

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
The Truth of the Matter

“The Killing of Soleimani and U.S. Response”

RECORDING DATE
Friday, January 10, 2020

SPEAKERS
Seth Jones
Harold Brown Chair, director of the Transnational Threats Project, CSIS

HOST
Bob Schieffer
Trustee, CSIS

Andrew Schwartz
Chief Communications Officer, CSIS

Transcript by Rev.com

Bob Schieffer: I'm Bob Schieffer.

Andrew Schwartz: And I'm Andrew Schwartz of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and this is The Truth of the Matter.

Bob Schieffer: This is the podcast where we break down the policy issues of the day. Since the politicians are having their say, we will excuse them with respect, and bring in the experts, many of them from the CSIS, people who have been working these issues for years.

Andrew Schwartz: No spin, no bombast, no finger pointing. Just informed discussion.

Bob Schieffer: To get to the truth of the matter on the U.S. killing of Qasem Soleimani, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, we'll talk with CSIS's Seth Jones. Dr. Jones holds the Harold Brown Chair, is Director of the Transnational Threats Project, and is a Senior Advisor to the International Security Program at CSIS. Prior to joining CSIS, he was the Director of International Security and Defense Policy Center. He also served as a representative to the Commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, to Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations.

Bob Schieffer: Dr. Jones, let's talk about the latest news, and that is this Ukrainian aircraft, a passenger airliner, was shot down, according to intelligence sources now, by the Iranians. By some accounts, it was an accidental shootdown, that one of the missiles they were firing hit it, but we do know, and there seems to be broad agreement across intelligence and news agencies including CBS News, that this aircraft was shot out of the sky.

Seth Jones: That's what it looks like right now. There was a Ukrainian airliner, which was a Boeing 737, that was shot down by an Iranian defense system, an SA-15, but it was likely done by mistake, meaning that the Iranians did not intentionally shoot down a civilian airliner, which raises questions about what did they think it was.

Bob Schieffer: What do you make of that? What parts of that do you question, or do you think we need more information on?

Seth Jones: Well, I think probably the biggest issue, when we take a step back, is that the tensions are significant. That there, in my view, is not a major de-escalation in the situation between the U.S. and Iran, that everybody's got their fingers on a trigger right now. In this case, it was the Iranians with a surface-to-air missile, an SA-15. And that someone may have quickly done an assessment that there was an aircraft coming through Iranian airspace, when many airlines had stopped flying over Iranian airspace, misassessed what that airliner was, thinking it might be a fighter, and then engaged it and shot it down. So I think that we need to better understand what happened on the Iranian side.

Bob Schieffer: Let's just kind of work this from today back and go through these events that have occurred in this extraordinary several days we've all just gone through. Let's start with the President's address to the nation, where he delivered a message and now there seems to be considerable questioning about what exactly was that message. Why do you think the President made this address and what was his message?

Seth Jones: Well, I think one of the more interesting parts of the President's message was the first statement before he even started reading his transcript, which is that Iran will never get a nuclear weapon under his watch, while he's president. And then he proceeded to explain why the U.S. killed Qasem Soleimani, and that the U.S. was now interested in peace and potentially talking to the Iranians, and even opened up avenues of cooperation on counter-terrorism with the Iranian government. But I think the issue here was to try to step back from the brink. The problem is that is not the way the Iranians are seeing this right now.

Bob Schieffer: I want to just inject one thing here. He made all of those so-called offers in the same speech that he said he was going to put sanctions on Iraq, a country we have spent trillions of dollars in building up. Now he says, if they ask the United States Forces to leave, he'll impose sanctions immediately.

Seth Jones: Right. Well, sanctions are the tool of this administration, and it was a clear threat to the Iraqi government that, much like the North Koreans, much like the Iranians, that they will be a target of the U.S. if they don't do what he wants them to do.

Bob Schieffer: Andrew?

