

Analysis: Will Soleimani's Killing Lead To A Wider Conflict?

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Qasem Soleimani - Head of IRGC Qods Force - Iran

The shocking **killing of brigadier General Qasem Soleimani** (1957-2020), who had served for the last twenty-two years as the Commander of the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard's Qods Force will have profound impact on American, Iraqi and Iranian politics.

A man who before the 1979 Iranian Revolution had worked as a mason and later a contractor in a regional water department and then proved his mettle in the Iran-Iraq war, went on to become the most feared Iranian general of the last half a century. In 2005, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei referred to him as a "living martyr," and Soleimani was credited with having masterminded important battlefield victories for Iran and its allies in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere.

While in Iran Soleimani had acquired the stature of a superhero, he was considered a high value target for American forces in Iraq. His killing is going to complicate Iraqi politics tremendously. Shiite militias will undoubtedly stage more attacks on American forces to avenge his killing and that of the deputy head of Popular Mobilization Forces Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Iraqi citizens and politicians will pressure the parliament to pass legislation demanding the withdrawal of American forces. Even Ayatollah Sistani and Moqta al-Sadr, two Shiite clerics not sympathetic to Iranian meddling in Iraq, will now be under pressure to denounce the killings.

The interim caretaker Prime Minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, will most probably be replaced with someone more friendly to Iran. The cause of **Iraqi protesters demanding** the end of corruption and provision of better services will now be overshadowed by the unfolding repercussions of Soleimani's assassination and the grandiose dynamics of US-Iranian rivalry in Iraq.

The United States has certainly succeeded in a military operation but the political fallout does not look promising. Some big questions now loom large: How will the U.S. handle enraged crowds? How will it respond to the wave of attacks on its forces, institutions and interests throughout the Islamic world? Will the Trump Administration be forced to send more forces to the region in an election year? By reducing the complexity of Iraqi politics to Iranian manipulations, the Americans have surely made a grave analytical mistake. They may have physically eliminated a number of nemesis while handing Iran, on a silver platter, a major political victory in Iraq.

The killing of Soleimani will also have repercussions for Iran. Losing a man who had such an in-depth **knowledge of regional military affairs** and such close rapport with so many fighters in Iran, Iraq and Syria will not be easy. The Iranian state will elevate martyr Soleimani to such a level not seen since Ayatollah Khomeini's death.

Many will be willing to overlook the fact that Soleimani was one of the twenty-four IRGC commanders who penned a threatening letter to reformist President Khatami in 1999 demanding a harsher crackdown on student protesters. His death will also push the news of the violent suppression of last month's demonstrations to the background. Furthermore, the Iranian regime will now seek more maximalist goals in terms of its interests in Iraq. Following the dictum of "revenge is a dish best served cold," they will also decide when to strike to avenge Soleimani's death.

Does all of this mean we are heading toward an inevitable war? Not necessarily. A tit for tat escalating war in the Middle East is the last thing the Trump Administration wants in an election year. Their Iranian adversaries are also prudent enough to know that they can't wage a war when state coffers are empty and their citizenry is quite alienated. Besides, they don't want to sacrifice their political victory in Iraq while waxing eloquently about martyr Soleimani. In other words, the temperature in the oven that is the Middle East has dramatically gone up but it is not a forgone conclusion that a massive explosion is about to happen.

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