**[Qassem Soleimani’s assassination](https://nation.com.pk/07-Jan-2020/qassem-soleimani-s-assassination%22%20%5Ct%20%22_new)**

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Iranian General Qassem Soleimani’s assassination in Baghdad on 3 January by the US under the orders of President Trump was an event of seismic proportions. Its consequences will reverberate throughout the Middle East as its aftershocks unfold. The US drone strike also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of an Iraqi militia, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Undoubtedly, the region, which is already in turmoil, will be destabilized even further with the certainty of retaliatory steps by Iran and its supporters and sympathizers. The US attack violated Iraq’s sovereignty and delivered another blow to the UN Charter and the principles of international law, thus, aggravating the prevailing disorder in the world. It exposed once again the deplorable US tendency to resort to unilateral use of force in pursuit of its national interests in disregard of its obligations under the UN Charter. Above all, Washington by acting as a prosecutor, jury, judge and executioner in the case of General Qassem Soleimani has set an extremely bad precedent which may be followed by major powers in other regions.

The US attack on Soleimani took place against the background of growing tensions between Washington and Tehran following President Trump’s decision taken in 2018 to abandon the nuclear deal of 2015 which had been negotiated after painstaking efforts by all the parties concerned. Trump’s decision to reject the nuclear deal when Iran was scrupulously abiding by its provisions was totally unjustified and was criticized by other parties to the deal as well as by many members of the international community. This was followed by the imposition of crippling economic sanctions by the US which have severely damaged Iran’s economy. These steps have been welcomed by Israel and some Arab states of the Gulf who view Iran’s power and politics in the Middle East, especially its activities in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, as a threat to their own security. The US drone attack on Soleimani was the latest move by Washington to up the ante by piling up military pressure on Iran on top of its policy of maximum economic pressure.

The train of events that led to Soleimani’s assassination included a rocket attack on a military base in Iraq, allegedly carried out by an Iran-backed Iraqi militia called Kataib Hizbullah that killed an American contractor on 27 December, followed by US airstrikes on 29 December which killed 25 members of the militia. This led to an attack on the US Embassy in Baghdad on the eve of the new year prompting the US to deploy additional troops to the Middle East. President Trump claimed immediate after the fatal attack on Soleimani that he had killed or badly wounded thousands of Americans over an extended period of time. The Pentagon stated that President Trump had ordered the killing of Soleimani “in a decisive defensive action to protect US personnel abroad.”

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo justified the US attack on Soleimani by claiming that he had been planning an attack that was “imminent” and “would have put dozens if not hundreds of American lives at risk.” However, the Trump administration has not yet shared with the US Congress or the international community any evidence to substantiate the claim of an imminent attack. Questions are being increasingly asked in the US whether there was an imminent threat to US targets. Later, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in an interview given to CNN on 5 January blamed Soleimani for the past proxy wars in the Middle East against US interests and justified his assassination to prevent such dangerous activities in the future.

As expected, Iran has vowed strong retaliation against the attack on Soleimani. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif called the assassination “an extremely dangerous and foolish escalation”. President Hassan Rouhani stated that “the great nation of Iran and the other free nations of the region will take revenge for this gruesome crime from criminal America.” Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei warned that a “harsh retaliation is waiting” for the US. However, while stressing that a military response would follow at a time and place of Iran’s choice, Iranian leaders have pointed out that Tehran was not seeking a war with the US. Terming Soleimani’s assassination as “a criminal act” of “state terrorism”, Iran has also officially asked the UN Security Council to condemn it besides announcing that it would no longer be bound by any restrictions on its uranium enrichment programme.

The international community, alarmed by growing tensions and the prospect of another war in the Middle East, has generally counselled the exercise of restraint and de-escalation of tensions to both sides. The reactions from Russia, China, France and Germany fell in this category. However, predictably Israeli Prime Minister praised Trump for “acting swiftly, forcefully and decisively” to eliminate General Soleimani. Saudi Arabia, while drawing attention to terrorist attacks in the past and their negative consequences, called for restraint and de-escalation of tensions. Within the US, Republican leaders were by and large supportive of the action taken by Trump to assassinate Soleimani while Democrats generally questioned its justification and warned about the dangers of the outbreak of another devastating war in the Middle East.

Pakistan’s foreign ministry in a statement expressed its concern over the recent developments in the Middle East, urged respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, underlined the need to avoid unilateral actions and use of force, and called for restraint and de-escalation of tensions. Significantly, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa on 3 January and briefed him on the US position on Soleimani’s assassination. General Bajwa reportedly emphasized the need for maximum restraint and constructive engagement by all concerned to de-escalate the situation in the interest of peace and stability. Separately, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi in telephone calls to Foreign Ministers of Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Turkey on 5 January “underscored the imperative of avoidance of conflict, exercise of maximum restraint and de-escalation of tensions.” FM Qureshi also reaffirmed that Pakistan would neither let its soil be used against any other state nor become part of any regional conflict.

In another significant development, Iraq’s caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi on 3 January denounced the US drone attack as “an aggression against the country of Iraq, its state, its government and its people.” The action, according to him, was a flagrant violation of the conditions authorizing the presence of US troops on Iraqi soil. On 5 January, Iraqi parliament called on the government to expel the US and other foreign troops from Iraq, thus, weakening further the US position in Iraq vis-à-vis Iran. In response, Trump has threatened Iraq with severe economic sanctions if it goes ahead with its demand for the departure of the US troops.

The US drone strike to assassinate General Soleimani was undoubtedly a serious breach of Iraq’s sovereignty and a violation of the principles of the UN Charter and international law. It would certainly aggravate instability in the Middle East besides raising the specter of a major regional war. In view of the growing opposition in Iraq to the presence of the US troops in the country, it may even prove to be counterproductive from the US point of view. There is a strong likelihood that the US in due course may come to regret this fateful decision. Pakistan would be well advised to take a principled position while trying to defuse tensions in the region.