

How Israel Could Become Part of the U.S.-Iran Story

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The IRGC didn't spend decades and billions building up Iran's regional satellites for them to simply stand aside if the homeland is attacked, which Trump has vowed to do if the situation escalates further.

Israelis awoke last Friday morning to news of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani's death with one immediate question on their minds: Were we responsible? Once it became clear that the United States, and not Israel, was behind the drone strike in Baghdad that killed the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, apprehension turned to glee. Israelis didn't need a primer on what the preceding proper nouns are—the IRGC, its extraterritorial Quds Force unit and Gen. Soleimani at the lead have been battling Israel for years. “No one in Israel will shed a tear at [his] departure from this world,” prominent local analyst Anshel Pfeffer said, summing up the glee. Still some apprehension lingered. How exactly would Iran and its proxy forces spread across the region retaliate?

The list of Iran-backed militant groups just on Israel's borders, armed with thousands of rockets and missiles, stretches from Hezbollah in Lebanon, to Shia militias based in Syria, to Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza. Gen. Soleimani had a hand in funding, training and arming all of them. In interviews with senior Israeli defence officials in recent years, the name Soleimani came up often—usually in personal and respectful terms; a cagey adversary, if a bit grandiose in his ambitions, as one intelligence officer described.

Why was Gen. Soleimani still alive, Israeli Channel 10 television asked the outgoing Israeli military chief of staff, Gadi Eisenkot, last year. “That is a question,” Gen. Eisenkot replied with a shrug.

It wasn't Israel, though, that pulled the trigger, but rather U.S. President Donald Trump—an important distinction.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu obviously voiced complete support for the move, [saying](#)

<https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2020/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-addresses-Kohelet-Policy-Forum-conference-on-the-Pompeo-Doctrine-8-January-2020.aspx> Mr. Trump had acted against a “terrorist-in-chief who was the

architect...of Iran's campaign of carnage and terror throughout the Middle East and throughout the world." Yet Mr. Netanyahu himself, as well as other senior Israeli officials, have remained relatively tight-lipped, prudently trying to keep Israel out of the wider crisis unfolding in the region.

The Soleimani killing was "part of a campaign between the U.S. and Iran over the character of Iraq. That's the story," Major-General Herzi Halevi of the Israel Defence Forces said in the past week. "It has an impact on us as Israelis, we need to follow it closely, but we're not the central story here and good that it happened far away." Israel, though, is part of the Soleimani story—both in terms of potential fallout from any future U.S.-Iran escalation and, conversely, from how heightened regional tensions could have an impact inside Israel itself.

Iran's missile strikes on Wednesday against two Iraqi bases housing U.S. troops, its first response to the assassination of its top general, didn't draw any casualties. Mr. Trump himself minimized the strikes and said Tehran "appear[ed] to be standing down." The coming days and weeks will test that proposition.

Iranian leaders and their regional allies had vowed a "severe response" against the U.S., with emphasis on American forces stationed around the region. Israel for the time being isn't the primary target, as local officials have assessed. The Israeli military has been put on alert, but that in itself isn't out of the ordinary. Some amusement was directed at the French and U.S. governments issuing travel advisories for Israel this past week; many locals were more preoccupied with torrential rains (including some fatalities) than geopolitics.

But if Iran or its proxies attack the U.S. again, and Mr. Trump decides to retaliate—as he's vowed—against Iran proper, then Israel could quickly become part of the story. Gen. Soleimani didn't spend decades and billions building up Iran's regional satellites for them to simply stand aside if the metropole was attacked. Lebanon's Hezbollah in particular was always thought to be the main deterrent against any American (or Israeli) attack on Iran. In the event, more than 100,000 rockets and missiles in its arsenal would rain down on Israel, forcing a fierce Israeli military response. With reason, most analysts predict that the next major clash between these two old foes will likely be the worst Arab-Israeli war in nearly 50 years.

Israeli officials didn't need Mr. Trump's dramatic use of military force and the death of Gen. Soleimani to remind them of these risks. But the public may have. Images of the Iranian general's dismembered hand on front pages, television bulletins starting with news from Iraq, the narrative of Mr. Trump's muscular "return" to the Middle East—all of these have been useful to distract from more quotidian matters, such as a third straight election a mere seven weeks away.

Mr. Netanyahu, as is well known, is fighting for his political life. A slew of corruption indictments—including for bribery—were issued last November, putting his legal future in jeopardy. An actual war is bad, messy and never easy. But an uptick in tensions, and a focus on military affairs (in contrast to indictments), could prove beneficial for an experienced incumbent.

Mr. Netanyahu has spent most of his career railing against Iran, and all of the last year warning the public that it was a "very sensitive security moment." Israel, he keeps repeating, stands at a historic juncture—with "tremendous threats" looming. Depending on decisions made in Washington and Tehran, he may yet be proven correct.

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