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**Reconstructing the Event:  
The Repercussions of Soleimani's Assassination in the GCC  
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## Reconstructing the Event: The Repercussions of Soleimani's Assassination in the GCC

Erick Viramontes

### *Introduction*

It has been repeatedly stressed how a full-scale war between Iran and the United States, given the military capabilities of both countries and the intricate system of alliances each of them is part of, would have dire consequences for the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>1</sup> An open war in the Gulf could easily drag those states in, which would put their territories and populations at risk, and would disrupt their land, sea and air communications with the rest of the world. For this reason, the governments of the Arab States of the Gulf have attempted, quite expectedly, to ease the tensions that have arisen between Tehran and Washington after the latter's assassination of general Qassem Soleimani. Trough calls for self-restraint and formal offers, in the case of Qatar, to act as mediators in order to avoid further escalation, those states have sought to protect themselves from any threat to their security.

However, beyond a reactive set of policies to an external challenge, several actors throughout the eastern Arabian Peninsula have assertively sought to assemble the meaning of the killing of Iranian general Qassem

Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes. In this sense, narratives of what happened in the early morning of January 3 in Iraq constitute a field of contestation in which politically motivated actors clash over the political definition and meaning of the event. This struggle between narratives has taken place in digital platforms of social media, especially twitter, and has implied creating, designing and disseminating several political devices, such as government communiqués, pieces of news, official statements, and declarations from relevant characters, with the aim of advancing particular agendas by describing "what happened".

The discussion above relies on the assumption that the event is not divorced from what is said about it, but what is said about it actually constitutes the event. Such an assertion blurs the distinction between an observing subject and an observed object that can be equally described by anyone from a neutral position. For philosopher Jacques Derrida, who points out how an event implies surprise, exposure, and the non-anticipatable, describing the event through "statements of knowledge or information" or, in other words, saying the event "is always somewhat problematical because the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance: Maysam Behraves and Giorgio Cafiero. Why Doha should worry: The case for an Iran-Qatar non-aggression pact. *Middle East Institute*. November 20, 2019. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/why-doha-should-worry-case-iran-qatar-non-aggression-pact>. Retrieved on February 8, 2020; Hussein

Ibishi. U.S.-Iran Crisis Promotes Sudden GCC Unanimity and Common Purpose. *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*. January 9, 2020. Available at: <https://agsiw.org/u-s-iran-crisis-promotes-sudden-gcc-unanimity-and-common-purpose/>. Retrieved on February 8, 2020.

structure of saying is such that it always comes after the event.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, drawing on non-representational ways of talking and writing, such an assumption renders the very act of describing the event as political.

### *A criminal or a criminal act?*

One of the first encounters regarding the definition of the event took place the same day of the killing, after Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) posted a tweet informing about the event, according to the Saudi-based news website *Al-Arabiyya*. Through its twitter account, *Al-Arabiyya* assured, KUNA alerted that the killing of Soleimani could lead to further instability in the region and was like “pouring fuel on the fire”, which some twitter users criticized for being an “overly sympathetic” declaration from the state of Kuwait.<sup>3</sup> In this way, the very wording of a piece of news by the official news agency from the state of Kuwait became the object of dispute in social media, given its role as a powerful political device in the struggle between narratives over the framing of a given political event.

Some of the criticisms, such as that of Saudi journalist Adhwan al-Ahmari, emphasized the alleged implication of general Soleimani in the

attempted assassination of late Emir Sheikh Jaber Al Sabah back in the eighties, a claim that was equally assembled through pieces of news, reports and declarations.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, these critiques aimed to challenge any narrative that did not conform to the claim that ‘the US military had simply killed another “terrorist”’. Similarly, others pointed towards the alleged lack of responsibility of KUNA, which as a state news agency should be run by state authorities, rather than any person. Such claims suggested the position of the state of Kuwait should substantially depart from that manifested in such a tweet. At the end, the official twitter account of KUNA, the story in *al-Arabiyya* assures, ceded to those pressures and decided to delete the tweet on the same day this had been posted.<sup>5</sup>

Another battle over the definition of the event happened around a declaration by well-known Grand Ayatollah Sheikh Issa Ahmed Qassim, a former citizen of Bahrain who is now based in Iraq, the same day the US military operation took place, which was publicized by the Iranian-based outlets *MEHR*<sup>6</sup> and *AhlulBayt*.<sup>7</sup> According to such outlets, which paraphrase his alleged sayings, Sheikh Issa’s discussed the motivation of the “terrorist

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida. A certain impossible possibility of saying the event. Tr. G. Walker. *Critical Inquiry* (33). Winter 2007, pp. 446.

