**Dance of death**

BY M A H I R A L I | 1/8/2020

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| IN expressing the desire last week for a cracking new year, among the many things I did not envisage was the United States assassinating reputedly the second most influential person in the Iranian hierarchy of power.  The risk of plunging the Middle East into a fresh maelstrom prevented Donald Trump`s predecessors from targeting Maj Gen Qassem Soleimani. Mossad had long wanted to eliminate him, but was likewise constrained by similar considerations on the part of Israel`s political elite.  In his more than 20 years at the helm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps` (IRGC) elite Quds Force, he was tasked with protecting Ir an and its revolution in a region where it had been subjected to the longest conventional war in the 20th century, launched at Saddam Hussein`s whim with the backing of his Arab neighbours and Western powers including the US.  Consequently, he was lionised as well as feared and detested across much of the Middle East. He has been scorned for Iran`s crucial role in propping up Bashar al-Assad`s horrendous regime in Syria, and possibly inviting the Russians to participate in the venture. At the same time, the forces he commanded were instrumental in thwarting the goals of jihadist militias such as alNusra, and in Iraq the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilisation Forces provided the foot soldiers, in a tactical alignment with the US military, which provided air cover, to defeat the militant Islamic State group.  Soleimani had also indirectly collaborated with the US in defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan after 9/11, and US vicepresident Mike Pence`s absurd claim linking him to the 9/11 hijackers, most of whom were Saudi and Emirati citizens, has been ridiculed.  There can be little doubt, though, that Iran, via Soleimani, has provided sustenance to Hezbollah, especially in its Syrian ventures, and that the Quds Force became involved in Yemen in the wake of Saudi-led transgressions. Ever the pragmatist, though, Soleimani is claimed to have lately been pursuing a modus vivendi with the Saudis.  The general is routinely described in the Western media as a shadowy figure, but in recent decades he had operated fairly openly. Back in 2007 he sent a text to David Petraeus, then the top US military honcho in Iraq, declaring: `I, Qassem Soleimani, control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan.` Recently, Petraeus, who went on to serve as CIA head, noted `it is hard to overstate the significance` of Soleimani`s assassination, adding that `there will be responses in Iraq and likely Syria and the region`.The nature of the Iranian response is concentrating minds worldwide. Trump has warned that any retaliation will be greeted with the destruction of 52 Iranian sites of cultural importance, the figure relating to the number of US diplomats and embassy workers taken hostage in 1979 after the US initially welcomed the Shah following his departure from Tehran.  He is predictably impervious to warnings that this would be a war crime, much as the assassination of foreign of ficials is forbidden under international law. He has also threatened Iraq with stringent sanctions after its parliament voted albeit largely without Sunni and Kurdish participation to expel all foreign troops from the country. As always, for Trump it`s a matter of money: the US spent billions on its bases, so its forces won`t leave without compensation.  Iran will understandably be wary of undertaking any action that threatens allout war. Doing nothing, on the other hand, would be perceived both domestically and internationally as a sign of weakness. It hassuspended compliance with the nuclear treaty that Trump unilaterally withdrew from, but is prepared to permit international inspections, and remains committed to keeping its part of the bargain in the unlikely event of the US agreeing to liftits devastating economic sanctions.  It would be wise of Tehran to exercise restraintinthistryingmoment.ButAmerican belligerence doesn`t help. Another all-out war in the Middle East is not yet inevitable, but nor is it unavoidable. We live in a world, though, where worst-case scenarios routinely come true, and the sheer imbecility of the US leadership with the gobsmackingly ignorant Trump backed by his fundamentalist vice-president, Mike Pence, and bullyboy secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, there`s no telling where this will lead.  The massive funeral processions for Soleimani suggest hardliners in the clerical establishment will benefit from his perceived martyrdom. And the Western case against him on moral grounds could easily be extended to US and Israeli military leaders operating in the region. What`s more, the extent to which he was a `bad actor`is easily exceeded by the Saudi crown prince.  Trump`s impetuous crime may not go unpunished, but it would be best that his clarion call for another dance of death in the Middle East goes unrewarded. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com |