

As millions march in Tehran, US steps up military build-up against Iran

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Thousands of US paratroopers and Marines are being deployed to positions for striking targets in Iran as the Trump administration prepares to follow up the murder of General Qassem Suleimani with new and greater imperialist war crimes.

The US military build-up comes amid extraordinary scenes of mass anger and outrage, not only in Iran but also in several other countries in the Middle East with large Shi'ite populations and religious and political links to Tehran.

Millions turned out in the Iranian capital itself to pay tribute to Suleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps for the past 20 years and a leading figure in Iran's efforts to combat the Sunni terrorist group ISIS, as well as in support of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The crowds were said by observers to be the largest in Tehran since the funeral of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, in 1989. Hundreds of thousands more turned out in Isfahan, Ahwaz and other Iranian cities. Suleimani is to be buried Tuesday in Kerman, the city of his birth.

The US troops being deployed include a specialized unit of Army Rangers, a battalion of the 75th Ranger Regiment. According to a report in the *Hill*, "Rangers are the Army's elite light infantry force, specializing in raids to kill or capture enemy leaders. At the height of the Iraq War, the Rangers led a secretive unit responsible for hunting Iranian operatives and the leaders of Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite militias in the country, known as Task Force 17."

The military web site Army Times added, "Rangers are known for airfield seizures and direct action raids. During joint forcible entry operations, Rangers assault and secure airports and terminals for follow-on operations, including mass airdrops of paratroopers and equipment, until eventually aircraft can land and unload equipment and supplies on the ground... The 75th Ranger Regiment is also known for conducting direct action raids to capture or kill high value targets."

Qassem Suleimani was one such "high value" target, albeit in his case the attack was mounted by a drone-fired missile. But the troops being deployed to the Middle East could well be used to capture or assassinate pro-Iranian militants in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, or to mount cross-border operations into Iran itself.

The mobilization of the Army Rangers gives substance to the comments made by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during a series of Sunday television interviews, when he directly threatened

that Suleimani might not be the last Iranian leader targeted by the US military. Any retaliation by Iran for the killing of Suleimani would meet a US response that would "be borne by Iran and its leadership itself," he said.

Other forces dispatched in recent days include a brigade of 4,000 paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division, deployed to Kuwait, and 2,000 Marines on board the USS Bataan, who were diverted from planned war games off the coast of Africa to take up positions in the Persian Gulf. An Army unit stationed in Italy was alerted for possible deployment to the Middle East.

The Pentagon also mobilized an undisclosed number of soldiers for deployment to Kenya, where the Somali Islamic group Al-Shabab has staged two attacks on US military targets in the past week.

The mass outpouring of popular outrage over Suleimani's murder and hatred for US imperialism was indicative of a growing wave of strikes and protests by workers and youth around the world against social inequality, war and repression.

The funeral convoy for Suleimani proceeded first from Baghdad through southern Iraq, stopping in Najaf and Karbala, holy cities for Shi'ite Islam, before moving east into the Iranian province of Khuzestan, then north to Tehran. There the coffins of Suleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, another victim of the US drone missile strike on January 3, were passed along over the heads of the huge crowd of mourners.

There was another massive turnout of more than one million people in the Yemeni city of Saada, which is controlled by the Houthi movement, affiliated with the Zaidi branch of Shi'ism. An honorary funeral for Suleimani was also held by Lebanon's Hezbollah movement on Sunday, mobilizing tens of thousands.

Media reports cited the remarks of Suleimani's daughter Zeinab, broadcast over Iranian state television, warning that the assassination would bring a "dark day" for the United States. "Crazy Trump, don't think that everything is over with my father's martyrdom," she said.

Iranian leaders cited the huge turnout in the streets as an answer to Trump's threats against their country. "Have you EVER seen such a sea of humanity in your life, @realdonaldtrump?" Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, wrote on Twitter, addressing the US president. "And do you still imagine you can break the will of this great nation & its people?"

