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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

By Patrick Martin
07.01.2020

Democrats fault Trump on strategy, silent on illegality of Suleimani assassination

The Democrats competing for the party's presidential nomination to replace Donald Trump issued statements after the killing of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani generally denouncing the victim of the US state killing while faulting Trump for not embedding the murder of Suleimani in a broader strategy for promoting US imperialist interests in the Middle East.

Former Vice President Joe Biden, campaigning in Iowa for the February 3 caucuses, the first contest in the campaign for the Democratic nomination, said that Suleimani "deserved to be brought to justice," but that Trump had "tossed a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox, and he owes the American people an explanation of the strategy and the plan" going forward.

"We could be on the brink of a major conflict across the Middle East," Biden, who leads in national polls among the Democratic contenders, said in Dubuque. "I hope the administration has thought through the second- and third-order consequences of the path they have chosen. But I fear this administration has not demonstrated at any turn the discipline or long-term vision necessary."

Former South Bend, Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg, who leads current polls in Iowa, was campaigning in New Hampshire, the second contest in the Democratic race. "When you do something as provocative as assassinate a significant foreign official on the soil of a third country, you better think through all of the things that are going to happen next," he

told an audience Saturday in Wolfeboro. “As a military intelligence officer on the ground in Afghanistan, I was trained to ask these questions before a decision was made.”

By Sunday, Buttigieg had pulled back from the characterization of the killing as an assassination, telling CNN’s “State of the Union” program that he was “not interested in the terminology.” He criticized Trump not for ordering the killing—saying Suleimani “deserved it”—but for failing to notify congressional leaders and US allies in advance. “The real world effects of this are going to go far beyond the things that we are debating today and we need answers quickly,” he said.

Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, also campaigning in Iowa, issued a statement declaring, “Qassem Suleimani was responsible for directing Iran’s destabilizing actions in Iraq, Syria, and throughout the Middle East, including attacks against US forces. But the timing, manner, and potential consequences of the administration’s actions raise serious questions and concerns about an escalating conflict.”

Klobuchar has been heavily promoted by the corporate media and the Democratic establishment as a possible “moderate”—i.e., right-wing—replacement for Biden if the former vice president’s campaign falters. She reported raising \$11.4 million in campaign funds during the fourth quarter, double any previous three-month period.

Senator Bernie Sanders was the only top Democratic candidate to flatly describe the killing of Suleimani as an assassination and to connect Trump’s actions to previous acts of American military aggression, both in Vietnam and in Iraq. “This is a dangerous escalation that brings us closer to another disastrous war in the Middle East, which would cost countless lives and trillions more dollars and lead to even more death, more conflict, more displacement in that already highly volatile region of the world,” he said.

But Sanders placed that criticism in the context of praising the foreign policy of the Obama administration, the first in US history to be at war every day for eight years. Obama massively expanded the use of drone-fired missiles to carry out targeted murders, the method employed by Trump against Suleimani.

Sanders is well aware of the deep-seated opposition to imperialist war among working people. On Friday, he and Representative Ro Khanna of California introduced legislation that would deny funding for US military attacks on Iran without a congressional vote. They issued an accompanying statement declaring, “It will ultimately be the children of working class families who will have to fight and die in a new Middle East conflict—not the children of the billionaire class.”

This antiwar posturing is an empty gesture, given that Congress will never vote on the legislation and Trump would ignore it if it passed, just as he has ignored restrictions on the use of military funding to build the wall on the US-Mexico border. The bill was introduced only to give the Democrats a “left” cover after they voted overwhelmingly to approve the record \$738 billion military budget sought by Trump.

The Democratic leadership agreed to Trump’s demand that they strip from an earlier House version of the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act a provision requiring congressional authorization for any military strike against Iran, effectively giving the White House a blank check for launching a war against the country.

Senator Elizabeth Warren, in a manner that has become almost stereotyped, sought to straddle both the position of Sanders and the more openly right-wing position of rivals like Biden, Buttigieg and Klobuchar. Her initial statement echoed that of Biden, filled with denunciations of Suleimani as a “murderer” and an enemy of the United States military.

When this produced a negative reaction on social media, Warren issued a more “left”-sounding statement describing the killing of Suleimani as an “assassination” and Trump’s policy as directed towards war with Iran.

This came under attack from the right. Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a late entry into the Democratic race who has spent more than \$150 million of his \$56 billion fortune on television and internet advertising in barely a month, denounced Sanders and Warren, calling it “outrageous” that they had used the word “assassination,” and solidarizing himself with Trump, saying the president had killed “an enemy of America who killed Americans.”

Warren then performed a further flip-flop, going on several Sunday television interview programs to criticize Trump for killing Suleimani to help his 2020 reelection campaign. She made a direct comparison to the charges raised in the Democratic impeachment of Trump, saying that in both the Ukraine military aid cutoff and the killing of Suleimani he was pursuing personal political interests rather than the “national security” interests of the United States.

What unites all the Democratic presidential candidates, from the open right-wingers to the pretended leftism of Sanders, is their support for American imperialism and its key institutions, including the military, the Special Forces, which carried out the assassination of Suleimani, and the presidency itself.

Not one of the Democratic presidential candidates characterized the state assassination as a criminal action or suggested that this charge should become the basis for the impeachment and removal of Trump.

6 January 2020