Andrew Schwartz: Thank you, Bob. Seth, the Iranians have said that they will continue to take harsher revenge. What do you think that means? They also, at the same time, are saying that the missile strikes were not intended to kill anyone. So they're sending mixed messages. What do you think that all adds up to?

Seth Jones: Well, I think it's interesting to look at the Iranian attack against two Saudi oil processing facilities in September of 2019. They targeted Abqaiq and Khurais with land attack cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles. Our satellite imagery assessment at CSIS, of those attacks, were that they were extremely precise, even the same locations on the different spheroids. So what that suggests is the Iranians do have some precision capability to target locations. There is, and I've talked to U.S. officials about this, there are indications that the Iranians gave advanced warning through Iraq, to the United States, about its missile launches. If that ends up being true, another indication that they did not intend to kill American civilians.

Seth Jones: The general approach here would be, and Iran's general M.O. for operating, is not to operate directly against foreign states. I think they needed to show their population that they were taking action and taking action directly, and

they did a limited step. But their primary way of conducting military strikes is through their proxy organizations.

Andrew Schwartz: So asymmetric warfare.

Seth Jones: Asymmetric warfare, through Lebanese Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and other organizations like that, that work with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, Quds Force, the organization that was once run by Qasem Soleimani. That is almost certainly the way that they're now going to respond.

Andrew Schwartz: And their reach isn't even just in the Middle East. Their reach is in Latin America and other places in the world too. Is that right?

Seth Jones: Iranian-linked proxies, as well as the IRGC Quds Force, has conducted terrorist attacks in Latin America, in Argentina, in Africa, in Asia, and even conducted plots and assassination attempts in North America and Europe. So they have an extensive reach to hit back. And I suspect that's what they're going to do next.

Bob Schieffer: Let me just go back to one thing you talked about when you were talking about the accuracy of their missiles in that attack on Saudi Arabia where no one was injured, no one was killed, as far as I know. There's broad thought across the intelligence, in the news community as it were, that the Iranians may have fired those missiles into the ground just to make a show of force. You talk to people over at the Pentagon and they seem to infer that they're really not that good, that they really couldn't do that. They didn't have that capability. You seem to be suggesting that they do.

Seth Jones: Well, I'm suggesting what we've seen both in Saudi Arabia with the strikes as well as Iranian operations in Syria, is over the past two or three years they have definitely improved their ability to use missile systems, as well as unmanned aerial vehicles to conduct kinetic strikes. And I think my conversations with senior Saudi, Israeli and other officials indicates that they were extremely concerned about the implications of the September 2019 strikes in Saudi Arabia. And also, the Iranians have worked very closely with the Houthis in Yemen to conduct some fairly precise strikes against Saudi Aramco facilities in the southern parts of the country. So I think, what this suggests to me, is that if the Iranians had really wanted to kill Americans in Iraq, they would almost certainly have been able to do that. And these were short-range missiles too.

Bob Schieffer: When we were talking the other day, you said, when I said this kind of reminds me of leading up to World War I, where nobody seemed to really want a war, but the wheels had started turning and people just couldn't turn them off, and suddenly we were involved in World War I. You said, no, that's not entirely correct because the Iranians don't want an all-out war, because they know that it would be just a total annihilation of their culture.

Seth Jones: I don't believe the Iranians want anything close to a conventional war. Their regular or conventional military is weak. Their ground forces use U.S.-provided tanks from the 1960s and 70s. Some of their aircraft are also from the same era, the Shah era. Where they have put money and resources since the Iran-Iraq War is into the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Quds Force to conduct asymmetric attacks, and into the missile program. These are, in Iran's views, these are their comparative advantages. So a conventional war works to their much weaker side.

Bob Schieffer: So we should be on the alert, and we should be monitoring closely their activities in these other areas?

Seth Jones: I think our intelligence, in terms of the next steps, has got to be deeply focused on IRGC Quds Force activities around the globe and their partner organizations, Lebanese Hezbollah, Kata'ib Hezbollah. These are organizations that have conducted attacks and killed Americans at Marine barracks in Lebanon, the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, and as the Israelis know, have been hitting places like Argentina.