Ali Akbar Velayati, an adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared, "Americans made a foolish move by

assassinating Suleimani, and they must leave the region,” the Iranian news service Fars reported. “If they do not leave the region, they will face another Vietnam,” this time in the Middle East, Velayati said.

The Iranian government announced Sunday that it was suspending its remaining commitments under the 2015 nuclear deal with six world powers—China, Russia, Germany, France, Britain and the United States. Trump pulled the US out of the deal in 2018 and unilaterally imposed illegal financial and trade sanctions, tantamount to economic warfare, which have crippled the Iranian economy. Iran has continued to observe some of the treaty limitations on its nuclear power activities, but the European powers have refused to defy US threats and maintain trade and investment ties.

The Suleimani assassination continues to drive diplomatic and military discussions, not only in the Middle East but around the world.

In Iraq, the scene of the US crime, there was confusion among US military officials Monday as the commander of US forces in Iraq sent a note to the Iraqi government acknowledging the vote of the Iraqi Parliament Sunday to demand the withdrawal of all US forces from the country. The US officer said that US troops would be shifting their positions within the country in preparation for actual pullout. Within hours of this note being reported in the press, the Pentagon issued a statement flatly denying any intention of removing US troops from Iraq.

Speaking to reporters on Air Force One as he flew from his vacation home in Florida back to the White House, President Trump threatened “very big sanctions on Iraq” if the Iraqi government made good on its threat to demand a US withdrawal (the resolution passed by the Parliament was non-binding). Bullying Iraq just as he sought to bully Iran, he said that Iraq would have to come up with billions of dollars to repay the cost of the US airbase at al-Asad, which has been the center of US military operations in the region for more than a decade.

Also Monday, the Saudi defense minister flew to Washington for urgent consultations with the Pentagon. Saudi Arabia is the largest single purchaser of American-made weapons, most of them bought with an eye to eventual war with Iran. The Saudi oilfields were the target in September of drone attacks by the Houthis in Yemen, an act of retaliation for the protracted Saudi war against the people of Yemen, which has produced one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

The NATO alliance held an emergency meeting of ambassadors in Brussels Monday to discuss the crisis in Iraq and Iran. They heard a video presentation from US officials about the killing of Suleimani, after which NATO officials declared their full support.

“We are united in condemning Iran’s support of a variety of different terrorist groups,” NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said. “At the meeting today, allies called for restraint and de-escalation. A new conflict would be in no one’s interest. So, Iran must refrain from further violence and provocations.”

The imperialist hypocrisy is staggering. The calls for “restraint” are directed against Iran, the victim of US military violence, while the US assassination of Iran’s most prominent military official draws support rather than censure. Officials who attended the

meeting said no ambassador raised any objection to the drone missile killing during the briefing by State Department and Pentagon officials. There was also no discussion, let alone criticism, of Trump’s threat to destroy 52 sites in Iran, including cultural sites, in the event of an Iranian retaliation for the Suleimani killing.

The unease among some of the leading NATO members, including Germany and France, is obvious, however. German Chancellor Angela Merkel is to travel Saturday to Moscow, along with Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, for consultations on the crisis with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This will follow Wednesday’s meeting between Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Istanbul.

In Washington, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told Democratic members that she would support the introduction of a “War Powers Resolution” limiting any US military hostilities with Iran to 30 days, unless a formal congressional authorization was enacted. This is a completely cynical and toothless measure on at least two grounds.

First, even if it were to pass the House, the Republican-controlled Senate would not take it up and Trump would likely ignore it.

Second, a 30-day limit on military action amounts to giving Trump an incentive for massive bomb and missile strikes, including the use of nuclear weapons. He has already tweeted the threat that, in the event of any Iranian retaliation for the killing of Suleimani, “the United States will quickly & fully strike back, & perhaps in a disproportionate manner.”

It should be recalled that last summer, Trump expressed the desire to end the war in Afghanistan with a quick military victory. “I could win that war in a week, I just don’t want to kill 10 million people,” he said, adding, “Afghanistan would be wiped off the face of the earth.” Similar dangers now threaten the people of Iran and the entire world.



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