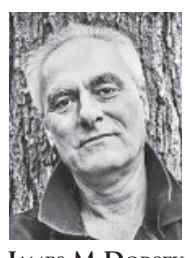


KILLING QASSEM SOLEIMANI

Rule of law or rule of the jungle?



JAMES M DORSEY

INTERNATIONAL law may not be a major consideration in debates about the US killing of Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani, yet the legality of the assassination could prove to have long-term consequences for whether the rule of law or the law of the jungle dominates a new world order.

The Trump administration has asserted that killing Mr Soleimani was necessary to avert an imminent attack on US targets that allegedly was being planned by Mr Soleimani and Abdul Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia, who also died in the attack. The assertion, yet to be backed up by evidence, served to justify the attack and fend off allegations that the targeted killing violated both US and international law.

The implication was that Mr Soleimani's death would thwart an unspecified imminent attack and stop the Iranians in their tracks, an assumption that has little foundation in reality given Iran's track record, most recently its refusal to buckle under following the imposition in 2018 of harsh US economic sanctions, some of the harshest ever imposed.

The notion that the killing of Mr Soleimani amounted to rule of the jungle rather than rule of law was reinforced by assertions by Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi that he had been asked by Mr Trump to mediate with Iran and that the Iranian military leader had been carrying Iran's response to a Saudi initiative to defuse tension when he was assassinated.

Mr Abdul Mahdi's claim that Mr Soleimani was involved in efforts to dial down tensions

came in a debate in parliament in which lawmakers called in a resolution for the removal from Iraq of foreign forces, the bulk of which are American. His assertion that Iran was responding to a Saudi initiative was all the more noteworthy given that the kingdom had reportedly recently put its indirect outreach to Iran on hold as anti-government protesters in Iraq and Lebanon targeted Iranian influence in their countries.

"Americans, once the most prominent proponents of international law as the regulator of relations between nations, have now fully validated the law of the jungle. We are now likely to experience it," said Chas W Freeman Jr, a former career US State Department official, in an email to a private mailing list.

Conservative commentator Robert Kagan warned in a book published last year, bemoaning America's withdrawal as an enforcer of international law, a notion challenged by an array of critics, that chaos was the world's historical norm. "The jungle will grow back, if we let it," Mr Kagan argued.

The sense that Mr Trump, like many of the world's civilisational leaders, has no regard for international law was evident, particularly to Iranians, in his threat to attack Iranian cultural sites if Iran retaliates for the killing of Mr Soleimani. Mr Trump did not specify what he meant by "cultural". Some analysts suggested the president may have been referring to symbols like the mausoleum of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of Iran's Islamic republic.

Legal experts nonetheless warned that attacks on cultural sites amount to a war crime.

With millions in the streets welcoming the return of Mr Soleimani's body, Iranians used the hashtag #IranianCulturalSites to respond to the threat by posting online pictures of mosques, museums, monuments, archaeological sites, and other Iranian

PHOTO: NAZANIN TABATABAEE/WANA VIA REUTERS
Iranian people attend a funeral procession for Major-General Qassem Soleimani, head of the elite Quds Force, in Tehran, Iran on January 6, 2020.

architectural marvels. Similarly, with Iraq perceiving the US strikes as a violation of the country's sovereignty, Iraqis may, alongside Iranians, be one of the few who, perhaps self-servingly, factor adherence to international law in their debates.

In line with the comments of Messrs. Freeman and Kagan, the legal aspects of Mr Soleimani's killing take on a significance that goes far beyond the Middle East in an environment in which civilisational leaders like India's Narendra Modi, China's Xi Jinping, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Myanmar's Win Myint flout international law with impunity.

Violations of international law grounded in propagation of concepts of a civilisational

rather than a nation state that defines its borders not in terms of internationally recognised frontiers, but blurry lines of civilisational reach, have occurred in recent years fast and furious.

For example, Iraqi assertions of a US violation of sovereignty echo Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine. Mr Trump has ignored United Nations Security Council resolutions by unilaterally recognising Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Mr Myint stands accused of ethnic cleansing by the United Nations that has prompted hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. Massive evidence documents Mr Jinping's authorisation of the brutal

repression of Turkic Muslims in the troubled north-western Chinese province of Xinjiang, while Mr Modi appears to be progressively disenfranchising his country's Muslim minority.

