

The Suleimani assassination, imperialist strategy and the crisis of the Iranian regime

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As with any sudden turn in world geopolitics, the true purpose and full implications of Washington's criminal assassination of Iranian Revolutionary Guard General Qassem Suleimani are emerging only with the passage of time.

The Trump administration's claims that the assassination was in response to an imminent threat to American lives have been exposed as blatant lies. Suleimani's murder was months in the planning and long advocated by key figures in the US military-foreign policy establishment, including CIA head Gina Haspel, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former Trump National Security Adviser John Bolton.

The killing of the military leader, who was widely viewed as second only to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran's power structure, constitutes a dramatic escalation of the Trump administration's campaign of "maximum pressure" on Iran. This campaign combines unrelenting diplomatic and military pressure with devastating economic sanctions—that are themselves tantamount to an act of war—cyber-warfare and other "special ops."

It is aimed at "turning" Iran and bringing to power—whether through the reconfiguration or outright overthrow of Iran's Shia clergy-led bourgeois nationalist regime—a government in Tehran, akin to the Shah's bloody quarter-century-long dictatorship, that will be at American imperialism's beck and call.

Iran has long been viewed by US imperialist strategists as central to its drive to secure hegemony over all Eurasia. This is because of its vast oil wealth and its geo-strategic position, near the convergence of three continents and straddling the Middle East and Central Asia, the world's two most important oil exporting regions.

In diplomatic terms, the US drive to force Iran into neo-colonial subjugation is expressed in Trump and Pompeo's demand that Tehran negotiate a replacement to the "flawed" Iran nuclear deal—a "Trump deal" that would severely limit Iran's military, "roll back" its influence across the Middle East, and permanently bar it from a civil nuclear program.

Washington's maximum pressure campaign against Iran is predicated on the "credible" threat of all-out war, and is intimately bound up with its preparations for "strategic conflict" with Russia and China. It could rapidly cascade into a catastrophic war with Iran that would engulf the entire Mideast and draw in the other great powers.

But it is animated by the calculation that a "grand bargain" more

favorable to US imperialism can be extorted from the crisis-ridden and deeply divided Iranian bourgeoisie, under conditions where it is facing not only ever-escalating external pressure, but also massive social opposition, above all from the working class.

The Iranian regime was shaken by an explosion of popular anger against austerity and social inequality at the beginning of 2018. Last November, when massive gas price hikes sparked demonstrations in more than 100 cities, some of them violent, the Iranian government again responded with brutal repression, reportedly killing scores of protesters.

The assassination of Suleimani was itself clearly targeted at more than "just" threatening and destabilizing the Islamic Republic. It was aimed at shifting the internal dynamics of the Iranian regime. It removed the military leader responsible for overseeing Iran's attempts to counteract US pressure through a network of foreign militia groups, most of them based on Shia populism. Suleimani, moreover, was a leader, as the subsequent mass demonstrations protesting his murder and the US war threats attested, who had a broad base of popular support.

Given the manner in which Suleimani died, including his evident lack of security, it is legitimate to ask whether factional opponents within the Iranian state facilitated his murder.

What is incontrovertible is that in the wake of his assassination and the tumultuous events it precipitated, the factional warfare has intensified, culminating in last week's inadvertent downing of a Ukrainian International Airlines plane by an Iranian Revolutionary Guard missile, its cover-up, and the outbreak of student demonstrations denouncing government negligence and repression.

Yesterday, President Hassan Rouhani, who spearheaded the push for the rapprochement with the European imperialist powers and Washington that resulted in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, denounced the military for failing to "apologize" for the downing of the passenger jet. He also criticized the recent decision of the Guardian Council to exclude many sitting parliamentarians from standing in the coming elections. He called for "national reconciliation"—a slogan long raised by supporters of the Greens, a movement based in dissident sections of the bourgeoisie and upper-middle class, which, with imperialist backing, disputed the outcome of the 2009 presidential election.

Meanwhile, on a visit to New Delhi in which he met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Iranian Foreign Minister Javed

Zarif declared that the Indian government, a key US ally, could play an important “role in de-escalating tensions in the Gulf.”

A major element in the Trump administration’s drive to leverage the crisis of the Iranian regime and the longstanding cleavages within it has been the effort to cajole the European imperialist powers—Germany, France and Britain—into joining Washington in repudiating the Iran nuclear accord.

