

Noam Chomsky: US Is A Rogue State And Suleimani's Assassination Confirms It



Noam Chomsky

Trump's decision to assassinate one of Iran's most prominent and highly respected military leaders, Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, has added yet another name to the list of people killed by the U.S. — which many rightly see as the world's biggest rogue state.

The assassination has escalated hostilities between Tehran and Washington and created an even more explosive situation in the politically volatile Middle East. As was to be expected, Iran has vowed to retaliate on its own terms for the killing of its general, while also announcing that it will withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal. Iraq's parliament, in turn, has voted to expel all U.S. troops, but Trump has responded with threats of sanctions if the U.S. is forced to remove its troops from the country.

As world-renowned public intellectual Noam Chomsky points out in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*, the primary aim of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has been to control the region's energy resources. Here Chomsky — a university professor emeritus at MIT and laureate professor of linguistics at the University of Arizona who has published more than 120 books on linguistics, global affairs, U.S. foreign policy, media studies, politics and philosophy — offers his analysis of Trump's reckless act and its possible effects.

C.J. Polychroniou: Noam, the U.S. assassination of Iran's Quds Force commander

Qassim Suleimani has reaffirmed Washington's long-held obsession with Tehran and its clerical regime, which goes all the way back to the late 1970s. What is the conflict between U.S. and Iran all about, and does the assassination of Suleimani constitute an act of war?

Noam Chomsky: Act of war? Perhaps we can settle on reckless international terrorism. It seems that Trump's decision, on a whim, appalled high Pentagon officials who briefed him on options, on pragmatic grounds. If we wish to look beyond, we might ask how we would react in comparable circumstances.

Suppose that Iran were to murder the second-highest U.S. official, its top general, in the Mexico City international airport, along with the commander of a large part of the U.S.-supported army of an allied nation. Would that be an act of war? Others can decide. It is enough for us to recognize that the analogy is fair enough, and that the pretexts put forth by Washington collapse so quickly on examination that it would be embarrassing to run through them.

Suleimani was greatly respected — not only in Iran, where he was a kind of cult figure. This is recognized by U.S. experts on Iran. One of the most prominent experts, Vali Nasr (no dove, and who detests Suleimani), [says](#) that Iraqis, including Iraqi Kurds, “don't see him as the nefarious figure that the West does, but they see him through the prism of defeating ISIS.” They have not forgotten that when the huge, heavily armed U.S.-trained Iraqi army quickly collapsed, and the Kurdish capital of Erbil, then Baghdad and all of Iraq were about to fall in the hands of ISIS [also known as Daesh], it was Suleimani and the Iraqi Shia militias he organized that saved the country. Not a small matter.

As for what the conflict is all about, the background reasons are not obscure. It has long been a primary principle of U.S. foreign policy to control the vast energy resources of the Middle East: to *control*, not necessarily to use. Iran has been central to this objective during the post-World War II period, and its escape from the U.S. orbit in 1979 has accordingly been intolerable.

The “obsession” can be traced to 1953, when Britain — the overlord of Iran since oil was discovered there — was unable to prevent the government from taking over its own resources and called on the global superpower to manage the operation. There is no space to review the course of the obsession since in detail, but some highlights are instructive.

Britain called on Washington with some reluctance. To do so meant surrendering more of its former empire to the U.S. and declining even more to the role of “junior partner” in global management, as the foreign office recognized with dismay. The Eisenhower administration took over. It organized a military coup that overthrew the parliamentary regime and re-installed the Shah, restoring the oil concession to its rightful hands, with the U.S. taking over 40 percent of the former British concession. Interestingly, Washington had to force U.S. majors to accept this gift; they preferred to keep to cheaper Saudi oil (which the U.S. had taken over from Britain in a mini war during World War II). But under government coercion, they were forced to comply: one of those unusual but instructive incidents revealing how the government sometimes pursues long-term imperial interests over the objections of the powerful corporate sector that largely controls and even staffs it — with considerable resonance in U.S.-Iran relations in recent years.

The Shah proceeded to institute a harsh tyranny. He was regularly cited by Amnesty International as a leading practitioner of torture, always with strong U.S. support as Iran became one of the pillars of U.S. power in the region, along with the Saudi family dictatorship and Israel. Technically, Iran and Israel were at war. In reality, they had extremely close relations, which surfaced publicly after the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. The tacit relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia are surfacing much more clearly now within the framework of the reactionary alliance that the Trump administration is forging as a base for U.S. power in the region: the Gulf dictatorships, the Egyptian military dictatorship and Israel, linked to Modi’s India, Bolsonaro’s Brazil and other similar elements. A rare semblance of a coherent strategy in this chaotic administration.

