

Shia Militias in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon Post-Soleimani

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Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



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Brief Analysis

Will the various regional militias once controlled by Qasem Soleimani continue to take sometimes-unwanted direction from Tehran after his death? Read or watch a spirited conversation with three experts.

On January 28, Michael Knights, Phillip Smyth, and Hanin Ghaddar addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Knights, a senior fellow with the Institute, has conducted two decades' worth of on-the-ground research in Iraq alongside security forces and government ministries. Smyth is a Soref Fellow at the Institute and creator of its [interactive Shia Militia Mapping Project \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shia-militia-mapping-project\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shia-militia-mapping-project). Ghaddar, the Institute's Friedmann Visiting Fellow, has worked as a managing editor and journalist with numerous Lebanese media outlets. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MICHAEL KNIGHTS

The late Qods Force chief Qasem Soleimani played a special role within Iran's influence-wielding enterprise. He was uniquely close to the Supreme Leader and had the intelligence, creativity, and political backing to design and execute the regime's complex policy of building and commanding a network of proxy militant groups. Some of his deepest militia contacts were in Iraq, where he cultivated the loyal and capable Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, another casualty of the January 3 U.S. strike that killed Soleimani.

That strike holds **serious long-term implications for Iraq (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/soleimani-is-dead-the-road-ahead-for-iranian-backed-militias-in-iraq>)**. By last September, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had reached its apex of influence next door, graduating from unconventional warfare to "foreign internal defense" missions. Having gained so much control in Iraq, the IRGC now needed to maintain it.

Yet the IRGC and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces had grown overly reliant on Soleimani and Muhandis. The U.S. strike broke the IRGC's momentum and opened political space in Iraq, which could lead to the confirmation of a better prime minister very soon. It also disrupted the PMF's consolidation and created more competition among the militias. Previously, Muhandis had pushed for his Kataib Hezbollah militia to take a leading role in this consolidation. Now, however, the entire militia constellation has room to operate differently, and Kataib Hezbollah's standing may be weakened.

The U.S. strike also made Iraqi Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr an even more powerful player, and he will likely influence the selection of the next prime minister. Yet even after gaining in prominence and demonstrating his sway through the January 24 "Million Man March," he still faces pushback from elements of his fractured, difficult-to-control movement. Some Sadrists may drift into the Iranian camp, while others may overlap with the ongoing civilian protest movement.

As for the Qods Force, it is unlikely to lean on two individual leaders to the extent it did with Soleimani and Muhandis. Instead, it will probably **redistribute power (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/who-is-esmail-qaani-the-new-chief-commander-of-irans-qods-force>)** among several junior leaders, establishing a safer and more diverse mode of operation.

Going forward, the U.S. government should take three steps to improve its Iraq policy. First, it should identify and support friendly actors. This includes defending the demonstrators, listening to the country's next generation of leaders, and grooming select young Iraqis for future Track II dialogues. Second, it should levy credible threats and punishments against Iraqi figures who deserve them. Third, it should negotiate a sustainable security cooperation framework with Baghdad.

By carving out a safer and less kinetic military role in Iraq, U.S. policy may even align with Sadr's goals. To maintain his legitimacy, Sadr needs to publicly push for the removal of foreign forces, but that does not necessitate a total U.S. withdrawal. Rather, it may mean a change in visibility and combat operations. Soleimani's death has opened up the possibility of a civil conversation—after a cooling period—about a new security cooperation framework. The Sadrists will be integral to this conversation. As for the prospect of improving U.S. relations with Tehran, that may have to wait until 2021, following the U.S. and Iranian elections.

PHILLIP SMYTH

Soleimani took a very hands-on approach to leadership. He was skilled at delegating tasks and playing groups off of one another. Under his watch, Syria was the largest nexus for Iranian foreign interference, and it remains so after his death. Tehran's proxy machinery is already well entrenched there and is unlikely to be abandoned anytime

soon. Bashar al-Assad does not have the power to dislodge Iran even if he wanted to—and there is no evidence he does. Although Tehran must still compete with Russian and Turkish influence on the ground, Syria is its grand strategic prize. It has been creating bases there to aim missiles at Israel

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-to-lebanon>) and consolidate control of its territory. Meanwhile, it is steadily pushing its “resistance” narrative,

advancing its ideological goals through the creation of cultural centers

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-is-iran-up-to-in-deir-al-zour>), and grooming local Shia groups (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/pushing-back-on-iran-in-syria-part-1-beyond-the-boots>).