<sup>3</sup> Tamara Abueish. Kuwait News Agency deletes report condemning Soleimani’s killing after outcry. *Al Arabiya English*. January 4, 2020. Available at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2020/01/04/Kuwait-News-Agency-deletes-report-condemning-Soleimani-s-killing-after-outcry.html>. Retrieved on February 4, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Idem

<sup>5</sup> Idem

<sup>6</sup> MNA. Bahrain’s leading Shia cleric condemn US over Lt. Gen. Soleimani assassination. *MEHR News Agency*. January 4, 2020. Available at:

<https://en.mehrnews.com/news/154091/Bahrain-s-leading-Shia-cleric-condemn-US-over-Lt-Gen-Soleimani>. Retrieved on February 5, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> ABNA. Sheikh Isa Qassim condemn US over Lt. General Soleimani assassination. *AhlulBayt News Agency*. January 4, 2020. Available at: [https://en.abna24.com/news/sheikh-isa-qassim-condemn-us-over-lt-general-soleimani-assassination\\_999211.html](https://en.abna24.com/news/sheikh-isa-qassim-condemn-us-over-lt-general-soleimani-assassination_999211.html). Retrieved on February 4, 2020.

forces” of the United States to commit such a “criminal act”. In this sense, Soleimani was not the main object of discussion, but rather the government of the United States that had, according to him, committed a criminal act against the Muslim world.

After the circulation of some declarations attributed to Sheikh Issa, the government of Bahrain, through its ministry of foreign affairs, issued a declaration in which it called for moderation among the parts involved. Bahrain’s government did not offer an account of who and why committed the assassination. According to such declaration, the ‘event’ was the possibility of a full-scale war in the region that could have dire consequences. The statement issued by the ministry was then used as a reference to the ‘concern’ by the Bahraini government regarding the killing and its determination to act against ‘the threats to regional and national security’. In this way, the event became a discussion about the degree in which the killing was an offensive against the Muslim world, where the Bahraini government distanced itself from such a claim, but still avoided silence.

### *An unreliable partner?*

Finally, a struggle over narratives that spanned throughout the spectrum of intra-GCC politics initiated after the Saudi-based newspaper *Arab*

*News* released a piece that suggested, citing “UK media”, the drones involved in the attack had took off from US military base in al-Udeid, in the outskirts of Doha.<sup>8</sup> Several twitter accounts retweeted or referenced that piece of news, and some of them, such as *Al-Arabiyya*, called it an example of Qatar’s “extremely dangerous drift towards Iran”, which motivated, according to this newspaper, the visit of Qatar’s foreign minister to Tehran to ‘offer his condolences’.<sup>9</sup> The communiques, news and declarations that came out of the active involvement of the government of Qatar in the crisis and the subsequent visits of some of its leaders, including the Amir himself, to Tehran became then powerful devices to counter such claims. Statements that pointed towards the ‘strength of bilateral relations between Iran and Qatar’ and the need to revive regional security dialogues have been critical elements for framing such narratives.

In this latter exchange, the discussion revolved around the reliability of Qatar as an ally and security partner for other countries in the Gulf region, which shows that some of the policies coming out of Washington are received with suspicion even in the GCC, an organization that brings together the most important allies of the United States in the Middle East. It is thus revealing the discussion was not about the desirability of eliminating a certain character, but it was rather about who, apart from the

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<sup>8</sup> Reaper drone launched from Qatar fired missile that killed Soleimani. Arab News. January 5, 2020. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1608386/middle-east>. Retrieved on February 5, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Emily Judd. Qatar’s condolences over Soleimani show ‘dangerous’ drift towards Iran:

Expert. Al Arabiya English. January 5, 2020. Available at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/01/05/Qatar-s-condolences-over-Soleimani-show-dangerous-drift-towards-Iran-Expert.html>. Retrieved on February 6, 2020.

US military, was also responsible for the act. The suggestion that Qatar, through its military alliances, might have been somewhat implicated, was also responded with references to the existence of other military bases in the Arabian Peninsula, from where the drones that killed Soleimani could have also taken off. In the GCC, the struggles over narratives took the form of who serves as the platform for the US regional policies.

As shown by the previous stories, the repercussions of the assassination of Iranian general Soleimani in the GCC go far beyond a simple concern for these states' security and the corresponding governmental response in the form of calls for "self-restraint", mediation efforts and the reactivation of regional security dialogues. While security concerns are certainly there, the killing is also "an event" whose description and reconstruction becomes a site of politics and contestation. In the context of the GCC, this has taken the form of a struggle between narratives of what happened that mixes with ongoing political struggles taking place within and between those countries.

#### **About the author:**

Erick Viramontes is a joint fellow at the Brookings Doha Center and Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University. He holds a Ph.D. in Politics and International Relations from the Australian National University; and has published articles in both English and Spanish in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Foro Internacional*, and in outlets such as *The New Arab* and *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*.

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