

World #1 – Iran's Top General Is Dead. What You Need to Know.

Daily News Article — Posted on January 7, 2020

(by Daniel Davis, The Daily Signal) – U.S. forces killed one of Iran's most powerful men, **Qassim Suleimani**, early Friday morning in Baghdad. He was leader of the elite Quds Force, the division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps that conducts spying and terrorist operations outside Iran, and the order came directly from President Donald Trump.

This U.S. military success is comparable to the killing of Osama bin Laden in 2011, said James Jay Carafano, a retired Army lieutenant colonel who is vice president for national security and foreign policy at The Heritage Foundation.

In an interview, Mr. Carafano discussed the details, what led to the attack, and what to look for next. Read the interview below, (and, if you wish, listen to the podcast as you read the transcript):

0:00 / 0:00

#1 – Daniel Davis: So we know now that President Trump actually ordered this attack on Iran's top general. Why did he take out the general in Baghdad?

Carafano: Yeah, so, well, first of all, Suleimani is probably the world's most dangerous terrorist. He runs the Quds Force, this is part of the Iranian [Revolutionary Guard], which is basically responsible for all the covert operations, terrorist acts, managing the surrogates overseas, personally responsible for thousands of deaths, including hundreds of Americans who died because of [improvised explosive device] attacks.

And the Iranians have actually [been] attacking U.S. people in Iraq now for over a year, the official number is there's been 19 attacks. The real number is there's much, much more than that.

So, all this stuff in the embassy, which preceded this, that was just the latest attack. But the better question is, why now? Right? Suleimani has been around forever, right? He's been designated by the U.S. as a head of a foreign terrorist organization forever.

So here's what happened, when [President Barack] Obama pulled out of Iraq back in 2011 and ISIS metastasized ... we went back in, the Iraqis let us back in. We were doing operations in Iraq and Syria principally focused on killing ISIS.

Now, what the Iranians were doing during all that time is they were infiltrating their people and their influence out, getting more control of what's called the Shia militias, so you have Kurds, Sunnis, and Shias in Iraq. The Shias are the majority population, that's why they control the government. And the Iranians [also Shias] were infiltrating them, bribing, threatening, corrupting, getting control of them. We didn't do much about it because to be honest, we were all fighting ISIS. So there was kind of a cease-fire, right?

And after ISIS is destroyed now, what the Iranians have done trying to push back on Trump and his isolation is they've tried a bunch of different things. They tried [by] blocking the straits, they tried [by] [cutting off oil](#), they tried [by] [bombing Saudi Arabia](#), they tried [by] shooting down an American drone, and now what they've done is weaponize the Iraqi militias that are controlled by Iran in Iraq to attack Americans.

So that's why now. And because Suleimani was actually in a foreign country in Iraq, plotting terrorist attacks to kill Americans. So there's every bit as rational, logical reason to kill him as there was to kill Osama bin Laden.

The stunning thing is, what the heck was he doing in Baghdad? He was arguably the most wanted terrorist of United States, the guy that's in charge of killing Americans in Iraq.

What is he doing kind of out in the open in Baghdad? It's like Yamamoto deciding to vacation in Waikiki or Osama bin Laden planning his next terrorist attack from a hotel in Times Square. That was such a brazen, in-your-face act.

If the United States did not do that, that would have rippled throughout the region. What the U.S. did is not an escalation, it was a very justifiable, very proportionally, very rational act of self-defense. On the other hand, if we hadn't done that, there would just be more killing of Americans today.

#2 – Davis: Yeah, he was caught at the airport in Baghdad just a couple of days after the U.S. Embassy had been burning in Baghdad. What's the connection between him and what happened at the embassy?

Carafano: Well, here's the untold story, right? So the U.S. Embassy is in the middle of something called a green zone. It's hundreds of acres, right? That is surrounded by Iraqi security. So unlike the attack at some of these other U.S. bases, you've got to get through all that Iraqi security to get to the embassy. Well, how did that happen? Because they literally walked through. And the answer is, somebody told them to walk through.

So, one of the untold stories of all this is the Iranians really overreached in their attack on the embassy because by doing that, all the people that were responsible for that security that allowed that to happen or of criticism, they just gave us a blueprint of everybody in the Iraqi government security forces who are working with the Iranians.

#3 – Davis: So, they're basically like double agents. They say they're working for Iraq and complying with the U.S., protecting our personnel, and then letting the Iranians through. Who was it that was actually attacking the embassy though? I mean, were they Iranian?

