**Wag the dog**

BY I R FA N H U S A I N | 1/11/2020

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| IN the 1997 movie Wag the Dog, the US president gets embroiled in a sexual scandal while fighting for re-election. A spin doctor is hired to divert the public`s attention away from the tawdry presidential gossip. Deciding that the best way to get the people to rally around their leader is to start a small war somewhere, he hires a movie director. Together they whip up a scenario in which the Albanian military is crushing local dissidents, and US troops are sent in to intervene. Does this sound familiar? Trump, facing impeachment and re-election, could do with a short, sharp war. And what country better than Iran to serve as a punching bag? Hated by many Americans for its retrograde ways, its ayatollahs and its belligerence, it is way ahead of other candidates. The fact that it threatens Israel as well enhances its appeal as a target.  So before you can say `Reaper drone` Trump decides to assassinate Maj Gen Qassem Soleimani. And since this has to be a very public execution, the trigger is pulled when the Iranian hero is at Baghdad airport together with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy leader of the Iraq`s Popular Mobilisation Forces. Both are killed instantly.  Threat and counter-threat are exchanged, with Trump promising to destroy 52 Iranian targets, including religious and cultural sites. When the Taliban blew up the giant sixth-century Bamiyan Buddhas, the world was appalled by such barbarism. Condemnation, including f rom America, was swif t.  And when the militant Islamic State group wantonly destroyed much of Iraq`s priceless cultural heritage at Mosul and elsewhere, and then Syria`s at Palmyra, all civilised people around the world shook their heads in despair at this deliberate vandalism. There was a subtext of Muslims being indifferent to ancient artefacts that the rest of the world revered.  Although Trump has been walked back from his threat by his advisers, who informed him that any deliberate destruction of cultural heritage would be a war crime, the fact that this boorish president entertained such a thought shows the dangers he poses to the world.  So where does Iran go from here? Af ter its largely symbolic missile strike against two US airbases in Iraq that inflicted no casualties, itis clear thatit has little stomach to take on the Americans in a major war. For one,itis hopelessly outgunned; and its economy, suffering from severe US sanctions, cannot sustain a long conflict. For the time being, therefore, the Americans hold the high cards.  However, there`s more than one way to skin a cat: Iran has many proxies in the region it can use to take revenge. And many US allies to target. This is why there is littleglee on the streets of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. And precious little gloating in Israel.  These countries are well aware of the power and reach of the Al Quds force that Soleimani commanded so effectively.  So clearly, no matter how much the Americans would like to put this killing behind them, it won`t be erased so quickly from Iranian minds. As it is, there is a heavy burden of anger among Iranians towards America, beginning with the 1953 coup orchestrated by the CIA that deposed an elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, for daring to nationalise the oil industry.  This regime change was followed by the return of the Shah of Iran Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who turned his country into a fascist dictatorship with US support.  After the shah was finally removed by massive street protests in 1979, he was followed by Ayatollah Khomeini, and a rigid theocracy was established.  Just as the Islamic republic was finding its feet, Iran was invaded by Saddam Hussein.With the US providing him with intelligence, arms and instructors, the bloody conflict took tens of thousands of lives on both sides. Chemical weapons capability sold to Iraq by Western countries produced lethal gas that was used against Kurds as well as Iranians, killing thousands.  And most recently,US sanctions have taken a heavy toll on Iran`s economy. By pulling out of the treaty negotiated by Obama`s administration, the UK, France, China and Germany plus the UN and EU, it was thought that the Iranian nuclear programme would be halted for 15 years.  But a petulant Trump, determined to wreck everything that Obama had achieved, trashed the treaty and walked out. Now, he has threatened to sanction any country buying Iranian oil. Iran is also prohibited from using the dollar for all transactions.  This policy of `maximum pressure` was designed to drag Iran into one-sided negotiations, a ploy that has been rejected by Ayatollah Khamenei. The economic pain thus caused has forced thousands to take to the streets to protest against unemployment and inflation. Trump had expected that Soleimani`s assassination would strengthen this youth movement, but predictably, it has only united the Iranian people.  Perhaps Iranians will remember the old adage: revenge is a dish best served cold.  irfan.husain@gmail.com |