



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 07 January 2020

US Iran Tensions at Boiling Point:

How will Iran Respond to the Assassination of Qassem Soleimani?

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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On Friday 3 January 2019, the US announced that it had carried out a targeted dawn air raid at Baghdad's international airport, where a convoy was transporting the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC's) Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani and the deputy chief of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. The two commanders, along with eight officers were killed. The US Department of Defense issued a statement endorsing the operation and claiming that the decision was taken on the direction of US President Donald Trump, the goal being to deter Iran from any future attacks against US troops in Iraq.⁽¹⁾ Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei vowed "harsh revenge", pledging that Soleimani's work will not end with his death⁽²⁾. Iran's National Security Council issued a statement also promising that "that America will not escape the consequences easily."⁽³⁾

Background to the Escalation

The latest action comes as part of the build-up of US-Iranian tensions since president Trump pulled out of the nuclear agreement and tightened sanctions against Iran. Preventing Iran from exporting oil spurred Iranian responses through direct and proxy operations in the Gulf against US allies, recently spilling into Iraq. The Iraqi PMF besieged and attempted to storm the US embassy in Baghdad in response to US targeting of the Hezbollah Brigades in Syria and Iraq, whom Washington had in turn accused of killing a US contractor and wounding four soldiers in an attack on a US base near Kirkuk. President Trump, in a tweet, blamed Iran for the attempt to storm the embassy, and promised to hold Tehran responsible, adding that "this is not a Warning, it is a Threat".⁽⁴⁾ Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, responded with a tweet in which he ridiculed the American President and mocked his threats, while assuring that Trump would not do anything against Iran.⁽⁵⁾ The Supreme Leader's position indicates that Iranian calculations were based on a basic premise that the United States does not want to escalate, for several reasons, the most important of which being:

- The approaching US presidential elections, which restrict the president, reduce his options and render him less willing to enter a military confrontation with Iran.
- The removal of republican hawks who have been pushing for an open confrontation with Iran from the US administration, including National Security Adviser John Bolton.
- Trump's behavioural patterns during his presidency, which have left the impression that he prefers to use economic and diplomatic confrontation methods but is not a man of war, despite his verbal grandeur. This impression was further cemented after Trump chose not to respond to any of the attacks that Iran was accused of carrying out against the United States

1 Statement by the Department of Defense, **DOD**, 3/1/2020. Accessed 3/1/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/35oXCsq>.

2 Kim Hjelmggaard, "Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei Vows Vengeance for Gen. Qasem Soleimani's Death" *USA Today*, 3/1/2020. Accessed 3/1/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2QpmsYy>.

3 "The Killing of Gen. Qasim Suleimani: What We Know Since the U.S. Airstrike" *NY Times*, 3/1/2020. Accessed 3/1/2020 at: <https://nyti.ms/36sAOt7>.

4 Tweet by US President Trump, Twitter, 31/12/2019. Accessed 3/1/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/37yKr9E>.

5 Tweet by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Twitter, 1/1/2020. Accessed 3/1/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2ZML3WH>



and its allies between May and September 2019, including his reluctance to respond to Iran's downing of an expensive American drone (\$130 million) in July, justifying this with the fact that killing a potentially large number of Iranians with American strikes, is not commensurate with disabling a drone.⁽⁶⁾

These facts may have prompted the Iranians to escalate hostilities, as payback for the sanctions and embargo imposed on them after the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in May 2018. But they clearly did not expect a major US reaction, with the embassy incident indicating that the Iranians were not aware of the sensitivity of such a move. As soon reports came in of attempts to storm the American embassy, the US media were quick to evoke the memory of the 1979 hostage crisis in Tehran, as well as the attack on the US embassy in Benghazi, where ambassador Christopher Stevens was killed in September 2012. The two incidents were also linked to former US President Jimmy Carter's defeat in the 1980 presidential election in the midst of the hostage crisis and Hillary Clinton's defeat in the 2016 presidential election as she was held publicly responsible for the weak security measures that led to the US ambassador being killed in Benghazi.

Securing American embassies abroad had clearly become an obsession for the US government, and particularly for an incumbent president facing major domestic challenges in a crucial election year. The decision to deal a major blow to Iran, which had apparently failed to read the signs was part of this picture. Washington also holds the belief that Iran has shifted its movements against the United States from the Gulf waters into Iraq and that Iran must be deterred before increasing its operations directly or by proxy in Iraq, especially since it is in Iran's interest to re-direct the conflict inside Iraq away from the street protests against the government and towards issues such as the American presence in Iraq.