Carafano: Kataib Hezbollah, which is an Iraqi Shia militia that is funded and directed by the Iranians. And one of the guys (Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis) killed in the strike with Qasem Suleimani, the head of the Quds Force, was one of the heads of the Hezbollah militia that attacked the U.S. Embassy.

#4 – Davis: Wow. So does this killing seriously weaken Iran's position in the Middle East? Or is it sort of you take the head off the snake and another one's going to take its place?

Carafano: Yeah, I mean, I think it probably disrupted operations in the short term. And a lot of people said this is an **escalation**, which it's just not. It is clearly an act of American self-defense. There's no question about that.

But, well, Iran will try and get back at us and my answer is, "Well, what are they going to do?" Look, there's not going to be a conventional war. The Iranians can't get to the United States. We're certainly not stupid enough to invade Iran.

Well, what can they do? Well, they do have a lot of capabilities. They have surrogates, you have Hezbollah, the Shia militias in Iraq, you have Islamic Jihad, Hamas in Palestine. You've got the Houthi rebels in Yemen. They can unleash them on the U.S. or their allies. OK? They can try to do terrorist attacks in the United States or Europe.

They can try to close the Straits of Hormuz. They can try to interdict shipping. They can even attack America's friends and allies in the region like Saudi Arabia.

Now, that list I just gave you, over the last year they've tried to do all those things, right? So the answer is they're probably going to try to do more of the same.

I think that the notion of war talk is pretty ... I mean, in some sense we're already at war. I mean, you storm an American Embassy, dude, that's an act of war. But in another sense, we're not going to escalate to a conventional conflict because our capabilities are very what we call asymmetrical. Right? We don't really have the stuff to get at them, they don't really have the stuff to get at us.

So what I expect the Iranians to do is kind of more of the same. And what the United States has demonstrated so far is that kind of activity, if it kills an American, it's going to provoke a response. And what it's certainly not going to do is cause the Americans to back down.

#5 – Davis: Something we haven't mentioned is that Suleimani is not just a general, there's really a political dimension to his power. Right?

Carafano: Absolutely.

#6 – Davis: He's really the right hand man of the Ayatollah.

Carafano: So the other thing, when people say, “Well, how do people in Iran and Iraq respond to this?” And the answer is, you’re going to see both. You will see people in Iran, and we’ve already seen that, mourning his loss, vowing vengeance, and everything. Who are those people? Those are the people that are owing to the regime, right? They are people that support the regime.

On the other hand, there are vast swaths of Iranians who have been protesting and fighting back against their government for months, many of whom have been oppressed, tortured, and killed by his people. They’re kind of like going, “Yeah, baby.” Right? They’re happy he’s dead. Now maybe they’re not going to go out in the street and start cheering because they don’t want to get shot in the back of the head.

#7 – Davis: Is that a minority of people, though, in Iran? Or do you think that most people are probably secretly happy?

Carafano: No, I think that everybody that hates the regime hates the Quds Force and hates Suleimani. My guess is that’s a very significant chunk of the population. And we’ve seen that by the scope and the persistence of the protests in Iran.

In Iraq, it’s kind of the same thing. Remember there are Kurds, Sunnis, and Shia in Iraq, the largest group is the Shia. The smallest is actually the Sunnis. Saddam Hussein was a Sunni. And one of the problems was that you had a small Sunni group essentially dictating the country.

And then you have the Kurds, right? Which are often kind of their own little area. So the Kurds are just saying, “Dude, we’re just staying out of this.” Right? They’re just staying in Kurdistan being Kurds.

And by the way, they hate Suleimani because Suleimani helped kill a lot of the peshmerga and killed them, too. So, they’re not shedding any tears in Kurdistan.

The Sunnis, they’re being oppressed by Iran and their allies. They have used these militias not just to go after Americans, but to kill all the Sunni opposition.

I mean, if you’re a politician and you don’t play ball with the United States, we might cut off your money, maybe not give you a visa and not talk to you. If you’re a politician and you shun the Iranians, they’re going to find somebody to put a bullet in the back of your head. So the Sunnis, they’re cheering that this guy’s dead.

Now, the Shias are kind of split. There are Shias that are beholden to the Iranian regime, obviously, they’re very angry. Many of those people are actually in government because the Shias are the dominant force in government. So when you have government officials saying, “We object to what the Americans are doing,” those are government officials who are essentially working for the Iranians.