Bob Schieffer: And what about the homeland? Should we be more alert to possible attacks?

Seth Jones: Well, about a decade ago, there was a, while I was in the U.S. government, there was a reasonable assessment of a plot to kill the Saudi ambassador in Washington D.C. that linked back to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. That appeared to be reliable information, although the timing wasn't entirely clear. So that does suggest that there has been an interest in conducting homeland attacks. But I think that'd be very difficult to do and to pull off. It'd be much easier for the Iranians to do this somewhere other than the U.S., particularly with everybody on such high alert right now.

Andrew Schwartz: Seth, Sanam Vakil, the Iran scholar at Chatham House, wrote yesterday on Twitter. She said that she expects that more kinetic action and reaction between the United States and Iran is inevitable. That seemed pretty right on, to me. What do you think about that statement, and how can the United States get ready for such kinetic action and reaction?

Seth Jones: Well, I think if you look at even the last year after the U.S. enacted crippling sanctions against the Iranians, there has been a lot of military activity. The Iranians have conducted sabotage operations against commercial ships off the coast of the United Arab Emirates. They've perpetrated attacks using limpet mines against Japanese and Norwegian tankers. They've shot down U.S. Global Hawk. The U.S. responded. The Israelis have conducted hundreds of strikes against Iranian-linked positions in Syria.

Andrew Schwartz: Every time they fly into Syria and land there, the next thing that happens is the Israelis take whatever their position is, out.

Seth Jones: Yeah. And the Israelis have hit lots of Iranian targets in Syria. They've hit UAV locations, command and control centers, radar early warning sites.

They've hit missile and missile parts. So we see a lot of kinetic activity in this area. All of this suggests is that this will continue. What is different after the Qasem Soleimani attack though, is now we have direct U.S.-Iranian kinetic activity. This was really the first time where the U.S. and Iran, one side has killed a government official from the other.

Andrew Schwartz: And it was us first.

Seth Jones: In this case it was us first. Yeah. I mean, there was the U.S. contractor that was killed. Some debate about whether it was Iranian government or a partner force. And assuming it was a partner force, this would be the first direct action by one side, and this was the U.S. escalating then.

Andrew Schwartz: Escalating, because this is a senior official of huge magnitude, compared to any contractor.

Seth Jones: This was the most important Iranian military official, a close friend of the Iranian Supreme Leader, and the architect of Iran's expansion, by proxy, across the Middle East.

Andrew Schwartz: This is as if they would assassinate a senior U.S. official, like a joint chief of staff or a cabinet official.

Seth Jones: Yeah, I mean, the U.S. doesn't quite have the equivalent because it is, at its core, a large conventional power. But yes, probably, I mean, he was the most important military figure. So that may be a good comparison

Bob Schieffer: To me, one of the most interesting parts of all of this has been the rather muted response from our allies. And in Europe, Boris Johnson, in the beginning, refused to authorize or agree with the President on the killing of Soleimani. I notice that the Saudis, who've been fairly quiet, [inaudible 00:14:38] restraint, actually. And now we come along with Erdogan, who says no one has the right to put our region into a ring of fire.

Seth Jones: Well, and there are also others. One of the first steps from the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, was to actually travel to the region, I think is an indication, at least from his perspective, that their role in the Middle East continues to grow. The Israelis certainly were supportive publicly of the strike. Netanyahu went out. But I think the challenge, particularly between the United States and Europe, is that there is not an agreed upon framework and strategy for how to move forward. The Europeans have been pushing, even recently, for a return to political dialogue and to salvage some aspects of the nuclear deal, but the U.S. and the Europeans are far apart right now. And I think that silence is indicative that there is no long-term agreement on where this is going.

Bob Schieffer: Well, we saw the President, in one part of that speech afterward, that kind of surprised me, when he called on NATO to improve and enlarge its role in the region. Would you think that NATO has any idea of doing that?

