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# CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THE ASSASSINATION OF QASEM SOLEIMANI: A POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

## Introduction

At the beginning of 2020 the politics in the Middle East acquired a new radical dimension. Qasem Soleimani, the leader of the Quds Force, an elite unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), was assassinated in Baghdad International Airport by an American airstrike. This assassination undoubtedly transformed the politics in the region. To understand why Qasem Soleimani was killed and to predict what might happen next, it is necessary to present some general background of the events, and understand how the United States, Iran and other powers in the region perceived Soleimani's political role. While those perceptions were often contradictory, one thing remained certain – Soleimani had considerable influence on politics in the Middle East. For some, he was a brave, charismatic supreme commander of Iranian people; for others, he was a terrorist responsible for numerous killings of Americans as well as local civilians. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that he was a legitimate commander of the Quds Force since 1998, and his primary role was to organize and supervise Iranian military operations. He firstly gained influence and fame during the Iraq-Iran conflict of the 1980s. In the following years he gradually became indispensable for Iranian national security, state survival and national interest. As to the strategy of Iranian influence in the Middle East, he was the mastermind

in policymaking and conducting operations during the power struggle against the major actors in the region, i.e. the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia. To fuel tensions among these powers in the service of Iranian expansionist policy throughout the region, and its national or regional interests, Soleimani maintained strong ties with proxy forces, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, al-Assad's forces in Syria and Shi'a militia groups in Iraq, making use of the anarchical structure in the Middle East to benefit Iran and thus increasing his own importance for the state. Under his leadership, the Quds Force significantly expanded its capabilities to operate in military, financial and political spheres in Iran and abroad, which allowed Soleimani to effectively impact Iraq's domestic and international policies after the government was re-established following Saddam Hussein's removal. Soleimani also influenced the political decisions and activities of the paramilitary forces of the Iraqi Shi'a population. His position as one of the most fundamental figures in the proxy war against the US and its allies in Iraq was the most tangible reason for his assassination. In this respect, his death caused lament and celebrations, raised questions and uncovered rivalries, for in the eyes of some people he represented the most destructive elements of Iranian expansionist policy in the Middle East. Therefore, the background and outcomes of his assassination should be examined through a multidimensional approach.

### **1. Is there a relation between Qasem Soleimani's assassination, the proxy war for dominance in the region and the US national security issues?**

Firstly, it must be said that there are significant differences between killing of Qasem Soleimani and the deaths of Osama bin-Laden and Ab Bakr el-Baghdadi – while their actions might have had a similarly destructive potential, the latter two were globally recognized as leaders of terrorist organizations, while Soleimani was a legitimate military commander and a statesman, supported by a legitimate and sovereign state. From the US perspective, while the January 2020 assassination involved many short- and long-term risks for the region, the decision and its execution were rationalized as necessary considering the multidimensional Middle East policy of America. The reasons included civilians, who are the targets of Soleimani's proxies, national security of the US and the safety of American soldiers in the region as well as possible political gain for the US and President Trump himself in the form of assertion of their control over the region. The last factor is where the killings of Baghdadi and Soleimani are similar – both were assassinations of prominent local figures. This US action was

evidently directed against the Iranian government and its proxies such as Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon, all of which had strong ties to Soleimani. The operation's goal was to shift the power balance in the region in favor of the US and its own proxies. In the words of Hans Morgenthau, "International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim" (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 29). In this sense, the US unhesitatingly used hard power tools to achieve security and dominance, undertaking the potentially risky operation to eliminate the threat to its national interest, troops in the region and local civilians created by the anarchistic tendencies present in the Middle-East politics as well as Soleimani's political influence and control over the network of proxies used by Iran in the ongoing war for dominance in the region.

From the point of view of US domestic politics, Soleimani's assassination has been useful for President Trump and his administration as a means to gain support of the public opinion – or at least its conservative and nationalist part, susceptible to the rally-'round-the-flag effect – in the upcoming 2020 election campaign, and to defend the president against potential impeachment. The presidential order to kill Soleimani can be then presented as a move intended to maintain America's dominant position in the Middle East and a proof of the US' military and intelligence capabilities, and used to facilitate the objectives of American domestic policy. This is a philosophy that dates back to Machiavelli, aptly summed up by Jackson and Sørensen: "The supreme political value is national freedom, i.e., independence. The main responsibility of rulers is always to seek the advantages and to defend the interests of their state and thus ensure its survival" (2013, p. 69).

