

The Soleimani Assassination: Worse Than a Crime, a Mistake

In March of 1804, French dragoons secretly crossed the Rhine into the German Margraviate of Baden. Acting on orders from Napoleon himself, they kidnapped Louis Antoine de Bourbon, Duke of Enghien. After a hastily convened court-martial on charges of bearing arms against France, the duke was shot.

“C’est pire qu’un crime, c’est une faute,” a French official (supposedly, but probably not, Talleyrand) said of the duke’s execution: “It is worse than a crime, it is a mistake.”

That terse evaluation came immediately to mind when news broke of a January 3 US drone strike at Baghdad International Airport. Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ “Quds Force,” and nine others, died in the attack. US president Donald Trump claimed responsibility for ordering the strike and has subsequently defended that decision.

The duke’s execution outraged Europe’s aristocrats, and in particular brought Russia’s Alexander I to the conclusion that Napoleon’s power must be checked. The international reverberations created by Soleimani’s assassination are already shaping up in similar fashion.

Yes, Iran’s government is outraged and vows revenge, but that’s not surprising. It would be hard for US-Iran relations to get much worse short of all-out war.

Five of those killed in the strike were Iraqi military personnel from the country’s Popular Mobilization Forces, including their deputy commander, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Iraq’s outgoing prime minister denounced the strike as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty and of the US/Iraq Status of Forces Agreement. The speaker of the country’s parliament vowed to “put an end to US presence” in Iraq. Powerful Shiite religious and political figure Muqtada al-Sadr, whose militia forces bedeviled the US occupation after the 2003 invasion, is re-mobilizing those forces to “defend Iraq.”

NATO, the Secretary General of the United Nations, and several leaders of regimes putatively allied with the United States have likewise responded negatively to Soleimani’s assassination.

Trump’s order wasn’t even remotely legal, according to Hoyle, under US law or the 400-year international order since the Peace of Westphalia.

The attack occurred without congressional approval or even notification, let alone the

declaration of war that the ever-deteriorating US Constitution requires. Unfortunately, while Congress perpetually rumbles discontent over such things, it's likely to continue enabling, rather than punish and rein in, such abuses of presidential power.

The attack occurred on the supposedly sovereign soil of a putative ally, killing that ally's officials and invited guests. While it's merely an escalation, not a new phenomenon — the previous president, Barack Obama, also claimed and exercised a “right” to murder on foreign soil at will — it's a significant escalation by a president with fewer and less loyal friends on the global stage.

Whether Trump is “wagging the dog” in an attempt to distract from impeachment, or playing “6D chess” in an attempt to get the US out of Iraq at the demand of the Iraqis themselves (I've heard both claims), he's turning friends against him and currying renewed European sympathy for Iran.

The prospects for peace on Earth have receded significantly since Christmas Day.