

Iraqi Protesters on the Killing of Qassem Soleimani: The Protests Will Continue

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Brief Analysis

On the streets of Baghdad, protesters are still mulling over the U.S. air raid on Friday morning that killed General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC's) Quds Force near Baghdad international airport along with nine others, including Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis.

Meanwhile, Iran has moved forward: the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has appointed Ismail Qaani—Soleimani's deputy chief—as a new commander of Iran's Quds Force, and Iran has launched a direct strike on an Iraqi base with U.S. forces, though the attack did not produce any casualties.

Despite the apparent move towards de-escalation on both sides, Soleimani's killing has nevertheless drastically escalated U.S.-Iran tensions, which had been fraying in the past several weeks due to engagement with the Iranian-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah forces inside Iraq. For Iraq's political establishment and its proxy forces, the response has been clear: thousands of people gathered in Baghdad and many other Iraqi cities to mourn the deaths of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) also called Hashd Al-Shaabi group. This procession wound its way through Kadhimiya and towards the Green Zone, where government and diplomatic compounds were located.

On January 5, Iraq's parliament also voted to expel U.S. military forces from Iraq, though this decision has not actually changed the status of U.S. forces. Inside the hall of parliament, the parliamentarians chanted "Yes, Yes Soleimani" even as they opined on Iraqi sovereignty, making more explicit their ties to Iran.

Despite a strong official condemnation of Soleimani's killing in Iraq, Iran's Iraq proxies have been less than pleased with the response of the general public to Soleimani's death. In particular, the mostly Shia protestors who have

occupied the streets for months to protest government corruption and Iranian intervention in Iraqi affairs have clashed with Iran's desire for a uniform image of mourning.

Protesters in Basra were targeted by Kata'ib Hezbollah (Kata'ib Bridges) during the march to mourn Soleimani and Al-Muhandis when it appeared that these people refused to mourn Soleimani. In Nasiriya, for example, Kata'ib Hezbollah opened fire on protesters after they refused to attend Soleimani's funeral in Al-Habbobi square, killing one and wounding two. These pro-Iranian militias have tried to bring in funeral processions into the protest areas, but this has simply sparked anger amongst the protesters.

This violence is directed at Iraqis who—in the proxies' eyes—have failed to adequately mourn Soleimani. In fact, many Iraqis have welcomed the killing of Soleimani, especially those who have been on the streets for months protesting Iran's control of the country. Interviews conducted by the author with Iraqis provided a different window into how Soleimani's death is seen by those Iraqis who have taken to the streets to express their frustration with the Iraqi government's failures to—among other things—protect Iraqi sovereignty from Iranian intervention.

For example, according to the 24 year old Mohammed Qasim, based in Basra, the death of Soleimani is a net positive: "One of the best news at the beginning of the new year is that Soleimani has been killed. I think Soleimani's assassination should have been done years ago—he was clearly acting against the protesters. So, his killing is a turning point for Iranian presence in the country."

For Qasim, "Anyone who kills Iraqis—especially protesters—his fate will be like Soleimani's, or even like Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's end." Qasim made the connection in his eyes between ISIS and Iran more explicit: "Both ISIS and the Quds Forces are criminal. We will not allow anyone to use our lands for battle."

Qasim's equation of ISIS and Iran emphasize the sense of many Iraqis that Iran has been driving wars in both Iraq and Syria through both the Quds force and Iranian proxies. Moreover, for another interviewee, the U.S. reparial after the storming of their embassy was actually a warranted response to Iran's escalation.

Similarly, a 29-year old a doctor and protester who asked to be identified by his last name, Alghaffari, explained that he "totally welcomed the Soleimani killing. He hurt Iraqis and did lots of operations against Iraq." For Alghaffari, there was a historical grievance between Iraqis and Soleimani that included the "assassination of 182 Iraqi military pilots...who participated in the Iran-Iraq war in 1980-88." Like Qasim, he also saw little distinction between Iran's actions and those of the terrorists groups that have terrorized Iraq for decades: Iran's ideology is like any other terrorist group's ones, like Al-Qaeda. Given this association, Alghaffari characterized the United States' actions against Iran as similar to its other counterterrorism efforts: "America toppled Saddam Hussein and freed Iraqis from ISIS through the international coalition air forces. And now it is going to put an end to the militias."