The Carter administration strongly supported the Shah until the last moment. High U.S. officials — [Henry] Kissinger, [Dick] Cheney, [Donald] Rumsfeld — called on U.S. universities (mainly my own, MIT, over strong student protest but faculty acquiescence) to aid the Shah’s nuclear programs, even after he made clear that he was seeking nuclear weapons. When the popular uprising overthrew the Shah, the Carter administration was apparently split on whether to endorse the advice of de facto Israeli Ambassador Uri Lubrani, who counselled that “Tehran can be taken over by a very relatively small force, determined, ruthless, cruel. I mean the men who would lead that force will have to be emotionally geared to the possibility that they’d have to kill ten thousand people.”

It didn't work, and soon Ayatollah Khomeini took over on an enormous wave of popular enthusiasm, establishing the brutal clerical autocracy that still reigns, crushing popular protests.

Shortly after, Saddam Hussein invaded Iran with strong U.S. backing, unaffected by his resort to chemical weapons that caused huge Iranian casualties; his monstrous chemical warfare attacks against Iraqi Kurds were denied by Reagan, who sought to blame Iran and blocked congressional condemnation.

Finally, the U.S. pretty much took over, sending naval forces to ensure Saddam's control of the Gulf. After the U.S. guided missile cruiser Vincennes shot down an Iranian civilian airliner in a clearly marked commercial corridor, killing 290 passengers and returning to port to great acclaim and awards for exceptional service, Khomeini capitulated, recognizing that Iran cannot fight the U.S. President Bush then invited Iraqi nuclear scientists to Washington for advanced training in nuclear weapons production, a very serious threat against Iran.

Conflicts continued without a break, in more recent years focusing on Iran's nuclear programs. These conflicts ended (in theory) with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, an agreement between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN, plus Germany, in which Iran agreed to sharply curtail its nuclear programs — none of them weapons programs — in return for Western concessions. The International Atomic Energy Agency, which carries out intensive inspections, reports that Iran fully lived up to the agreement. U.S. intelligence agrees.

The topic elicits much debate, unlike another question: Has the U.S. observed the agreement? Apparently not. The JCPOA states that all participants are committed not to impede in any way Iran's reintegration into the global economy, particularly the global financial system, which the U.S. effectively controls. The U.S. is not permitted to interfere "in areas of trade, technology, finance and energy" and others.

While these topics are not investigated, it appears that Washington has been interfering steadily.

President Trump claims that his effective demolition of the JCPOA is an effort to negotiate an improvement. It's a worthy objective, easily realized. Any concerns about Iranian nuclear threats can be overcome by establishing a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) in the Middle East, with intensive inspections like those successfully implemented under the JCPOA.

[As we have discussed before](#), this is quite straightforward. Regional support is overwhelming. The Arab states initiated the proposal long ago, and continue to agitate for it, with the strong support of Iran and the former nonaligned countries (G-77, now 132 countries). Europe agrees. In fact, there is only one barrier: the U.S., which regularly vetoes the proposal when it comes up at the review meetings of the Non-Proliferation Treaty countries, most recently by Obama in 2015. The U.S. will not permit inspection of Israel's enormous nuclear arsenal, or even concede its existence, though it is not in doubt. The reason is simple: under U.S. law (the Symington Amendment), conceding its existence would require terminating all aid to Israel.

So the simple method of ending the alleged concern about an Iranian threat is ruled out and the world must face grim prospects.

Since these topics are scarcely mentionable in the U.S., it is perhaps worthwhile to reiterate another forbidden matter: The U.S. and U.K. have a special responsibility to work to establish a NWFZ in the Middle East. They are formally committed to do so under Article 14 of UN Security Council Resolution 687, which they invoked in their effort to concoct some thin legal basis for their invasion of Iraq, claiming that Iraq had violated the Resolution with nuclear weapons programs. Iraq hadn't, as they were soon forced to concede. But the U.S. continues to violate the Resolution to the present in order to protect its Israeli client and to allow Washington to violate U.S. law.

Interesting facts, which, unfortunately, are apparently too incendiary to see the light of day.

There's no point reviewing the years that followed in the hands of the man "sent by God to save Israel from Iran," in the words of the serious figure of the administration, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Returning to the original question, there's quite a lot to contemplate about what the conflict is about. In a phrase, primarily imperial power, damn the consequences.

The term "rogue state" (used widely by the U.S. State Department) refers to the pursuit of state interests without regard to accepted standards of international behavior and the basic principles of international law. Given that definition, isn't the U.S. a star example of a rogue state?

State Department officials are not the only ones to use the term "rogue state." It

has also been used by prominent American political scientists — referring to the State Department. Not Trump's, Clinton's.

During the era between Reagan's murderous terrorist atrocities in Central America and Bush's invasion of Iraq, they recognized that for much of the world, the U.S. was "becoming the rogue superpower," considered "the single greatest external threat to their societies," and that, "In the eyes of much of the world, in fact, the prime rogue state today is the United States" (Harvard professor of the science of government and government adviser Samuel Huntington; President of the American Political Science Association Robert Jervis. Both in the main establishment journal, *Foreign Affairs*, 1999, 2001).