The Potential Response to Soleimani's Death

Soleimani is the most visible and important Iranian personality in Iranian regional politics. For more than two decades, Soleimani has led the Quds Force, the wing responsible for foreign military operations in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. He is considered the de facto engineer of Iran's regional project and supervisor of the establishment, support, armament and operation of pro-Tehran militias in the Arab region. In this sense, his death is a major blow to Iran's regional influence. Despite the promptness of the Supreme Leader in appointing his deputy, Brigadier General Esmail Qaani, as his successor in the leadership of the Quds Force,⁽⁷⁾ Tehran will find great difficulty in filling the void, due to the multiple tasks that Soleimani was personally managing, especially in the Arab region.

⁶ "Trump Says he Abruptly Cancelled Retaliatory Strike on Iran after Drone Attack," *USA Today*, 21/6/2019. Accessed 3/1/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/35nAb2L>

⁷ "Iran Names Quds Force Number Two Esmail Qaani to Replace Slain Soleimani" *The New Arab*, 3/1/2019. Accessed 3/1/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/36ubHGa>.



Realizing the strength of the strike, the United States was quick to contain Iran's response to the killing of Soleimani by expressing its desire not to escalate. In his first media appearance after the strike, the US President said that Washington does not want to start a war and does not want regime change in Iran. He also renewed his desire to open the door to negotiations with Tehran, when he said that Iran had not won a war but had not lost any negotiations⁽⁸⁾. The Pentagon followed this with the announcement of its intention to send four thousand special forces soldiers to the region, in an attempt to enhance US deterrence capacity against Iran and discourage any retaliatory measures.⁽⁹⁾

Tehran is under great pressure to take retaliatory measures, whether from the popular base of the conservative movement inside Iran, or from its allies in the region. Iran also needs to respond to restore respect for the policy of deterrence. But the country faces a sensitive equation; how can it respond without instigating a harsher US response, which could eventually lead to a full-scale confrontation? In this context, Iran's options are limited to three scenarios.

1. Direct Response

Iran may choose to attack US targets and interests, whether in Iran's regional surroundings (Iraq, the Gulf, Afghanistan, and Syria), or in areas far from the main conflict zone. They could pick a symbolic target that provides Iran a quick escape, as it saves face on the one hand, and reduces the possibility of US retaliation on the other, given that Washington is also seeking to contain the escalation. Or they could choose to go in the direction of striking strategic American targets of high value. But this possibility carries great risks and could lead to a violent US response if Americans are killed. In this case, the US President would have no choice but to implement his threats to Iran. He cannot appear weak in a crucial election year when he would be held responsible for the deterioration due to his policies towards Iran.

2. Indirect Response

Iran could respond indirectly through its regional or international allies. Iran may target US interests or those of its allies in the region (Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, for example). Although this option is the best for Iran, because it relieves the country of direct responsibility, and takes advantage of its experience, this also comes with risks. Most importantly, Iran may find it difficult to evade responsibility for any attacks at this stage and may find itself subject to American retaliation anyway. Moreover, Iran's allies in the region, especially in Iraq and Lebanon, are in a difficult situation, and some of them, like Hezbollah, have a greater interest in stability, as it represents the

⁸ Tweet by US President Trump, Twitter, 3/1/2020. Accessed 3/1/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/36pmWjl>.

⁹ "The Killing of Gen. Qassim Suleimani: What We Know Since the U.S. Airstrike," *The New York Times*, 2/1/2020. Accessed 3/1/2020, at: <https://nyti.ms/39DZRve>.



actual ruling authority in Lebanon. In Yemen, the Houthis could carry out attacks against US allies (Saudi Arabia), but as they are at war already, this will lose its edge.

3. No Response

Iran may be forced to absorb this blow and focus on investing it internally to bolster the regime, unite its ranks in the face of US sanctions and wait until the US presidential election date, in the hope that Trump will lose to the Democrats. Meanwhile, Tehran will try to put pressure on the Iraqi government to completely remove US forces from Iraq, which would be a huge victory if it succeeds.

Conclusion

The US assassination of Qassem Soleimani changed the rules of engagement implicitly agreed between the United States and Iran, especially in Iraq. These unspoken rules keep the leadership safe from attack on both sides and allow coexistence in the context of a competitive conflict. But this is also logical, considering escalating hostilities since May 2018.

Iran will try to restore respect for its prestige in coming weeks, without exposing itself to the dangers of a major American strike. In return, the Trump administration will try to reinforce its deterrence policy to prevent Tehran from responding and pushing Washington toward the negotiating table. But establishing this scenario requires that each side carefully read the intentions of the other as any mistake may push them towards direct confrontation.