to achieve this.

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