**[US-Iran conflict: The Israel factor](https://nation.com.pk/09-Jan-2020/us-iran-conflict-the-israel-factor" \t "_new)**

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The military tensions between the arch foes Iran and the US have visibly escalated since the last week’s assassination of top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani in a US drone strike in Iraq. Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has vowed a “severe revenge” against the “criminals” responsible for this incident. On the other side, the megalomaniac President Donald Trump has further hinted at ‘sending’ some of the ‘Two-Trillion Dollar Military Equipment’ to Iran after claiming to be ‘the biggest and the best in the world’. He has threated to target 52 ‘cultural sites’ (probably holy sites) in Iran if the Islamic Republic attacks the US personnel and assets anywhere. He has also threatened severe sanctions against Iraq after its parliament called on some 5 thousand US troops to leave the country.

Manifestly, the so-called US unilateralism is, once again, in full swing in the Middle East. Firstly, President Trump unilaterally and arbitrarily chose to conduct a pre-emptive drone strike inside a sovereign country like Iraq. Secondly, he assassinated a senior serving general of another sovereign country without any formal declaration of war against such country. And thirdly, he is now explicitly intimating Iran and Iraq in sheer violation of Article 2(4) of UN Charter which says that member states shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. So, it seems the things like diplomacy, fair-play and international law no longer have any place in the US foreign relations.

General Qasem Soleimani was the head of the Quds Force, an elite unit in Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), specialized in unconventional warfare, and responsible for the entire extraterritorial operations of the Islamic Republic in the region. He was the architect of Iran’s regional military strategy who also played a pivotal role in eliminating the ISIS from Iraq and Syria. He was a war hero who has been greatly admired and loved by Iranians. The state media in Iran has reported that millions of people attended his funeral and that it was the largest funeral procession since the 1989 funeral for Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini. Indeed, the US has committed a grave strategic blunder by assassinating such a person who had become a symbol for Iranians’ pride and nationalism.

There have been an intense mutual rivalry and antagonism between the US and Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. For many, such rivalry is hardly understandable or explicable. Both countries are thousands of miles away from each other. There is no territorial or border dispute between them. Nor do their economic interests clash anywhere in the world as such. Nor does the much-anticipated Clash of Civilization hypothesis fit here well since the US is currently enjoying close and cordial relations with other Muslim countries in the same region.

Nonetheless, carefully analyzing the nature and chronology of the US-Iran confrontation, one can conveniently infer that the state of Israel has been the primary source of such confrontation. There is no denying that the state of Israel has become somewhat a cornerstone of both countries’ foreign as well as regional policies in the Middle East over a period of time. The US has emerged as the largest supporter, guarantor and protector of the territorial integrity and wellbeing of Israel. On the other hand, Iran is generally portrayed as a country which is posing a serious threat to the very existence of the state. Israel is currently having comfortable bilateral relations with all countries in the Middle East except Iran and some pro-Iran regional countries.

Post-revolution Iran took a hardline position against the Israel and the imperialist policies of the US in the world. Iran also actively raised a voice for the Palestinians’ rights and their freedom. To express solidarity with the Palestinian people, the last Friday of the Holy month of Ramadan is observed as the ‘Al-Quds Day’ in Iran every year. ‘Al-Quds’ is Arabic name for the city of Jerusalem. Incidentally, the elite military wing of Iran’s IRGC has also been named as ‘Quds Force’. Such nomenclature essentially shows both the purpose and priorities of Iran’s external military wing in the region.

The 2006 Hezbollah-Israel war was a crucial event in the Middle Eastern region. It was an asymmetrical war in which a small militia comprised of few thousands fighters inflicted a humiliating defeat on Israel, the greatest military power in the region. The Israeli Chief of Staff had also to resign over such defeat. It should not be forgotten that all the Arab countries were jointly defeated by Israel in just six days in 1967, but the Hezbollah could not be defeated by Israel in this 34 day long war. Lebanon-based Hezbollah is a pro-Iran Shia militant outfit. So, the Iran-Israel confrontation has constantly been escalating since this war. Israel started considering Iran and all pro-Iran elements in the region the greatest threat to its very existence. Such perception just reinforces when the likes of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad publically talk of wiping Israel off the map.

