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By Bill Van Auken
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Iran strikes US bases in Iraq as Pentagon deploys B-52 bombers

Iranian media reported Tuesday night that the country's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had attacked multiple American bases inside Iraq in the first step of retaliation for the criminal January 3 US drone missile assassination of General Qassem Suleimani, the head of IRGC's Quds Force. Suleimani was considered the country's second most powerful figure.

The main targets of the first missile attacks were reported by the Pentagon to be the Ain al-Assad base in western Iraq's Anbar province and another base near Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. A major center for US military operations in both Iraq and Syria, the Ain al-Assad base was visited by Trump in December of last year and by Vice President Mike Pence last November.



Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) fire rockets targeting the U.S. air base of Ain al-Assad in Anbar in Iraq. (Credit: <https://en.irna.ir>)

The spiraling war crisis in the Persian Gulf that was initiated with the murder of Suleimani had an immediate effect on world markets, with oil prices climbing by more than four percent and Dow futures dropping some 350 points Tuesday night. The clear implication being drawn by world finance capital is that a US counter-retaliation against Iran may well lead to Iranian attacks on Saudi and other Gulf state oil facilities, or a closing of the strategic Strait of Hormuz through which some 20 percent of globally traded oil passes.

In evident preparation for full-scale war, the Pentagon has dispatched a bomber strike force consisting of six B-52 heavy bombers to the US military base on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, a British colonial possession that is within striking distance of Iran but beyond the range of Iran's longest-range missiles.

Amid the steadily escalating tensions that have followed the assassination of Suleimani, the deployment of the nuclear-capable bombers represents a direct threat of wholesale military violence against the nation of 82 million people.

The sending of the B-52s to Diego Garcia follows the deployment to the Middle East of 4,000 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division stationed at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, along with the dispatch to the Persian Gulf of 2,000 Marines aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Bataan.

The US military buildup in the region follows a series of increasingly virulent threats from Washington of new war crimes in response to any Iranian retaliation for the murder of General Suleimani, who was killed along with four other Iranians and five Iraqis in a US drone missile strike at Baghdad's international airport.

Speaking at the White House Tuesday, Trump stated, "If Iran does anything they shouldn't be doing, they are going to be suffering the consequences, and very strongly." Earlier, the US president claimed that he had selected 52 targets in Iran, one for each of the hostages taken in the 1979-1980 seizure of the US embassy in Tehran, and that these would include cultural sites, a war crime.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley and Vice President Mike Pence all assembled with Trump at the White House Tuesday night following the report of the Iranian missile attacks.

Multiple Iranian officials had made it clear that retaliation for the assassination of the Iranian leader was inevitable, particularly in the face of the mass outpouring of grief and rage in cities across the country. The turnout of millions of Iranian men, women and children, unprecedented at least since the 1989 funeral for the Islamic Republic's founder Ayatollah Khomeini, took a tragic turn on Tuesday. A massive crowd attempting to accompany Suleimani's coffin to a cemetery in his hometown of Kerman became trapped in its narrow streets, leading to a stampede in which a reported 56 people were killed and over 200 more injured.

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, considered a "moderate" within the Iranian ruling establishment, said of Suleimani's assassination: "This is an act of aggression against Iran, and it amounts to an armed attack against Iran, and we will respond. But we will respond proportionately, not disproportionately... We are not lawless like President Trump."

Washington denied Zarif a visa to attend a scheduled meeting of the United Nations Security Council, where he would have indicted Washington for a war crime in carrying out the cold-blooded murder of an Iranian government official conducting a state visit to Iraq. National security adviser Robert O'Brien justified the denial of the visa by declaring, "Whenever he comes to New York, he spreads propaganda."

In a Tuesday morning press conference, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo mocked Zarif's statement that Suleimani had gone to Baghdad on a diplomatic mission. "Is there any history that would indicate it was remotely possible that this kind gentleman, this diplomat of great order, Qassem Suleimani, traveled to Baghdad for the idea of conducting a peace mission?" he said.

What Pompeo sought to ignore is the fact that Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi has himself said he was scheduled to meet with Suleimani the morning of the murder to discuss the situation in Iraq and Baghdad's attempts to mediate in the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The Trump administration's claims that it acted in response to an "imminent threat" of an attack involving Suleimani have proven increasingly threadbare. Defense Secretary Esper claimed before briefing the so-called "Gang of Eight," the Democratic and Republican leaders of both houses of Congress and both of their intelligence committees, that US intelligence on the supposed threat was "exquisite." Responding to reporters' questions, however, he allowed that "imminent" could have meant either days or weeks.

Pentagon officials speaking off the record have indicated that there was no intelligence of any impending attack. In any case, had there been, killing Suleimani, a top-level Iranian government official who was operating openly and in discussions with the Iraqi government, was hardly likely to stop it.

The US position in Iraq has grown increasingly untenable in the wake of the assassination. Confusion continued to reign in Washington over a letter drafted by Gen. William Seely, a US commander in Iraq, that clearly implied that US forces were preparing to withdraw from the country in response to a unanimous vote by the Iraqi parliament on Sunday demanding their expulsion.

Esper, Pompeo and others in the administration insisted that the letter was merely an unsigned draft and that Washington had no intention of withdrawing, no matter what the Iraqi parliament or people want. Esper went so far as to claim that the Iraqi members of parliament had voted unanimously for forcing US troops out because “they were threatened.” As for the letter, they claimed it was merely a poorly worded notification that US troops were being redeployed within Iraq as the US and its NATO allies evacuated Baghdad’s Green Zone out of fear of attack.

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, however, insisted that he had been delivered a signed copy of the letter in Arabic not just once, but twice after it was sent back with a translation correction.

In a televised speech, he reiterated the call for the end of the US military presence. “We have no exit but this, otherwise we are speeding toward confrontation,” he said, adding that Iraq would have to take a “historic decision” to expel US forces. “Otherwise we will not be taken seriously.”

Outrage in Iraq over the drone strike has been nearly as strong as in Iran, with huge crowds taking to the streets of Baghdad, Basra, Najaf and other cities to condemn the assassinations of both Suleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was second in command of the powerful Popular Mobilization Forces, a coalition of Shia militias that is considered part of the Iraqi armed forces. If the US defies Iraqi demands for a troop withdrawal, it could well face a resumption of the Iraq war, pitting American soldiers against these militias.

The Iranian retaliation for the Suleimani assassination was expected to push back consideration of a toothless “War Powers Resolution” proposed by House Democrats,

which would limit US military action against Iran to 30 days without a formal congressional authorization for the use of military force.

As of Tuesday night, there were no reports of US casualties resulting from the missile attacks. Trump issued a tweet stating “Assessment of casualties & damages taking place now. So far, so good!” He added that he would make a statement Wednesday morning.

Whatever the response by Washington, the recklessness and criminality that characterize US policy toward Iran are a sign not of strength, but rather of the deep-going crisis of US imperialism, which has failed to achieve any of its strategic aims in the Middle East after decades of war, and which faces mounting social conflict and unprecedented political crisis at home.

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