And then you have Shia who are very nationalistic and who love their country and are very patriotic and they’re actually glad Suleimani’s dead, right? They don’t want to be a suburb of Tehran.

So, people say, “Well, the people are protesting.” You got to ask the question, “Well, who’s protesting and what are they protesting about?”

If you remember people tried to say that the people that were protesting at the U.S. Embassy were just like the people that were protesting over the last couple of months. Completely different.

The people that had been protesting in Iraq were people protesting against Iran, hundreds of them were killed, thousands of them were wounded, all really at the direction of the Iranian regime. The people that attacked the embassy, those were terrorists and they were attacking a U.S. facility, they weren’t mourners or protesters.

#8 – Davis: You mentioned Iran’s proxies around the world, ways that they have to strike at the U.S. and our allies. The State Department is telling Americans now to get out of Iraq because they now have targets on them. Does that apply around the world, too? Should the U.S. personnel expect to be more of a target from proxies?

Carafano: Part of the problem with it is what’s changed, in terms of Iran looking to go after American assets worldwide. What’s changed from Tuesday? And the answer is nothing, right? So, I mean, I think if there is an Iranian presence or influence, I mean, we already had to be concerned about that before. So, I don’t think anything’s has really—

#9 – Davis: But isn't there a kind of honor element? You've talked about how in their culture, being attacked is kind of a humiliation for them and now they sort of have more of an incentive to lash out?

Carafano: Right, but it's also not a suicide pact, right? So, we've humiliated them before. I mean, they've done a number of different acts and we have basically responded and made them look weak. Their answer is just to try to do something else, which I assume they will do something here.

They will try to respond in some way and look strong, but they're not going to do it in a way that really escalates conflict because I think that's more of a danger to them than it is to us actually.

They've got a very weak political hold at home. The Ayatollah is very old. Their economy is in shatters. And the interesting thing is people always talked about the Iranian-Russian-Chinese Alliance. The Russians and Chinese have done nothing for them.

So Iran is really on its own when it comes to combating the U.S. Matter of fact, the one thing that hasn't got a lot of press, which I think makes me angrier than everything, is that one of the first countries to come out and condemn the U.S. defending itself against Iranian terrorists in Iraq was Russia.

And what's ironic about that was just last week the president of Russia called the president of the United States to thank him because the [U.S.] helped thwart a terrorist attack aimed at Russia. So, if you help stop a terrorist attack aimed at Russia, you're a hero—I mean, that's good—but if you defend yourself against a terrorist attack, apparently, according to the Russian perspective, that's bad.

#10 – Davis: Well, you said that conventional war is really not a possibility here, but could you imagine a situation where Iranian proxies do strike out more and the president orders some kind of strike in Iran? Maybe on oil facilities? Is that within the realm of possibility?

Carafano: I think [it's] least likely that the United States would directly attack facilities inside Iran without some kind of major provocation. I don't know if it's necessarily off the table.

Look, here's what we know about this president—this is what the critics have just maybe been, I don't know, sleeping the last couple of years—he's been through a lot of crises. Iraq, Iran, back to Iraq, back to Iran, back to North Korea, terrorist attacks. He's been very steady and when he has used force, it's always been restrained and proportional, right?

In Syria against a chemical weapons attack and, I mean, if I can remember, when the Iranians shot down a drone, we did nothing, that wasn't an act of weakness. We did other [things] to punish the Iranians for that act, but we didn't go in and start blowing up facilities in Iran, which, when you think about it, how does that even make sense? The guy that ordered the shoot-down of that drone is not some poor schlep who's in the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] who's sitting in a base in Iran. But when they cross the line and kill an American, the president goes after the people that did that.

If you look at the attack on the Saudi territory, that was an attack on Saudi territory, not an attack on Americans. If you noticed, after we put Americans in that area, the Iranians didn't do that again.

So, why have the Iranians gotten so bold and still they're not directly coming after us, because they're not, they're having the Iraqis do it, right? Why are they doing that though? They're running out of options. That's one. Maybe they just don't believe the president when he says, "Don't do this." I don't know.

Davis: Well, we'll keep watching the developments closely. Jim, as always, thank you for your time.

Carafano: Thanks for having me.

Published by dailysignal .com on Jan. 3, 2020. Reprinted here for educational purposes only. May not be reproduced on other websites without permission from The Daily Signal.

Background