## **2. The potential risks for the US and the Middle East region**

The decision to assassinate an important political figure was not without pitfalls, as the consequences for the region and the US are potentially far-reaching and complex. The first effect was escalation of hostility and destabilization of the relations between the US, Iran and other regional powers. The Trump administration has been applying "maximum pressure" – economic and military – against Iran. The assassination can be thus considered a measure aimed at blocking diplomatic efforts and breaking the Iran nuclear deal made in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – a sign that American policy has once again abandoned deterrence with soft power in favor of maximum pressure. Iran reneging on its commitment to the JCPOA and removing limitations

to its nuclear program is a grim perspective for the region. Although Iran has no intercontinental nuclear capacity, the other parts of the region where proxy wars are ongoing are now at risk due to the escalated tension between Iran and the US.

Another risk factor comes from the fact that by killing Soleimani, the US violated the territory of another state and assassinated a legitimate statesman, thus blatantly disrespecting another state's sovereignty and undermining one of the basic tenets of international law.

The third source of risk is disruption of the precarious balance in the Middle East. Soleimani was crucial to Iran's relations with its proxy forces, in particular with Hezbollah, Hamas and Shi'a groups in Iraq. While actions of these groups have made a devastating and tragic impact on the situation in the region and civilians' lives, these forces are essential elements of the power balance in the region and tools of power policy. The main reason for their existence are American attempts to influence the stability of the Middle East – when an area becomes unstable, states within and without the region inevitably become involved in a proxy war. America has a history of such involvements and feeding tensions. Yet while external policy makers do not usually act with a view to stabilizing a region, and they cite the “security dilemma” as justification of their actions, the principle of respect for sovereignty of states should be re-established and strengthened by restoring the balance of power in the region.

### **3. In the light of its proxy war and the external and internal issues caused by the sanctions and protests, how will Iran act without Qasem Soleimani and what forms may retaliation for his death take?**

The killing of Qasem Soleimani created a complex problem for Iranian domestic and international politics. The state not only lost its political mastermind and the most powerful (both nationally and internationally) military leader; the assassination also dealt a blow to Iran's and its prestige in the Middle East, presenting Iran as a state unable to protect its most powerful commander. This endangered Iran's national interest and the position of its regime, considering in particular the authority Soleimani had among the proxy forces in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. While other nations of the region may have celebrated his death, for over a million people who mourned him he was a hero. His death convinced Iran to retaliate with hard power tools. Probably the most glaring example of decisions made under influence of strong emotions was the shooting

down of a Ukraine National Airlines plane with civilians on board, which led to domestic and international protests.

However, before speculating on how Iran can retaliate, it is important to understand the country's situation – it is caught in the fork created by its own “maximum resistance” against the US’ “maximum pressure”. The Trump administration declared a series of sanctions as part of the “maximum pressure” policy aimed at decreasing Iranian nuclear capability and forcing Iran to dial back their nuclear programs and potential weapon building. Iran's economy also has suffered due to harsh international sanctions, which gave an impulse to civil unrest and protests. Yet the state's course has remained unchanged. Annelle Sheline, a research fellow in the Middle East program at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, said on *Al-Jazeera* news that “The maximum pressure campaign has succeeded in squeezing Iran's economy, but it has utterly failed in making Iran change its policies in the direction Washington wants” (Piven, 2020). The assassination of Soleimani demonstrated that the standoff between American “maximum pressure” and Iranian “maximum resistance” has brought no results other than adding another dimension to the already tense and complicated situation in the region.

Considering these factors, there are two essential elements of Iranian response: the first is pursuing relations with the proxy forces that had strong ties to Soleimani and which have a significant role in Iran's national and regional interest, while the second is revenge for the assassination, motivated mostly by its psychological impact on Iranian government, who lost a key figure, indispensable for the power policy aimed at survival and influence, and on Iranian citizens who loved the general. Yet despite such severe, multi-dimensional loss, the international sanctions and disproportions in military capabilities may significantly limit Iran's response. However, in a sensitive area such as Iraq, a well-planned retaliation against vulnerable points of interest may be dangerous for the US' security and national interest. For this kind of guerilla response, proxy forces are important. “Launching new tanker attacks in the Gulf, kidnapping American citizens in the region or targeting American facilities and embassies beyond Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen are also potential options. However, all of these, and especially the latter, would achieve little beyond momentary shock value, and could invite a devastating response.” (Haddad, 2020). As US policy is to coerce Iran to cooperate by escalating the tension, its potential response would likely pose more problems to Iran's national security and its domestic and international interests. Thus it is probable that Iran will follow the tenets of its power policy and retaliate through the widespread network of proxies including

the Shiite militia in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and/or by cyber-attacks directed against Americans or their allies.