At present, the US is proactively pursuing its so-called Middle East policy which aims at ensuring a secure and safer Israel besides advancing the Israel’s national agenda in the region in collaboration with its regional allies. In 2015, The US spearheaded the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as “Iran Nuclear Deal”, reached between Iran and P5+1 countries primarily to secure Israel against the perceived nuclear threats from Iran. Earlier, the so-called Arab Spring had also helped topple or weaken many anti-Israel regimes in the region while the pro-US regimes in GCC countries simply managed to stay.

For the last couples of years, the US has been devising a number of diplomatic and military strategies to marginalize Iran and pro-Iran elements in the region. It tried to topple the pro-Iran Assad regime in Syria in 2013. However, owing to strong opposition posed by Russia and Iran, the US had to give up its plan to dislodge Bashar al-Assad through military force. Surprisingly, as soon as the US abandoned such plan, there instantly emerged the militant outfit ISIS to accomplish same task in Syria and Iraq. There have been many conspiracy theories maintaining that the ISIS and its affiliates were sponsored and supported by the US and GCC countries. Interestingly, none other than Donald Trump himself has publically called former US President Barack Obama the “founder”, and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton the “co-founder” of the ISIS. Russian president Vladimir Putin has also been making similar statements about the ISIS. It is a fact that Iran, Russia and pro-Iran militias have offered maximum resistance to the ISIS militants but the US and GCC countries never launched any significant military onslaught against their regional proxies.

As Iran and its allies were defeating the ISIS terrorists inside their strongholds in Iraq and Syria, the US tried to form a so-called Islamic Military Alliance, IMAFT, to counter the rising influence of Iran in the region in the name of countering terror. This time, it made its subservient ally Saudi Arabia, Iran’s regional arch-foe, spearhead such alliance. President Trump formally ‘inaugurated’ the IMATF during the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh In May 2017. He also inked a $350 billion arms sales agreement with Saudi Arabia to adequately equip the IMAFT. It was the largest arms deal in the US history. Nevertheless, in the absence of required military cooperation from the Muslim countries, this controversial and ambiguous ‘Islamic’ military alliance remained non-functional from the outset.

Noticeably, the successive US strategies have badly failed in marginalizing Iran and its allies in the Middle East. In such utter frustration, the US has just resorted to some unilateral and arbitrary military actions and diplomatic rhetoric against Iran. It has readily ‘executed’ Iran’s top military commander who couldn’t be harmed or defeated by its regional allies or proxies. Earlier, President Trump also unilaterally withdrew the US from the ‘Iran Nuclear Deal’. It is, however, yet to see how far the US would be able to pursue its new ‘Iran policy’ with impunity.

The US has been extending unqualified moral, diplomatic and military support to Israel while it remained busy in articulating its dangerous national agenda internally and externally. It helped Israel declare Jerusalem a ‘complete and united’ capital of Israel in violation of the “two-state solution” to pacifically resolve the longstanding Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Middle East has torn apart. The US unilateral policies and actions are primarily responsible for the chaotic state of affairs in this volatile region. More worryingly, the US and Israel are still aggressively and arbitrarily pursuing their broader strategic goals in the region. Such formidable duo is posing a serious threat to the Middle East peace.

The recent bold initiatives, aimed at seeking some pragmatic solutions to the multiple problems currently faced by the Muslim world, taken by the courageous leaders of Turkey, Malaysia and Iran are really commendable. Indeed, Pakistan should also be part of such courageous initiatives rather than unthinkingly and unquestioningly following the Arabs who have just become the miserable protagonists of the Imperialism and Zionism in the region. It is also advisable that Muslim counties should seriously evaluate the option of evolving a NATO-like potent collective-security apparatus in collaboration with Russia and China to stabilize this region after marginalizing the role of the US and its regional associates. Needless to say the multilateral bodies like the UN should also play its institutional role in ensuring world peace and order.