

US assassinated Suleimani to quash Iran's talks with Gulf monarchies

By Bill Van Auken
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The Trump administration ordered the January 3 assassination of Major General Qassem Suleimani, one of Iran's most senior officials, not because he posed some "imminent threat," but rather in a calculated bid to disrupt Tehran's attempts to reach an accommodation with Washington's allies in the region.

This is the inescapable conclusion flowing from a report published Thursday in the *New York Times*, citing unnamed senior officials from the US, Iran and other countries in the Middle East.

It recounts the arrival last September in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, of a plane carrying senior Iranian officials for talks aimed at achieving a bilateral peace agreement between the two countries.

The trip came in the context of a steady sharpening of US-Iranian tensions as a result of Trump's abrogation of the Iranian nuclear agreement in 2018 along with the imposition of a punishing sanctions regime tantamount to a state of war. This was followed by a major escalation of the US military presence in the region a year later.

While the US dispatched an aircraft carrier strike group and a B-52-led bomber task force to the region in May of last year, the same month saw the use of limpet mines to damage four oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz, the strategic "chokepoint" through which 20 percent of the world's oil is shipped.

In June of last year, the Iranians downed a US Navy spy drone over the same area, with the Trump White House first ordering and then calling off retaliatory air strikes against Iran. And in September, Saudi oil installations came under a devastating attack from drones and cruise missiles.

Washington blamed both the attacks on the oil tankers and the strike against the Saudi oil

installations—for which the Houthi rebels in Yemen claimed responsibility—on Iran, charges that Tehran denied.

As early as last August, there were reports indicating concerns within Washington that the UAE was veering away from the anti-Iran front that the US has attempted to cobble together, based upon Israel and the Gulf oil sheikdoms. The Emirates' coast guard had signed a maritime security agreement with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and the UAE had clashed openly with Saudi Arabia over the control of southern Yemen's port city of Aden. At the time, the *Washington Post* warned that the UAE "is breaking ranks with Washington, calling into question how reliable an ally it would be in the event of a war between the United States and Iran."

According to the *Times* report, the meeting with the Iranian delegation in Abu Dhabi, which had been kept secret from Washington, "set off alarms inside the White House ... A united front against Iran—carefully built by the Trump administration over more than two years—seemed to be crumbling."

Both the Emirati monarchy and its counterpart in Saudi Arabia had become increasingly distrustful of Washington's Iran policy and concerned that they would find themselves on the frontline of any confrontation without any guarantee of the US defending them.

Saudi Arabia also began a secret diplomatic approach to Tehran, using the Iraqi and Pakistani governments as intermediaries. Suleimani played the central role in organizing the talks with both Gulf kingdoms, the *Times* reports.

In October, according to the report, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo flew to Tel Aviv for a meeting with Yossi Cohen, the chief of Mossad, who warned

him that “Iran was achieving its primary goal: to break up the anti-Iran alliance.”

Last month’s assassination of General Suleimani was initially defended by Trump and administration officials as a preemptive strike aimed at foiling supposedly “imminent” attacks on US personnel or interests in the Middle East. This pretext soon fell apart, however, and the US president and his aides fell back to justifying the extra-judicial murder of a senior state official as revenge for his support for Shia militias that resisted the US occupation of Iraq 15 years earlier and retaliation for a missile strike that killed an American military contractor last December.

That strike was launched against a military base housing American troops in the northern Iraqi province of Kirkuk. Iraqi security officials have since contradicted the US claim that an Iranian-backed Shia militia was responsible for the attack. They have pointed out that the missiles were launched from a predominantly Sunni area where the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is active, and that Iraqi intelligence had warned US forces in November and December that ISIS was preparing to target the base.

The US responded to the missile strike on the base in Iraq by targeting Iraqi Shia militia positions on the Syria-Iraq border, killing 25 members of the Kataib Hezbollah militia. The attack provoked an angry demonstration that laid siege to the US embassy in Baghdad on December 31.

Two days later, a US Reaper drone fired missiles into a convoy at Baghdad International Airport, killing Suleimani along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a central leader of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces, the coalition of militias that constitutes an arm of Iraq’s security forces, as well as eight others.

In the wake of the drone assassinations, US Secretary of State Pompeo sarcastically told the media: “Is there any history that would indicate that it was remotely possible that this kind gentleman, this diplomat of great order—Qassem Suleimani—had traveled to Baghdad for the idea of conducting a peace mission? We know that wasn’t true.”

As the *Times* report indicates, that was precisely what Suleimani was doing in Baghdad, the US knew it and that is why it assassinated him. Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi said at the time that General Suleimani had flown into the country, on a commercial

flight and using his diplomatic passport, for the express purpose of delivering an Iranian response to a message from Saudi Arabia as part of talks aimed at de-escalating tensions.

The more that emerges about the assassination of Suleimani, the more the abject criminality of his murder becomes clear. It was carried out neither as a reckless act of revenge nor to ward off unspecified attacks. Rather, it was a calculated act of imperialist terror designed to disrupt talks aimed at defusing tensions in the Persian Gulf and to convince the wavering Gulf monarchies that Washington is prepared to go to war against Iran.

This is the policy not merely of the Trump administration. Among the most significant moments in Trump’s State of the Union address earlier this month was the standing ovation by Democratic lawmakers as he gloated over the murder of Suleimani, a war crime.

The resort to such criminal actions is a measure of the extreme crisis of a capitalist system that threatens to drag humanity into a new world war.

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