

There are claims that Iran is plotting to assassinate the US Ambassador to South Africa Lana Marks as revenge for the killing of Major General Quassem Soleimani. Iran has denied this allegation and insists it is part a wider anti-Iran campaign launched by the US. It is plausible that Iran is considering an assassination attempt to retaliate for the killing of Soleimani in South Africa because of Iran's history of assassinating foreign officials and their network of spies in South Africa. It is unclear at this time who or what will be targeted; when the attack will be carried out; how the attack will be carried out; and where the attack will be carried out. Major General Soleimani was killed on January 3, 2020 by a US drone strike at Baghdad International Airport to prevent future attacks. The death of General Soleimani follows months of escalating tensions between the US and Iran. Most recently, the US announced that all UN sanctions against Iran will be reinstated, but the United Nations Security Council had denied this claim.

Sources have reported that an anonymous United States (US) intelligence sources claims that Iran is planning to assassinate the US Ambassador to South Africa Lana Mark as a retaliatory action against the US for the killing of General Quassem Soleimani. The Iranian Foreign Ministry has guaranteed revenge for Soleimani's death but denies plans to kill Ambassador Marks since the release of the Politico article. It is likely Iran is planning a targeted assassination in South Africa. Currently, it is unable to say for certain if the target is Ambassador Lana Marks, when the attack would occur, how the attack would be carried out, or where the attack would take place.

Multiple media sources have reported that Iran is threatening retaliatory actions against the US for the killing of General Quassem Soleimani. These claims are supported by public statements by Iran and US intelligence leaksⁱ. A Politico article released on September 13, 2020 reported that Iran was planning to assassinate US Ambassador to South Africa, Lana Marks. The report draws its information from an anonymous source who said that the US government was aware of general threats against Ambassador Marks since January, but in recent months the threats have become more specificⁱⁱ. The threats were credible enough that Ambassador Marks was told of the plan under the intelligence community's directive of "Duty to Warn"ⁱⁱⁱ. It is unclear why Ambassador Marks is a potential target because she has no links to Iran. Marks was sworn in as ambassador in October 2019; previously, she was a businesswomen and personal friend of President Trump as well as a member of the Mar-a-Lago club^{iv}. Therefore, it can be inferred that she is a potential target because of her proximity to President Trump.

The Iranian Foreign Ministry has denied any plan to kill Ambassador Marks since the release of the Politico article but continues to promise retaliatory action against the US for the killing of Soleimani. Furthermore, Iran called the article a "baseless claim" that is a "part of the Trump administration's intelligence campaign against Iran."^v More so, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Chief told the media that Ambassador Marks would not be a proportionate target^{vi}. The South African State Security Agency investigated and found no proof to maintain the allegations made by Politico's article. Still, the agency has increased security at the US Embassy in Pretoria^{vii}. The US responded to the threat allegations by affirming their stance to retaliate against Iran for an attack of any type against the US^{viii}.

It is plausible that Iran is considering an assassination attempt in South Africa. First, Iran has a history of using assassination to advance their agenda. The State Department has attributed about 360 assassination to Iran since 1979; this includes political dissidents and foreign government officials^{ix}. Second, it would be easy for Iran to attack a US target in South Africa because they have the personnel stationed in the country. Intelligence documents leaked in 2015 show that Iran operates a spy network in South Africa^x. Furthermore, the two countries maintain

a cooperative relationship^{xi}. It can be assumed that Iran will retaliate against the US for the killing of General Soleimani. It is unclear at this time who or what will be targeted; when the attack will be carried out; how the attack will be carried out; and where the attack will be carried out.

