



**Death by mistake**  
“Collateral damage” is a term invented to deal with loss of innocent life in areas of active military contestation. Seen here are photos of students who were aboard the Ukrainian jet shot down by Iran on January 8  
REUTERS/CHRIS HELGREN

**STATES OF MATTER**

# I spy the enemy

Tensions may have abated after the brief military escalation between Iran and the US, but the tit-for-tat will continue through proxies



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From the moment a Ukrainian civilian aircraft crashed on takeoff from Tehran, Iran was under pressure to prove the absence of any linkage with a volley of missiles it had fired against US military bases in Iraq. After a few days of unconvincing denial, Iran came clean, admitting the fatal error with “great regret”, attributing it to the enveloping fog of war following “adventurist” US actions in the region.

Few were willing to bet that the tragedy marked any manner of closure to the cycle of military action that began with a US drone attack in the vicinity of Baghdad airport, killing top Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani and the head of a proxy militia in Iraq’s fractious politics, Abu Mahdi al-Muhantisi.

For US President Donald Trump, eliminating the man widely credited with creating Iran’s arc of influence in the Arab world was a moment of triumph. He may even have briefly succeeded in diverting attention from his impeachment and imminent trial. But there was little likelihood that the stated purpose — of placating the violence stemming from the 2003 invasion of Iraq — would be served.

As Trump went into his familiar litany of falsehoods, opposition Democrats reacted with extreme scepticism. The targeted assassination was a “provocative and disproportionate” act, said Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the US Congress, as she vowed legislative curbs on the president’s war powers. And rather than the customary and reflexive blaming of adversaries, a candidate for the 2020 Democratic presidential ticket deplored the Ukrainian air tragedy as the consequence of “an unnecessary and unwanted military tit for tat”.

“Collateral damage” was the term of art invented to deal with loss of innocent life in areas of active military contestation. The term has to be somewhat elastic at a time when wars are waged in dense population centres and involve efforts at diminishing popular

will by targeting vital infrastructure and administrative nodes. But since history is written by the victors, it is a term that is invoked more easily to gloss over the war crimes of the powerful, while similar lapses by the weaker side are tarred with more than a fair share of disparagement.

When a US warship brought down an Iranian airliner in 1988, killing 290 civilians, it was quickly banished from public attention as regrettable but incidental to the perfectly legitimate purpose of keeping the Straits of Hormuz open for vital energy flows. That form of absolution will not be granted for Iran’s military misadventure. Protests breaking out within Iran, moreover, threaten a new phase of instability, especially in the context of wider unrest in the Arab world.

Iran has managed a holding operation on behalf of its allies through unending civil wars in Syria and Yemen, partly through a newly forged alignment with Russia and Turkey. Iraq and Lebanon, two other vital parts of the Iranian arc of influence, have been in ferment since October, posing a new dimension of strategic threat.

Iran has used armed proxies in both countries to restore order, in a strategy that Soleimani conceived and directed. Loss of life has been significant in the Iraqi demonstrations, provoking in one instance the vandalism of the Iranian consulate in the Shia pilgrimage centre of Najaf.

Outbreaks of popular unrest in Iran following the downing of the Ukrainian plane have drawn expressions of support from Trump. These must sound rather hollow after his avowal, soon after Soleimani’s assassination, that retaliation would be met by armed attacks on Iran’s cultural sites. Though he

backed away after learning that open advocacy of a war crime did his cause little good, Trump’s malign attitude towards Iran is seen as irremediable.

The attempted rapprochement with Iran under Trump’s predecessor Barack Obama was tacit admission that the US needed all regional powers onside in composing the tangles created by the invasion of Iraq. Trump has dispensed with that strategic objective, seemingly signalling an intent to go it alone while also vowing to get US forces out of the region.

In anticipation of retaliation after the Soleimani assassination, US forces had withdrawn from both combat and training operations when Iran’s missile attack occurred. That ensured zero casualties and minimal damage, coupled with Iran’s anxiety to avoid an escalation beyond its powers to control. Five days later, a rocket attack on an Iraqi military base from within underlined that Iran would continue pressuring US troops through its surrogates.

Trump has called for greater contributions from the major European powers in restoring peace. But Germany and France may see the frequent mood shifts in the US as a deterrent to the

commitment of men and material. Both countries, though, have in recent weeks shown greater inclination to join forces with Russia and Turkey. The new order that emerges under the ministrations of these countries could conceivably be very different. Iran waits in the wings and will surely show its hand as the US continues its retreat. That would seem an irresolvable strategic dilemma for an overstretched imperial power.

**Nancy Pelosi vowed legislative curbs on the president’s war powers**