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America's Foolish Shadow Conflict with Iran

By Doug Bandow

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While the Islamic Republic of Iran is never likely to be Washington's friend, Tehran poses little threat to the United States.

The conclusion of the Cold War brought a terrible threat to global peace to an end. But in the years since, Washington has increasingly used military force around the globe. Over the last two decades, Americans have been almost continually in combat.

Many of those battles have occurred in the shadows, including in the U.S. The Justice Department [recently charged an Iranian](#) with plotting to kidnap and murder John Bolton, one of President Donald Trump's national-security advisors. Threats also have been made against former secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Tehran reportedly also [planned to kidnap](#) Iranian-American journalist Masih Alinejad. While it disclaimed responsibility, Tehran [blamed](#) author Salman Rushdie for the much-publicized knife attack to which he was subjected. These threats energized opposition to dealing with Tehran in most any form. [Republican Rep. Mike McCaul tweeted](#): "The admin should walk away from nuke talks & prioritize Americans."

That the Iranian regime is criminal is not in doubt: it ranks [near the bottom](#) of Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" rankings. Yet few of Tehran's most vociferous critics do more than shed crocodile tears over such human-rights violations. Most of those critics embrace even worse regimes such as the Saudi royal dictatorship, which is more brutal at home and aggressive abroad than is Tehran. Indeed, Pompeo acted as devoted consigliere for Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman after the murder and dismemberment of journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi, [protecting](#) the Saudi leader from economic sanctions and other repercussions for his crimes.

Several of America's other Middle Eastern allies repress their people and imprison U.S. citizens on dubious charges. Yet, Bahrain, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and others buy friends in Washington with grants, bases, weapons purchases, and promises of support. American officials believe in human rights, except when, as often happens, they believe U.S. interests require otherwise.

Of course, hypocrisy in foreign policy is nothing new—for Washington or any other government. But Americans are especially adept at sanctimony, posing as Vestal Virgins in a vile, immoral world. For instance, after reports on the plot on his life, [Bolton commented](#): "It is not just a window into how they behave with their terrorist activities and sponsorship of terrorist groups, but how

they conduct their foreign policy altogether.” Thus, he added, “This is not a regime that can be trusted to meet its commitments or obligations. It is a regime that sees the United States as an enemy and acts that way.”

While that’s no doubt true, it is radically incomplete. Preceding the threats against Bolton and Pompeo was a singularly important event—the Trump administration’s [dramatic assassination](#) of Iran’s Qasem Soleimani, head of the Quds Force.

Soleimani was a malign influence, managing his government’s multiple irregular operations. But residents of the Middle East could make similar claims about the deputy director of the CIA for operations, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or even the national-security advisor, given his involvement in plotting coups and other dubious operations such as the killing of Soleimani.

The world is full of thugs, creeps, and killers in positions of authority. A lot of them, such as Saudi Crown Prince “Slice ‘n Dice,” are allies of the U.S. In the abstract, all of them deserve to be dispatched to mankind’s trash bin. In general, however, governments do not target one another for an obvious reason: if they do so, retaliation is likely. This is particularly important for Western democratic societies, which are vulnerable to infiltration and manipulation from aggressive authoritarian states.

The Trump administration violated this informal practice with Soleimani. There is no reason to mourn his death, but targeting him was rash at best. The most powerful argument for doing so was his supposed responsibility for American deaths by his support for the Iraqi opposition to the U.S. occupation. That’s likely true, though [Iran’s role](#) has been often [exaggerated](#).

But Uncle Sam has dirty hands, too. American military officers and civilian officials are responsible for killing Russian soldiers, [apparently including generals](#), in the Russo-Ukrainian war. And Washington’s support for the Afghan Mujahideen, with [Stinger anti-aircraft missiles](#), cost numerous Soviet lives during the USSR’s occupation of that nation. In both cases, if Moscow had assassinated the American architects of those deadly policies, the U.S. would by its own logic have no complaint.

Moreover, in Soleimani Washington killed not a backroom apparatchik or low-level operative, but a politically significant public figure. The popular distress in Iran over his death was genuine.

So far, Washington has escaped serious Iranian retaliation only through an apparent mix of restraint and luck. The Trump administration failed in its attempt to [ward off Iranian retaliation](#). (A [similar pronouncement](#) by the Biden administration also was ineffective.) Tehran [staged a missile attack](#) on a U.S. base, causing significant casualties—[downplayed by Trump](#)—but fortunately no deaths. Iran’s Iraqi allies, which lost a top commander in the U.S. drone strike, also targeted American facilities and the embassy in Baghdad. Pompeo responded weakly with plans [to close the](#) embassy if necessary. Imagine the Republican response if Barack Obama or Joe Biden had proved so weak-kneed!

Thankfully the U.S. thwarted the plot against Bolton. And the Biden administration should attempt to warn Tehran away from targeting American officials. But U.S. policy bears some of the blame for this Iranian plot. Bolton’s life is in danger *because* the government that he served, with his reported support, killed a high-ranking Iranian official for activities comparable to those carried out by American officials against other nations.

To paraphrase Bolton, the killing of Soleimani is not just a window into how American policymakers behave with their promiscuous military intervention and sponsorship of authoritarian regimes, but how they conduct their foreign policy altogether. U.S. officials are willing to drone, bomb, invade, and occupy other nations and injure or kill other peoples whenever and for any reason they choose, consequences be damned.

The impact of the Trump administration's assassination of Soleimani offers important lessons for Washington. Iran has demonstrated unexpected tenacity. American policymakers should recognize that there are no free kills, and that retaliation against any future U.S. intervention is likely. And that could spark an escalatory spiral with disastrous consequences.

While the Islamic Republic of Iran is never likely to be Washington's friend, Tehran poses little threat to the U.S. And it is not just Iran that has proved hostile. America's war on the Iranian people runs almost seven decades.

Washington's attacks on Iran have created tragic and unnecessary threats against Americans, such as the Bolton plot. Instead of promising to fight Saudi Arabia's and Israel's battles, the U.S. should allow those countries to take responsibility for their own security. The Trump administration policy toward Iran was a disastrous failure. The Biden administration should take a different course.

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