

Iran's proxies in Iraq, Lebanon signing own death warrants

Khamenei is desperate for rapid and decisive solutions because prolonged instability in Lebanon and Iraq weakens his ability to hold sway



BARIA ALAMUDDIN

With 400 already dead, the killings in Iraq escalated horrifically at the weekend following the torching of Iran's consulate in the holy city of Najaf. About 70 protesters were gunned down in just 48 hours, largely at the hands of unaccountable Tehran-backed paramilitaries. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's representative incited Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi militants to "pursue" and "uproot" those responsible for the consulate fire.

Tehran's crackdown strategies in Lebanon, Iraq and upon its own streets increasingly reek of desperation. Playing for time and making cosmetic political changes have failed. Attempts to terrorize and crush the demonstrations have simply brought out thousands more furious and defiant protesters. When Hezbollah personnel taunted protesters with their yellow flags and sectarian slogans, citizens defiantly chanted back: "This is Lebanon, not Iran," and "Hezbollah is a terrorist." Accusations of being "Zionist stooges" or failing to support the "axis of resistance" used to intimidate Hezbollah's critics into silence. Now such rhetoric is incessantly ridiculed in the protest camps.

At recent international conferences, regime-connected Iranian academics have floated proposals for converting Hezbollah into a

purely political entity. Hezbollah is Tehran's crown jewel in terms of its overseas sedition. The fact this is even being mooted suggests a degree of panic within the regime due to the existential threat that current developments pose.

Having used an iron fist against Iranian protesters, Khamenei believes that proxies in Iraq and Lebanon haven't been sufficiently aggressive. On Nov 21, Khamenei summoned to Tehran Iraqi officials, including paramilitary leaders Falih Al-Fayyadh and Hadi Al-Amiri, and reportedly demanded "extreme levels of violence" to crush protests, even if the death toll extended into the thousands. "Iran will not give up Iraq and will not allow its influence to be reduced," Khamenei was quoted as saying.

The Quds Force's Qassem Soleimani micromanaged the crackdown. Most deaths in Iraq are attributable to his paramilitary allies. According to eyewitness accounts, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq personnel in Shiite-majority towns like Nasiriyah and Amarah opened fire on protesters from the roofs of their own offices, as well as driving around shooting indiscriminately at citizens. There have been intensifying campaigns of abductions by paramilitaries, with instances of torture reported.

In the wake of the Najaf consulate incident, proxy leaders Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis (Kata'ib Hezbollah) and Qais Al-Khazali (Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq) called for deploying their forces in the holy cities, claiming – improbably – that protesters were plotting to attack their outspoken defender



Medical crew carry a wounded man during ongoing anti-government protests in Najaf, Iraq.

Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani. Indeed it was Al-Sistani's call for Iraq's leaders to "reconsider their choices" that is credited with forcing Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's resignation. Tehran has pursued various pretexts for beefing up its presence in Iraq's holy cities, having recently seen its proposal to send 20,000 Iranian security personnel to "protect pilgrims" rebuffed.

Abdul Mahdi's resignation was jubilantly celebrated by demonstrators, but it changes nothing. The prime minister has been threatening to resign for weeks and was only prevented

by the interventions of Soleimani, Al-Amiri and Al-Muhandis. Just as in Lebanon, constituting a new government could take months and will simply promote a combination of the same corrupt, discredited faces. Protesters' goals can only be achieved when the entire Tehran-sponsored sectarian system is razed to the ground.

Khamenei is desperate for rapid and decisive solutions because prolonged instability in Lebanon and Iraq weakens his ability to hold sway, while risking further contagion of unrest to Iranian cities. As well as harming

Two nations separated by a common

GAVIN ESLER

The playwright George Bernard Shaw once noted that Britain and the US are "two nations separated by a common language". It is certainly true that despite the affection most Britons feel for the US – an affection that, after nearly a decade living in Washington, I certainly shared – there are some things about America we just do not understand. Take US President Donald Trump, for example. Mr Trump provides Britain with something our citizens do enjoy – a bit of entertainment, plus the pleasure of feeling superior to our American cousins. This patronising tendency has long roots. In the 1950s, then British prime minister Harold MacMillan, a man with an American mother, repeatedly suggested that "these Americans represent the new Roman empire and we Britons, like the Greeks of old, must teach them how to make it go". The idea that British brains guide American decisions might be comforting to sections of the British public but it is largely nonsense.

During the presidency of Ronald Reagan, Britain's then prime minister Margaret Thatcher did become a trusted friend and adviser. But British newspapers, including those considered pro-American,

bought into another patronising idea that Reagan was "just an actor", a "cowboy", playing out the role of president of the US. The truth was much more complicated.

When I prepared Reagan's obituary for the BBC and reported on his funeral, I was astonished at how far – even among bitter opponents – he was seen as essentially a decent man whose words touched the hearts of the American people. For Mrs Thatcher, he was a kindred spirit offering a clear, if simple, political vision. Big government was bad. Communism was wicked. And that led to clear but simple policies. Taxes should be low, government spending limited and defence spending high.

It is worth recalling this complex historical background as Britain welcomes – if that is the correct word – Reagan's successor to the White House, Mr Trump. He is in London for the Nato summit and a state banquet with Queen Elizabeth II. But in Britain, Mr Trump appears to be the most unpopular US president ever.

Facing impeachment at home, he arrives in Britain in the middle of an extremely bitter general election campaign, having already controversially interfered in domestic British politics. He called the Conservative prime minister Boris Johnson a good man and



US President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson at the UN headquarters in New York.

Britain's Trump, as if he sees Mr Johnson as a kind of mini-me. He also urged Mr Johnson to work with the Brexit party of Nigel Farage to ensure Britain leaves the European Union. Mr John-

son's party has been ahead in the opinion polls for weeks, suggesting he could win a comfortable parliamentary majority. So what could go wrong? Advisers fear their American guest enthusias-

tically endorsing Mr Johnson and suggesting a future US-UK trade deal could involve Britain opening up its National Health Service to US companies, or holding its supermarkets to American food

US President Donald Trump's visit to the UK is a reminder of the two nations' complex historical ties