Alghaffari also emphasized that his rejection of Soleimani was driven in part by the control that Iran has sought to exercise over Iraqi political affairs. "After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran has played a vital role in sending many politicians to be decision-makers in the Iraqi government...Iran has been behind the instability of Iraq for decades." Nor was Alghaffari particularly concerned about the outcome of the U.S. attack: "Iran wants to play a game with the most powerful Empire in the world, the United States, and of course it will lose at the end."

At the end of the day, Alghaffari also saw the attacks on Iran as helpful to Iraq's protest movement: "Soleimani-affiliated militias in Iraq were behind killing, arresting, kidnapping, and assassination of hundreds of the peaceful protesters, while the ongoing unrest entered its fourth month, but Soleimani killing never weakened our revolution."

Riyadh Kareem, a 42 years old from Baghdad, explained that in his mind, "Iran started the war when it targeted the U.S. embassy and many U.S. military facilities by its supporters in Iraq, so the United States has simply responded." Moreover, Kareem saw the current U.S. presence in Iraq as one that actually benefited Iraqi sovereignty: "The United States wants to get rid of Iran and its proxies to help Iraq to build itself." Even so Kareem saw deescalation of any

potential conflict between the two states as paramount: “generally, I do not agree that our skies should be a medium for military conflict inside my country.”

This is not to say that all Iraqi protesters are supportive of the killing of Soleimani. Also referencing the sovereignty of Iraq, 28 year old Ali Abdul Salam saw U.S. actions in another light: “The presence of Qassem Soleimani in Iraq is legal, and [he and his forces are] military experts present in Iraq, like the US military experts in the international coalition who came to Iraq to defeat ISIS.”

Abdul Salam continued, “This brutal attack on Soleimani is a violation to the sovereignty of Iraq, and is contrary to all international laws as well as the security agreement between Iraq and the United States.” But like Kareem, Abdul Salam worried especially about the potential for escalation to destabilize Iraq. “The killing of Soleimani means more escalation not only in Iraq, but also in the whole region. And this is all due to America's reckless policies by Trump. Accordingly, removing the American presence has become an urgent necessity, because it does not respect the sovereignty of Iraq.”

For many protesters though, the real battle remains on the streets of Iraq, and is over the Iraqi government’s accountability to its people. Hameed Al-Shiblawi, a protester from Najaf, has taken to the streets since the demonstrations started on October 1. For Al-Shiblawi, “Soleimani’s killing has not affected our revolutionary protests, nor sent us back home. We will keep holding the streets until all our demands are met.”

“We are all against Iraq’s areas being used as a conflict zone, and all have to know that Iraq is for Iraqis only, not for anyone else. It is not for any country who wants to fight.”

The Iraqi political analyst Ghanim Abed agrees with this protester’s assessment: “The killing of Soleimani did not impact the continuing protests, nor has it sent them back home, despite Iran’s many actions against protesters to curb the unrest.” Abed also noted the role that the militias have continued to play in the violence against protesters: “Soleimani-backed militias have killed and assassinated the peaceful demonstrators on a daily basis, also dozens of their whereabouts are still unknown.”

For Abed, he did not believe that the larger regional conflict threatening to play out inside Iraq would lead to a ‘third world war,’ and suggested instead that the United States has clipped Iran’s wings in the region. Now, “Solemani is like a page in a history book, and that page has been turned.” ❖

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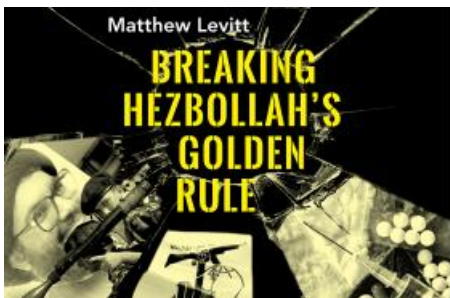
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