Seth Jones: Well, here's the problem. I mean, at the core of the issue right now is a need for some kind of political dialogue to deescalate. NATO is a military organization. The dialogue involved diplomats from the U.S., from Russia, from Germany, France, and the UK, and support from the Chinese. And so at the end of the day, if you were to get an off-ramp here, it has to be political dialogue. NATO doesn't give you that. NATO is a military alliance. And that's my concern with trying to elevate NATO to this, is what's needed is political dialogue, not more military.

Bob Schieffer: Who do you think benefited most from this whole situation? And I bring that up because Mike Morell, a CBS news consultant who was the Deputy Director of the CIA, said number one, the beneficiary was Iran. He said number two, ISIS, then he said number three, Putin.

Seth Jones: Well, I think, without a doubt, in my view, the first beneficiary agreeing with Mike is the Iranian regime. By our estimates, between 2018 and late 2019, there were over 4,200 protests in Iran against the government. When you add onto that the anti-Iranian protests in Lebanon as well as Iraq, and then in late November there were huge protests against the Iranian regime in Iran, sort of putting an exclamation point at where Iran sat just a few weeks ago. Now we see over a million people in the streets supporting the regime. This has been, in one sense, is this is a saving grace for an Iranian regime, whose economy is at negative 10% real GDP. Inflation rates are up at 40%. But now there's a rally around the flag effect in the country. So without a doubt, I think the first beneficiary is Tehran.

Bob Schieffer: And what about Putin?

Seth Jones: Well, I think, Putin has been increasing the role of Russia in the region. In 2014, the Russians seized Crimea to get additional access to the Black Sea. They have expanded their role in Syria. The Russians now have power projection out of the naval base of Tartus, and the airbase in Latakia. And they are a predominant military, diplomatic and intelligence power in the region. So I think Putin's trip to the Middle East, after the U.S. assassination of Qassem Soleimani, I think is an effort to increase Russian power and influence in the region. So I think, in that sense, they have probably benefited.

Andrew Schwartz: Seth, President Trump asking for help from NATO might've been the first time in his presidency that he actually called on allies to collaborate on an issue of foreign policy and national security. Here at home, though, Democrats and some Republicans are calling for Congress to intervene and discuss war powers. Some Republicans are saying this could hurt our ability to actually deal with the enemy. What do you make of all the turmoil here at home over this?

Seth Jones: Well, I mean, clearly this issue is caught up in a broader polarized political arena in the United States. I mean, look, this war power discussion comes up every time any president uses force. So I think, in that sense, it's not

surprising. I don't think we're going to resolve a debate between Capitol Hill and the executive branch over the use of force, particularly in a strike like this. I think what is more problematic, though, is that a successful long-term plan to contain Iran, which should be an important objective of the United States, and it's not just a military one. It's diplomatic, it's economic, and it's also an informational one. The way we dealt with the Soviets during the Cold War as an information campaign, radio stations and television broadcasts and covert operations. Is it's going to be really hard to put together a long-term strategy to contain Iran without some bipartisan support.

Bob Schieffer: Well, you did a study, a recent study, on leadership and kind of presented some options. Give us a little summary of that. Where do you think we ought to hit now?

Andrew Schwartz: Yeah. Your new report that we released this week is called Containing Iran, and it's about understanding Iran's power and exploiting its vulnerabilities. You have some really concrete recommendations in there. Tell us more.

Seth Jones: Well, one of the recommendations goes back to the way, even some Republican administrations that dealt with adversaries, the way Reagan dealt with the Soviets during the Cold War, where across the board in areas of information, so the U.S. Information Agency, covert action, the role of Special Operations Forces, and then just broader public diplomacy. Reagan increased resources. He conceptualized the struggle with the Soviet Union as one between democracy, freedom of speech, free market capitalism and authoritarianism, closed systems, and no access to any kind of freedom of speech. You could make a very similar argument that we are dealing with a regime in Tehran that is diametrically opposed to who we are and how we were created in the United States, and that most Iranians, and we've seen this in demonstrations, have wanted greater access to the internet. It's closed. We call it a Halal internet. They want less of a role of the clerics of the Shia leadership, of a theocracy, and they broadly want more political freedoms. This strongly suggests that we've got a lot of opportunities to undermine the regime and its stranglehold on the economy and on freedom of speech.