Major General Soleimani was killed on January 3, 2020 by a US drone strike at Baghdad International Airport. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stated Soleimani was killed to prevent future attacks on US citizens and to send a strong message of deterrence after a series of escalations in the conflict between the US and Iran^{xiii}. Soleimani was the chief of the special forces (Quds Force) of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC). Furthermore, he is credited with creating the “Axis of Resistance” policy^{xiii}. The goal of this policy is to expand Iran’s influence around the Gulf of Oman – mainly into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. The policy is widely considered to be a success. The United Nations’ Security Council (UNSC) sanctioned Soleimani for supporting terrorism and selling weapons overseas. The US considers him to be a terrorist supporter after plots to attack a popular Washington, DC restaurant to assassinate a Saudi leader were tied back to Soleimani^{xiv}. Furthermore, he crafted Iran’s insurgency strategy of co-opting government powers to create a relationship between militias and governments. Most recently, he gained the attention of the international community in 2018 after he responded to President Trump’s tweets threatening the leader of Iran with threats against the US^{xv}.

The death of General Soleimani follows months of acts that escalated tensions between the US and Iran. Escalations began in May of 2019 when the US deployed the USS Abraham Lincoln to the Persian Gulf to provide support in the event of any attack after “escalatory indications^{xvi}”. During the Summer of 2019, the US accused Iran of attacking two oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz; the IRGC shot down a US surveillance drone; and, Iran increased the enrichment level on their uranium stockpile. In September of 2019, Houthi rebels backed by Iran attacked a Saudi oil field and briefly cuts off an estimated half of the world’s oil stockpile. In the final weeks of 2019, tensions escalated rapidly. A US contractor was killed on December 27th after an Iranian backed militia (Kataeb Hezbollah) attacked a US base in Iraq; the US responded by launching an airstrike at Kataeb Hezbollah territory in Iraq. Then, on January 5, 2020 Iran withdrew from the Iranian-Nuclear Deal. Escalations of tensions devolved into global fear of war after Iran launched ballistic missiles at two US Military Bases in Iraq in response to the killing of General Soleimani in January 2020. No US servicemembers were killed but many experienced severe head trauma. Iran claimed responsibility for the attack and warned the US to expect more retaliatory action^{xvii}. On September 19, 2020 the US alone announced that all UN sanctions against Iran will be reinstated^{xviii}. This is the latest development in US-Iran relation. Since this announcement, 13 of the 15 UNSC member countries have called the US’s actions “void” and refused to restore sanctions to preserve the Iran Nuclear Deal. Regardless, the US intends to maintain an arms embargo against Iran^{xix}. In a live, televised speech, Iran’s president congratulated the UNSC for refusing the US’s attempts to reimpose all sanctions as well taunted the US for its allies’ refusal to back the country at the UNSC^{xx}.

Iran has the means and motive to carry out an assassination against an US diplomat - specifically, it is plausible that Iran could target Ambassador Marks, but it remains unclear if the country has decided to carry out this plan. Therefore, the US should to continue to investigate the credibility of these allegations, determine other potential targets Iran might attempt to assassinate, and increase diplomatic security to maintain the safety of US personnel abroad.

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ⁱ (“*Iranian Commander Vows to Avenge US Assassination of Top General*,” 2020)

ⁱⁱ (Toosi and Bertrand, 2020)

ⁱⁱⁱ (Toosi and Bertrand, 2020)

^{iv} (Toosi and Bertrand, 2020)

^v (Vecchiatto,) 2020

^{vi} (“*Iranian Commander Vows to Avenge*,” 2020)

^{vii} (Jordaan, 2020)

^{viii} (“*South Africa Says Insufficient Evidence of Iranian Plot to Assassinate US Ambassador*,” 2020)

^{ix} (Office of the Spokesperson, 2020)

^x (Toosi and Bertrand, 2020)

^{xi} (Toosi and Bertrand, 2020)

^{xii} (Connolly, 2020)

^{xiii} (Soufan 2018)

^{xiv} (Soufan 2018)

^{xv} (Soufan 2018)

^{xvi} (“*Key events leading up to US-Iran confrontations*”, 2020)

^{xvii} (“*Key events leading up to US-Iran confrontations*”, 2020)

^{xviii} (“*US against the world over Iran ‘snapback’ sanctions*”, 2020)

^{xix} (“*US against the world over Iran ‘snapback’ sanctions*”, 2020)

^{xx} (“*Iran chides US as world refused to reimpose sanctions*”, 2020)