In the wake of Soleimani’s death, Tehran may expand the model it perfected in Syria: namely, fostering the creation of numerous smaller groups, placing them under a general Iranian umbrella to ensure their efficacy, and playing them off one another in order to keep them under control. Currently, much of the Syrian territory controlled by such groups overlaps, especially around the border with Iraq. These areas are home to a large number of bases, Shia conversion centers, and recruitment efforts. Because they serve as a key section of Iran’s “land bridge” to the Lebanese border with Israel, they are very important geostrategically.

If the United States launches further military action in response to Iranian or proxy aggression, it would be better to do so in Syria, since that would serve the twin goals of avoiding further flare-ups in Iraq and targeting an important Iranian nexus. The assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis on Iraqi soil has enabled Muqtada al-Sadr to exploit domestic anger for his own purposes. Targeting proxy groups in Syria would also send the message that Washington aims to put an end to Tehran’s transnational project. Operating inside Syria may be more difficult to do now that the United States has fewer allies, but any actions it takes there can be more overt. Finally, U.S. officials should examine how the various Shia groups in Syria and other countries are interlinked, taking this overlap into consideration when designing future sanctions.

HANIN GHADDAR

Lebanese Hezbollah remains the most institutionally established of Iran’s proxies. Yet Soleimani’s death will present more challenges than opportunities for the group.

The Hezbollah-Iran relationship last came to a crossroads in 2011. Up to that point, the group had more room for maneuver, and its leaders had direct access to the Iranian regime, which often consulted with them on matters relating to Lebanon and the rest of the Arab world. After 2011, however, the Syria intervention and Soleimani’s increased micromanagement gradually shrank the organization’s military and political maneuverability.

Now that Soleimani’s heavy hand has been lifted, Hezbollah seems to believe it may be able to regain some of the independence it enjoyed before 2011. Yet the group also understands how difficult its current position is. Hezbollah has been suffering from decreased resources and personnel, particularly after being hit with stronger sanctions, losing many elite commanders in Syria, and relying too much on Soleimani as a military commander. As such, the group is currently spread too thin to play a much larger role in Iraq or the rest of the Shia Crescent.

Recent domestic protests have only compounded these problems. Unlike in Iraq, the protestors in Lebanon are challenging their local Shia militia indirectly—they are demonstrating against corruption, and Hezbollah protects the corrupt system.

The group’s response to these challenges is to consolidate domestic power. For the first time ever, it has formed a government composed entirely of Hezbollah allies. Although it will continue to work on precision missile capabilities with Iran's help (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-new-iranian-general-to-watch>), it cannot afford to provoke a war with Israel until they are ready, so its interim goal is to

establish control over all military and security positions within the government. It is also preparing for the collapse of the Lebanese economy and state by storing food and goods, believing it can regain control by offering them as relief amid the deepening crisis. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has flooded the domestic market with Iranian goods by continuing its smuggling operations, and exploited Lebanon's dollar shortage by hoarding U.S. dollars from Iraq.

To enhance Washington's current sanctions-based approach, U.S. officials should use the Global Magnitsky Act to target Hezbollah's corrupt political allies. This would hurt the group while simultaneously supporting protesters' demands for an end to corruption.

Another way to counteract Hezbollah is to refrain from bailing out Lebanon's current government. The group's leaders are adept at manipulating the international community's desire for stability in Lebanon. Under this pretext, they have put forward a Hezbollah-controlled government that will not carry out substantial reforms. Bailing this administration out would only legitimize the group's control over Lebanese politics. To be sure, the economy and government will likely collapse without a bailout, producing significant humanitarian consequences. Yet the Lebanese people are willing to accept a failed state if hitting rock bottom gives them a genuine opportunity to rebuild the system.

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