Bob Schieffer: Create our own narrative.

Seth Jones: Yeah. With media programs, they want access to American movies, music. And at the same time, and this is the great irony here, our State Department budget is comparatively tiny compared to our U.S. Department of Defense budget. And it's been slashed. So I think, in that sense, we've got our priorities wrong.

Andrew Schwartz: So Reagan understood the power of great storytelling. He knew that part of dealing with the Soviet Union and the Cold War, that we needed the power of our ideas to succeed. You're saying we need that here in dealing with Iran.

Seth Jones: I think that is one area. I mean, there clearly is a role for military force. There's a role for sanctions. There's a role for diplomacy. But this is one area where I think we have succeeded in the past against authoritarian regimes. We have a comparative advantage here, because people generally want this. And we have completely decimated most of the funding for these kinds of activities and even the organizational structures to do it.

Bob Schieffer: Exactly. I mean, give us a comparison. What was our plan and our strategy, let's say during the height of the Cold War. I know we had the U.S. Information Agency. We had various ways to get the message.

Seth Jones: We had a doubling of the budget for Radio Free Europe during the early 1980s and Radio Liberty. Massive increases in Voice of America and the U.S. Information Agency. And we significantly increased the covert action funding for political programs, that is like support to Solidarity in Poland, which was not military aid, but which was the support of an opposition movement. So we funded political opposition movements and funded information campaigns, doubling the budget in about six years. We've gone the other direction now.

Andrew Schwartz: Seth, last question. As you indicated, President Trump started his remarks yesterday with the statement that Iran, under his watch, would not be allowed to get a nuclear weapon. Where does this whole scenario leave us with Iran on the nuclear front?

Seth Jones: Well, I think there are probably at least two different pathways. First is, Iran has ended its commitments that it may delimit uranium enrichment, production, research and expansion. And if it continues in this direction, it may move towards building nuclear weapons capabilities, much like North Korea did. And if that's the case, then the way to stop it is through military strikes, U.S. or Israeli.

Andrew Schwartz: Some form of strike, whether it's cyber, or it's some kind of kinetic missile strike.

Seth Jones: Right. Operation Olympic Games was the cyber operation, or Stuxnet, to try to set back the Iranian nuclear program. There could also be, and it'd be difficult, you could strike targets, components of the nuclear facility, some of which are actually buried deep underground. The second pathway is that there is an effort, either under the Trump administration or by whoever wins, on the Democratic side, the elections in November of 2020, to sit down at the negotiating table and redo some kind of JCPOA. It's either a political dialogue, or it's a military strike. And that's really your only way to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons.

Andrew Schwartz: And the Iranians have said that they're willing to renegotiate if the United States is willing to go back into some form of negotiation on the deal.

Seth Jones: That's true. The challenge that the U.S. faces at the moment is, at least publicly, it has stated that in addition to limiting Iran's nuclear weapons capability, it also wants to limit its support to proxy organizations and terrorist groups, hand back all of its hostages, eliminate or significantly weaken its missile program. There are a whole range of things, which it's hard to believe Iran, particularly after the Qasem Soleimani strike, is going to do.

Bob Schieffer: Seth Jones, thank you so much for helping us get to the truth of the matter on this ever-changing story. We'll stay tuned. I'm Bob Schieffer.

Seth Jones: And I'm Andrew Schwartz.

Speaker 4: If you enjoy this podcast, check out our larger suite of CSIS podcasts, from Into Africa, The Asia Chessboard, ChinaPower, AIDS 2020, The Trade Guys, Smart Women, Smart Power, and more. You can listen to them all on major streaming platforms like iTunes and Spotify. Visit [csis.org/podcasts](https://www.csis.org/podcasts) to see our full catalog.