For his part, Mr Soleimani is believed to have been responsible for numerous incidents of political violence, including a 2012 attack on tourists in Bulgaria executed by a Lebanese suicide bomber. Five of the six casualties were Israelis.

But the civilisational leaders' abandonment of international law, including guarantees of basic and minority rights, risks creating a global jungle in which wars, political violence, marginalisation of ethnic and religious groups, and destabilising mass migration contribute to rule of the jungle rather than rule of law.

So do Western approaches adopted almost two decades ago in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington.

One may recall that at that time, Robert Cooper, a British diplomat, former advisor to the European Commission on Myanmar, and a proponent of the doctrine of a new liberal imperialism, had said: if the world has a civilised core that deserves lawful conduct, there also is a barbarous periphery that warrants "rougher methods of an earlier era... Postmodern states operate on the basis of laws and open co-operative security" but "in the jungle, one must use the laws of the jungle."

Some two decades after Mr Cooper wrote those words, the jungle rather than the rule of law threatens to become the norm, putting the global community on a dangerous and slippery slope.

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2010s: The Decade of Protests

FAHMIDA ZAMAN

AS 2020 begins with news of escalating tensions between the United States and Iran, it is important that we reflect on the defining features of the 2010s for a better understanding of the times we're going through. Among the most striking political stories of the last decade were, of course, Brexit in the UK and President Donald Trump's win in the US. However, if one is to decide what really defined the decade across continents, it certainly is the rise of civil rights movements and protests by the ordinary people. In 2010s, millions of people took to the street to demand freedom, justice, and democratic rights from Europe to Asia to Africa.

The list of countries hit by major protests since 2010 is remarkably long and covers almost every region of the world. Just in 2019, significant protests erupted or continued in Egypt, Hong Kong, Sudan, Indonesia, France, Iraq, Iran, Spain, Chile, Lebanon, Colombia, Venezuela, United States, India, Algeria, Haiti, Brazil, and Peru, among others. It's not surprising that 2019 is being called "the year of protests". However, do these protests with diverse political, social, and cultural contexts have anything in common? What do they tell us about the current state of politics around the world?

Protests led by tech-savvy youth

Protests in 2010s, from Africa to Europe, have been led primarily by the youth with the help of Internet. Some have tied Facebook and other social media platforms to the creation of a "disconnected" and "self-centred" new generation. Yet, it is these tech-savvy teenagers and young adults that have been at the forefront of large-scale protests around the world. The road-safety protests in Bangladesh, organised by school-going children, challenged the authoritarian nature of the political sphere. In Sudan, students, particularly young women, took a leading role in protests that ousted a 30-year-old regime in 2019. The young's concern for political and economic future along with their skills in using social media have characterised the nature of the protests.

Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube have played a significant role in galvanising protests.

These technological developments have made it easier to spread outrage, facilitate information dissemination, and create informal networks among large numbers of people. Besides, videos of protests shared online have also inspired further participation. As such, these platforms

with a series of pro-democracy protests that spread rapidly across the Middle East and North African regions. Known as the Arab Spring, these protests demanded a fundamental transformation of the political landscape and more political participation of the people. Similarly, the 2014 Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong came about to protest a proposed electoral reform which, the protesters believed, restricted their rights

Protesters demonstrate against then Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunis, Tunisia, on January 14, 2011.
FILE PHOTO: REUTERS/ZOHRA BENSEMPA

have fundamentally changed how protests are organised in the Twenty First Century. However, the reliance on social media is also the reason behind these protests being less organised and less enduring and why disinformation and government-imposed restrictions such as shutting down the Internet proved to be major impediments.

For freedom and democracy

One of the key features of the mass protests is that many of these emerged with the demand for greater freedom and democratic rights. The decade began

to choose their government. The Umbrella Revolution also formed the background of 2019 protests in Hong Kong against an unpopular extradition bill, which would have permitted extradition to mainland China. The protests forced the government to back down and the bill was withdrawn in September 2019. Protesters in other countries, for example, in Algeria, led by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Sudan led by President Omar al-Bashir, also ousted authoritarian governments last year.