#### **4. How will Qasem Soleimani's death affect the domestic policy of Iran?**

Even though Qasem Soleimani was best known as a key figure in international politics, he also had a strong authority and influence on the decision-making process in the domestic policy of Iran. Thus, it is necessary to examine his role in this sphere to predict the path of the future struggle for power between the US and Iran. The religious and nationalist circles in particular perceived Soleimani as a guarantor of Iran's strength, which amplified his importance for the domestic aspect of power policy. On Al-Jazeera, Fatima Ahmad Alsmadi observed: "The mythical status of Soleimani was necessary to build an image of a powerful Iran internally and externally, to cover up the reality of a besieged nation. Inside Iran, even young people, who are far removed from the first and second generations of the revolution and its ideals, still believe in Iranian supremacy. The image of Soleimani nourishes this belief" (Alsmadi, 2020). The stampede at the funeral, which claimed lives of 56 people, is the most drastic expression of mythicization of his character. In that sense, the killing of Qasem Soleimani can herald a more complicated period in domestic politics, particularly with regard to the IRGC, which is likely to face problems after the death of its most influential commander. The Corps will also probably feel the repercussions of shooting down the civilian plane. Considering all the components of the current situation, the 2020 elections are expected to be a decisive moment or a flashpoint which will shape Iran's domestic and international policy.

#### **5. Position of the other states in the region**

Other states in the region have also been influenced by the assassination and its impact on the activities of proxy forces. Iraq is the one most affected by the circumstances surrounding the assassination and its current and future repercussions, which threaten Iraq's sovereignty and national security, particularly as currently the central authorities have no control over the whole territory of the country<sup>1</sup>. The current Iraqi government has been dealing with protests,

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2003, Iraq has been unable to protect its own territorial integrity, is still fragmented, and faces civil disobedience and a deepening economic crisis. In this context,

uprisings, an economic crisis and foreign influences (Iranian in particular), and the Iraqi parliament consists of many parties with conflicting agendas. The killing of Qasem Soleimani has further endangered the territorial integrity of Iraq for two reasons. Firstly, for Iran, Iraq is not only a territory crucial to maintaining significant proxy forces used against the US but also a state within Iran's sphere of influence, raising Iranian status as a regional power. Secondly, the US does not fully recognize the sovereignty of the Iraqi state, considering the latter's territory as a battleground for moves and countermoves in the power struggle with Iran – and Iraq has no power or influence to prevent such violation of its sovereignty. As stated in a *Foreign Affairs* article, "Iraq is not the same today as it was in the years that followed the 2003 U.S. invasion. Iraqi Shiite leaders cannot simply turn to ethnosectarianism or anti-Americanism to bolster their power. Even in the wake of the U.S. attack, the demonstrators have shown that they are seeking another path, one that eschews the interference of external actors and returns sovereignty to Iraqis and, most crucially, ends the post-2003 political order." (Mansour, 2020). Nevertheless, even in the long-term perspective, Iraq is unlikely to be able to fight as a fully sovereign and independent state for power over its own territory against the US, Iran, and the proxies.

From the point of view of Israel, the assassination removed a key political operator as well as a symbolic figure co-coordinating and supporting the forces opposing Israel in Palestine and Lebanon. While Israeli authorities avoided any overt reaction, the sense of satisfaction was almost tangible.

While Russia and Iran have a loose strategic alliance in military and intelligence matters, it was hardly possible for the former to react to the assassination directly. However, the shift in the balance of power in favor of the US and Israel clearly endangers Russian influence in the region. As a direct response would be inexpedient, in its declarations Russia seems not to focus on the assassination, acting to maintain the status quo in its relations with the US in the Middle East. Any confrontation between Iran and the US threatens the balance of power and thus can be detrimental for Russian interests and policy in the region. Thus it is likely that Russia will strive to strengthen Iranian defensive capabilities as a deterrent, but will not directly join the conflict.

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Iraq has several burning issues. (1) The Iraqi territory is the main arena of the conflict between Iran and the US – several forces operating there are proxies of one of these states. (2) The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) continues to be a threatening presence in the region. (3) The Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) need to make an effort to negotiate in order to resolve their differences.

## Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the assassination of Qasem Soleimani has transformed the political situation in the Middle East. Force and deception are essential tools used to serve national interests; however, while Soleimani was responsible for numerous deaths, he was still a high-ranking official of a sovereign state, so the assassination went against international rules and law. Iran has been put under strong military, political and psychological pressure, and other states will also experience the impact of this situation, including an increased level of anarchy in the Middle East. Following this risky move, the situation in the region is now less likely to be changed by diplomatic means and constructive solutions, and the policy makers will probably resort to hard power and military options.

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