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US Assassination of Gen Qassem Soleimani & Its Aftermath

Iranian General's Killing: How Will Iran Respond?

By Ahmed S. Hashim

SYNOPSIS

Trump's decision to assassinate Iran's General Qassem Soleimani was a monumental escalation in the ongoing tensions between the United States and Iran. Who was Qassem Soleimani? Why did the US find it important for him to be killed and how is it justifying this action? How Iran reacts to this event are critical questions as the Middle East possibly stumbles into greater conflict in 2020.

COMMENTARY

AYATOLLAH KHAMENEI, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, once referred to General Qassem Soleimani as a 'living martyr of the revolution'. Assassinated on 3 January 2020 by US drones in Iraq, Soleimani was a legend in Iran.

His was such a big name at home that some equate his assassination, on the orders of President Trump, as the killing of Iran's de facto vice-president. It would thus be virtually impossible for Iran not to respond, but how will Tehran do so?

From 'Living Martyr' to Martyr

Soleimani was born in southern Kerman province in Iran. He left home at 12 years of age to work as a labourer. When war broke out with Iraq in 1980, Soleimani volunteered and headed to the frontline to fight, eventually becoming a senior commander in the 48th Division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

After rising through the ranks of the Iranian military, Soleimani was appointed commander of the Quds Force in 1997, which is responsible for the political warfare and sub-conventional operations of the IRGC.

Soleimani's threat perceptions were shaped by the Iran-Iraq war, by the massive presence of US forces in the region, and by the rise of anti-Shia extremist groups, which Soleimani referred to as 'Takfirism'. These factors shaped his use of sub-conventional warfare capabilities.

Soleimani was not merely a military commander and tactician. He had developed skills as a diplomatic negotiator and masterful promoter of Iran's national security interests in the region.

The justification for killing Soleimani was that he was involved in the "Iranian-backed" militias assault on US interests in Iraq and the attack on the US embassy in Baghdad. While that provided a justification for the Trump administration, there was no evidence that Soleimani was involved in this.

When he was killed, his primary concern was what seemed to be an erosion of the Iranian position in Iraq as a result of the instability in that country, as reflected in the emergence of protests against government incompetence and undue Iranian influence.

The Trump administration also claimed that it killed him and his associates because they were planning a series of 'sinister' military operations against US interests. Officials such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed the US had the intelligence on this, which he, of course, demurred from releasing, though he said the administration would do so in due course.

US Blundering After the Killing

Anonymous Pentagon officials contradicted this when they claimed that there was no indication of immediate plans of Iranian escalation in Iraq. Following the killing of Soleimani, worried US officials from Trump down fell over themselves with justifications and rationalisations:

It was claimed that Soleimani was a 'bad man' who had killed tens of thousands of people in Iran, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq. Soleimani was killed not because he was a 'bad man'; he definitely would not have been killed if he had been America's 'bad man'.

The US was not concerned with the deaths of tens of thousands of 'locals' at the hands of Soleimani and his allies. The US did not kill him because he had ostensibly played a role in the killing of the US contractor in Kirkuk or in the assault on the US embassy in Baghdad.

To be sure, Trump may have been worried about US diplomats being taken hostage in a replay of the Benghazi siege or even worse, the US embassy hostage drama in Tehran decades ago. He may have even been trying to deflect from his growing domestic problems associated with impeachment.

Soleimani was killed because he and his vast network of militias and skills in sub-conventional warfare were a threat to US interests in the region, and to Israel, which had advocated his assassination previously and to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Taking him out would deprive Iran of a seasoned commander in case of further escalation of the Iranian-Israeli 'undeclared war' in Syria or a full-scale US-Iran war.

Soleimani has had a bullseye on him long before recent events. It is not inconceivable that hawks within the administration pushed Trump into this act. Killing Soleimani was designed either to establish US dominance and force it into war with the US, or to back down in a manner that would humiliate it and delegitimise it.

How Will Iran Respond?

Pundits are referring to the killing as a 'game-changer'. They are predicting that Iran must respond now and that this will lead to a bloody war. This seems like an eminently logical prediction, if not a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Why is it a logical prediction? Iran *has* to respond to this. Its prestige and legitimacy are at stake. The US did not simply target Iranian forces on the ground as Israel had been doing in Syria. The US killed a military commander and senior official of the Iranian government. The US declaration of Soleimani as a 'terrorist' heading a 'terrorist' entity notwithstanding, simply does not make him or the Quds Force such.

For Iran, this means its officials are subject to decapitation, even in the absence of war. But killing Soleimani is not prelude to war, it *is* an act of war. In a supreme act of Orwellian 'doublespeak,' both Trump and Pompeo claimed that the killing of Soleimani was designed to de-escalate the situation. Iran will simply not see it that way.

A lack of response could have incalculable consequences for the regime in the region and at home: its enemies would be emboldened regionally and at home. Hence, Iran must respond.

So, how will it respond? This is a significant problem. Iran cannot respond conventionally by attacking US forces in Iraq and the Persian Gulf in a war which it cannot win. Iranian doctrine calls for the avoidance of falling into the trap of conventional war against a stronger enemy. This is something that Soleimani and other Iranian military leaders have repeatedly advised against, unless forced.

It could respond asymmetrically with sub-conventional war and try to engage in plausible deniability. It retains a vast capacity for sub-conventional warfare, which along with ballistic missiles constitute its major military assets.

Problems in Iran's Asymmetric Response

There are problems at the moment with any Iranian asymmetric counter-response. Everyone is assuming Iran will respond, even if its proxies undertake the retaliation, and the US will strike Iranian assets, even possibly within Iranian territory. While Trump may not be itching for a fight, the hawks around him are and a major Iranian

asymmetric response could escalate to outright war, which would allow Trump to blame Iran.

Iran's trajectory could be the incremental approach rather than the immediate response. Iran does not make hasty decisions or ones on the fly. The Iranian system debates, often extensively, to address the pros and cons of desired or necessary policy outcomes. The incremental is geared more towards political responses such as step-by-step withdrawal from the nuclear accord (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) and helping undermine the US presence in Iraq.

Iran has been known to put national interests above immediate action; indeed, it has and can defer a military or 'game-changing' response. It can wait until the US guard is down.

Ultimately, one could say that the Iranians believe that revenge should be a dish served cold; and in this context, what if we wake up to a headline one day: Iranian scientists test two nuclear devices in the Dasht-e-Kavir desert? Now that would be both revenge and a game-changer.

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