However, it is important to note that as the number of pro-democracy protests

increased in the 2010s, democratic norms and values have deteriorated at the same time. This erosion in democracy, or democratic backsliding, has been evident in the declining freedom of press and freedom of expression as well as the rise of extreme nationalist ideology across North America, Europe, and Asia. Despite the democratic backsliding, or perhaps because of it, millions of people hit the street with the demand for more democratic rights, greater political participation, and accountability from their governments in the 2010s.

Longstanding grievances

Although many of the recent protests around the world including the 2018 road safety movement in Bangladesh emerged suddenly, longstanding grievances over economic and political issues have been the driving force behind these protests. In Tunisia, the birthplace of Arab Spring, street protests began after a 26-year-old vendor set himself on fire protesting police corruption amidst high unemployment, poor living conditions, and corruption in the country. The Arab Spring protests in the neighbouring countries had a similar background of economic and political grievances. More recently, the Yellow Vests protest in France in November 2018 was also caused by an increase in fuel taxes, eventually leading to a call for actions to address inequality. Similarly, in Venezuela, tens of thousands of people took to the streets to protest against everyday hardship. Severe food and medicine shortages and an extremely high inflation led some 4.5 million people to flee the country. Of course, most of these protests have been responses to local politics with specific demands and goals. Yet, people's ongoing dissatisfaction and frustration over poor governance, corruption, lack of economic opportunities as well as governments' failure to provide goods and services are some of the grievances shared by demonstrators across countries.

The aftermath

Across continents, many of the political protests in 2010s have been anti-government in nature and called for

reforms in the political and economic arenas. Admittedly, these protests were met with mixed results. For example, while the Arab Spring led to positive changes in Tunisia, similar protests led to civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. In other cases, authoritarian politics remained intact or re-emerged crashing all hopes for democratic changes. The anti-government nature and democratic demands of the protests provoked harsh reactions from the governments. In Hong Kong, hundreds of protesters were injured while thousands were arrested as of December 2019.

Violence against the protesters intensified as their demands grew from revoking the extradition bill to establishing full democracy. In Iran, demonstrations against a 300 percent fuel hike in December 2019 was met with an Internet shutdown and brutal crackdown on the protests. In India, the Modi government's responses to protests against the controversial new citizenship law included attacks on students, mass arrests, shutting down of the Internet. Despite such violent responses by governments, the protesters have time and again challenged the status quo and the undemocratic concentration of power.

From Asia to Africa to Europe, the world has witnessed an overwhelming number of protests over the last ten years. Despite having distinct characteristics, these protests illustrated the greater struggle for various forms of freedom. In particular, demands for more democratic rights, accountability of governments, and a better future for all citizens have been the fundamental reasons for the protests. One can debate the success or failures of these protests to bring about desired changes. Yet, millions of protesters across continents have demonstrated that large numbers of ordinary citizens do not feel represented and are willing to fight for more social, economic, and political freedom. The 2010s should thus be remembered as the "decade of protests" by the ordinary people.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Cavalry weapon
- 2 "Republic" writer
- 11 Dodge
- 12 Pago Pago setting
- 13 Showed nervousness
- 14 So far
- 15 Rings
- 17 Flying mammal
- 19 Objective
- 20 Drill part
- 23 "The Iceman Cometh" author
- 25 Desert sight
- 26 Two ten-spots
- 28 Alley prowlers
- 29 Bundle
- 30 Letters of royalty
- 31 Pickle buy
- 32 Sardonic
- 33 Salad bar veggie
- 35 Move borders, perhaps
- 38 Valentino role
- 41 "My Fair Lady" role
- 42 Pageant topper
- 43 One of Santa's team
- 44 Nervous
- 45 Move borders, perhaps
- 46 Frog's perch
- 47 Foul up
- 48 Egypt's Sadat
- 49 Cereal grain
- 50 Pageant worker
- 51 Comic strip worker
- 52 Peevish
- 53 Powerful people
- 54 French nobleman
- 55 Coffee shop worker
- 56 Tea
- 57 Team
- 58 Sacred song
- 59 Gave out new hands
- 60 Serpent's spot
- 61 Highlands girl
- 62 Writer Tan
- 63 Salad bar veggie
- 64 Move borders, perhaps
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