On Tuesday, the so-called E-3 took a giant step in this direction by initiating the accord’s disputes resolution mechanism, thereby placing themselves on a fast track to join Washington in imposing and policing the sanctions that are strangling Iran’s economy.

It is Washington that trashed the nuclear accord and is pursuing “maximum aggression” against Iran. Through its dominance of the world financial system, it has successfully shut down the world’s trade with Iran, thereby making the quid pro quo underlying the nuclear accord—the removal of sanctions in exchange for the dismantling of much of Iran’s civil nuclear program—null and void.

Yet, in what could only be music to Trump and Pompeo’s ears, France, Germany and Britain are blaming Iran for violating the agreement, cynically citing Tehran’s attempts to gain leverage by exceeding various JCPOA stipulations and accusing it of seeking nuclear weapons.

The European imperialist powers have been rattled by provocative and unilateral US actions that cut across their interests. Suleimani’s assassination was just the latest rude shock.

Britain and the EU powers fear Washington’s ever-escalating aggression against Iran will spark an all-out war that will redound against their own imperialist interests, even if it doesn’t immediately draw in Russia and China. A war would send oil prices soaring, roil the European economy, spark another massive refugee crisis and further radicalize a growing working class counter-offensive.

No doubt Pompeo and others have told the Europeans that if they want to restrain Trump, avert a major conflagration and retain influence in the Middle East, they must rally behind Washington and its maximum pressure campaign.

To these dubious incentives, the Trump administration added a trade war threat, according to a report published yesterday by the *Washington Post* under the title, “Days before Europeans warned Iran of nuclear deal violations, Trump secretly threatened to impose 25 percent tariff on European autos if they didn’t.”

That said, as in the case of Washington, a key factor in the Europeans’ calculations is the character of Iran’s bourgeois regime and its manifest crisis.

The European imperialist powers have clearly been emboldened by the Iranian regime’s response to Suleimani’s assassination, which was limited to missile strikes of which the Pentagon was given advance warning and which resulted in no casualties, and by its ham-fisted attempt to cover up its responsibility for the downing of Ukraine Air Flight 752.

For all its anti-American bluster, the Iranian regime is a bourgeois national regime. In so far as it has come into conflict with Washington, it has always been from the standpoint of increasing its own possibilities for exploiting the working class and boosting its regional influence.

The growing opposition from the working class impels Iran to intensify what has been a decades-long attempt to effect a rapprochement with every US administration, dating back at least to that of George H.W. Bush.

If it can, the Islamic Republic’s elite, or sections of it, will strike a deal with imperialism at the expense of the masses. Even before Rouhani came to power in 2014 on a program that coupled overtures toward Washington and Europe with further privatizations, subsidy cuts and other anti-working class measures, the Iranian regime was involved in behind-the-scenes talks with the Obama administration on removing the sanctions.

Similar talks could happen in the future or even be underway though back channels now. Trump has shown in his dealings with North Korea that he is capable of pursuing such a two-track policy.

As for the so-called Iranian “hardliners,” they are no less hostile to the working class than their factional opponents, as evidenced by the implementation of neo-liberal “reform” measures by every Iranian government since the late 1980s, and their readiness to unite with their factional opponents to suppress any challenge from below.

Ultimately, the “hardliners” supported the nuclear deal and the pursuit of closer relations with the US and the EU. Even more importantly, their strategy for opposing Washington--based on seeking close military-strategic ties with Russia and China and the use of Shia populism and religious sectarianism to rally support across the Middle East--is a blind alley that risks plunging the region and the world into a conflagration.

The only viable strategy for opposing the US and European imperialist powers’ predations against Iran is one based on the growing worldwide upsurge of the working class against austerity, social inequality and war, and the fight to arm it with a revolutionary socialist program and leadership.

Workers and youth in Iran must counterpose to the capitalist Islamic Republic the struggle for a Socialist Workers Republic that would fight to unite the masses throughout the Middle East, across all religious sectarian and ethnic lines, against imperialism and all the venal bourgeois regimes.

In North America, Europe and around the world, the watchword of the working class must be “Hands off Iran!” Opposition to all sanctions, intrigues, threats and war preparations against Iran is a vital element in the building of a global, working class-led movement against imperialist war and the crisis-ridden capitalist system that is its source.



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