After Bush took over, qualifications were dropped. It was [asserted](#) as fact that the U.S. "has assumed many of the very features of the 'rogue nations' against which it has ... done battle." Others outside the U.S. mainstream might think of different words for the worst crime of the millennium, a textbook example of aggression without credible pretext, the "supreme international crime" of Nuremberg.

And others sometimes express their opinions. Gallup runs regular polls of international opinion. In 2013 (the Obama years), it asked for the first time, which country is the greatest threat to world peace. The U.S. won; no one else even came close. Far behind in second place was Pakistan, presumably inflated by the Indian vote. Iran — the greatest threat to world peace in U.S. discourse — was scarcely mentioned.

That was also the last time the question was asked, though there needn't have been much concern. It does not seem to have been reported in the U.S.

We might ponder these questions a little further. We are supposed to revere the U.S. Constitution, especially conservatives. We must therefore revere Article VI, which declares that valid treaties shall be "the supreme law of the land" and officials must be bound by them. In the post-war years, by far the most important such treaty is the UN Charter, instituted under U.S. initiative. It bans "the threat or use of force" in international affairs; specifically, the common refrain that "all options are open" with regard to Iran. And all cases of resort to force unless explicitly authorized by the Security Council or in defense against armed attack (a narrowly construed notion) until the Security Council, which must be immediately notified, is able to act to terminate the attack.

We might consider what the world would look like if the U.S. Constitution were considered applicable to the U.S., but let's put that interesting question aside —

not, however, without mentioning that there is a respected profession, called “international lawyers and law professors,” who can learnedly explain that words don’t mean what they mean.

Iraq has struggled since the U.S. invasion in 2003 to maintain a balanced situation with both Washington and Tehran. However, the Iraqi parliament has voted after Suleimani’s assassination to expel all U.S. troops. Is this likely to happen? And, if it does, what impact would it have on future U.S.- Iraq-Iran relations, including the fight against ISIS?

We don’t know whether it will happen. Even if the Iraqi government orders the U.S. to leave, will it do so? It’s not obvious, and as always, public opinion in the U.S., if organized and committed, can help provide an answer.

As for ISIS, Trump has just given it another lease on life, just as he gave it a “get out of jail free” card when he betrayed Syrian Kurds, leaving them to the mercy of their bitter enemies Turkey and Assad after they had fulfilled their function of fighting the war against ISIS (with 11,000 casualties, as compared with half-dozen Americans). ISIS organized at first with jail breaks and is now free to do so again.

ISIS has been given a welcome gift in Iraq as well. The eminent Middle East historian Ervand Abrahamian [observes](#):

The killing of Soleimani ... has actually provided a wonderful opportunity for ISIS to recover. There will be a resurgence of ISIS very much in Mosul, northern Iraq. And that, paradoxically, will help Iran, because the Iraqi government will have no choice but to rely more and more on Iran to be able to contain ISIS[which led the defense of Iraq against the ISIS onslaught, under Suleimani’s command] ... Trump has pulled out of north Iraq, of the area where ISIS was, pulled the rug out from the Kurds, and now he’s declared war on the pro-Iranian militias. And the Iraqi Army has not been in the past capable of dealing with ISIS. So, the obvious thing is now, the Iraqi government, how are they going to deal with the revival of ISIS? ... they will have no choice but to actually rely more and more on Iran. So, Trump has actually undermined his own policy, if he wants to eliminate Iran’s influence in Iraq.

Much as W. Bush did when he invaded Iraq.

We shouldn't forget, however, that enormous power can recover from muddle-headedness and failure — if the domestic population permits it to.

Putin appears to have outmaneuvered the U.S. not only on Syria, but almost everywhere else on the Middle East front. What is Moscow after in the Middle East, and what's your explanation for the often infantile diplomacy displayed by the United States in the region and in fact around the world?

One goal, substantially achieved, was to gain control of Syria. Russia entered the conflict in 2015 after advanced weapons provided by the CIA to the mostly jihadi armies had stopped Assad's forces. Russian aircraft turned the tide, and without concern for the incredible civilian toll, the Russian-backed coalition has taken control of most of the country. Russia is now the external arbiter.

Elsewhere, even among Washington's Gulf allies, Putin has presented himself, apparently with some success, as the one trustworthy outside actor. Trump's bull-in-a-China-shop diplomacy (if that is the right word) is winning few friends outside of Israel, on which he is lavishing gifts, and the other members of the reactionary alliance taking shape. Any thought of "soft power" has been pretty much abandoned. But U.S. reserves of hard power are enormous. No other country can impose harsh sanctions at will and compel third parties to honor them, at cost of expulsion from the international financial system. And, of course, no one else has hundreds of military bases around the world or anything like Washington's advanced military power and ability to resort to force at will and with impunity. The idea of imposing sanctions on the U.S., or anything beyond tepid criticism, borders on ludicrous.

And so, it is likely to remain even as "in the eyes of much of the world, in fact, the prime rogue state today is the United States," considerably more so than 20 years ago when these words were uttered, unless and until the population compels state power to pursue a different course.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

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