

# The Killing of Qassem Soleimani: What Does it Mean for Iraq?

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Jan 9, 2020

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Brief Analysis

**A**fter years of violence, today's Iraq is a country on the precipice of potential widespread bloodshed and destabilization. The country has already experienced months of large anti-government protests met with a brutal government and militia response. On top of these efforts—which have unseated Iraq's most recent Prime Minister and have led to a caretaker government—the country also faces an ongoing ISIS insurgency and attacks by Shia militia on U.S. forces stationed in the country.

It is the latter that has brought Iraq its most recent major challenge. The U.S. killing on January 2 of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Deputy Leader Abu Mahdi al Muhandis has placed Iraq at the center of a new potential threat. Understanding the potential paths for further escalation between these two powers is vital for the future of Iraq's stability.

The American decision to kill Soleimani and Muhandis seems to have been brought on directly by a series of quickly unfolding events. Kataib Hezbollah (KH), an Iraqi Shia militia with close ties to Iran, orchestrated a string of rocket attacks targeting U.S. bases in Iraq, followed by KH and its supporters' subsequent attempt to storm the U.S. embassy in Baghdad in response to retaliatory U.S. airstrikes against KH targets. Among other roles as leader of Iran's Quds Force, Soleimani had been instrumental in guiding Shia militia operations in Iraq and in the region against U.S. targets.

The presence of KH in Iraq reflects a larger challenge to Iraq posed by pro-Iranian militias within the country. While some of Iraq's Shia militias were originally formed to fight ISIS, those groups backed by Iran have now focused on promoting Iranian efforts, including efforts to expel U.S. forces from the country. Removing a U.S. presence in Iraq is instrumental to Iran's other goals in Iraq, such as solidifying its partial control of Iraqi politics and its use of Iraq as a cornerstone in its strategy to build a 'Shia crescent' throughout the Middle East.

Given recent events, Iraq now also appears to be the most likely arena where any further heightened level of conflict between the U.S. and Iran will play itself out. Granted, Iraq is not the only place that Iran is likely to attack U.S. interests—other options include cyber-attacks against the United States, strikes against U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and/or Israel, terrorist attacks against U.S. civilians in the Middle East or attacks against US ships in the Gulf. However, while these types of attacks would show Iranian resolve against the United States, they are not as likely to help Iran achieve its larger goal of reshaping the balance of power in Iran's favor in the Middle East.

Iran chose to respond to the U.S. drone strike that killed Soleimani by attacking two U.S. bases in Iraq during the early hours of January 8 with ballistic missiles launched from Iran. The missile attack was intended to show Iranian resolve, while at the same time designed not to provoke a strong kinetic response from the United States.

Adding to this de-escalatory trend, Iran told the Iraqi government that the missiles were coming and also warned several foreign military advisors at the bases. Thus, there was plenty of time for U.S. forces, who had warning of the coming attack from their foreign partners, to take cover and ensure that the Iranian attack did not produce any American casualties.

Indeed, this attack on the U.S. bases in Erbil and Ain al Assad was not meant to kill Americans but was rather designed to placate domestic voices in Iran calling for revenge and to project strength in the region to Iran's allies. This initial act of retaliation suggests that the main thrust of Iran's response to the U.S. attack on Soleimani will be political rather than military. It also suggests that the main thrust of any further retaliation will be aimed at Iraq.

Aside from this attack coming directly from Iran, Tehran also holds the option of pursuing attacks via its proxies if the situation re-escalates. For Iran, attacking U.S. forces in Iraq through its proxies makes logical sense to further its strategic interests. Doing so shows resolve as it can be seen as advancing deterrence against further U.S. actions, and, most importantly, it puts political pressure on the U.S. presence in Iraq. If the United States takes further action targeting Iranian or Iranian-aligned Iraqi targets in Iraq, this will stoke anger inside Iraq at the United States for violating Iraqi sovereignty and killing Iraqi citizens. The United States is already facing a 'decision' from the Iraqi parliament to remove the U.S. military from Iraq—though this is not legally binding—and it is possible that more binding legal efforts could follow. Pushing the United States out of Iraq would be a huge strategic triumph for Iranian goals to dominate Iraq and build the Shia crescent in the Middle East.

So far, the American response to this latest strike appears to be conciliatory. President Trump's remarks in his televised speech to the American public on January 8 were largely focused on extending an invitation to the Iranian government to negotiate a way for both countries to reach a mutually acceptable accommodation. While both countries are likely to use the current de-escalation as an opportunity to move toward a political deal that meets their interests, there is no guarantee that these efforts will succeed. And if this round of de-escalation fails, Iraq will likely, once again, become a venue for violent contestation between the US and Iran.

There are four other scenarios in Iraq that could potentially have come to pass in terms of the Iranian efforts to secure their interests in Iraq if the diplomacy track seems to be failing. These scenarios all depend on the calculations of Iranian and U.S. leadership as to how to best protect their interests in the country and in the region. Moreover, both sides must work to avoid paying a domestic political price for looking weak in the face of their adversary.

The first scenario—a very risky one on Iran's part—is for the Iranian government to stage a larger show of retaliation by significantly escalating pressure on the U.S. presence in Iraq. Such efforts could include the use of more sophisticated and deadly missiles against U.S. bases and even attempts to overrun these bases and the U.S. embassy in the country. Some Shia militias in Iraq have been receiving advanced Iranian missiles during the last few months and it is likely these missiles were supplied for the possibility of such a scenario.

While such a scenario would almost certainly invite a massive U.S. military response against Shia militia attackers in Iraq, and possibly targets in Iran—as President Trump’s recent tweet has threatened—this course of action could further a pair of Iranian goals. It would show resolve on the part of the Iranian government to regime backers in Iran and abroad that it will not bend to American pressure. And the escalating violence would also put great political pressure on the United States from Iraqis demanding that the United States leave the country rather than risk a full blown war there. While Iran would likely suffer very heavy short-term losses during the expected U.S. retaliation after escalation, getting the United States out of Iraq would be the prized achievement of a central Iranian goal.

Another possible scenario is for Iran-aligned Shia militias in Iraq to go through the motions of retaliating against U.S. forces in the country without true escalation. This effect would be achieved by continuing to use the relatively low damage katushya rocket attacks that the militias have used in previous months, and would be in line with Iran’s non-fatal strike on January 8. In this scenario, it is likely that the primary thrust of Iranian countermeasures against the United States would instead take place elsewhere. However, the cost to Iran of this plan could be as great as the assault on U.S. bases in Iraq would bring, and the long-term pay-off would also be less likely to include a full U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. Without strong U.S. retaliation within the country, it is unlikely that there would be enough pressure within Iraq to remove the U.S. presence there.

A third scenario would occupy the middle ground between the two previous strategies: it could include sophisticated and deadly missile attacks on U.S. forces in bases in Iraq without efforts to overrun American bases. This third strategy would also include some mix of Iranian attacks on U.S. interests outside of Iraq. A multi-faceted array of attacks by Iran would show strong resolve to deter the United States from further high-level regime targeting and satisfy domestic calls for revenge against the United States, while also likely to draw out a strong military response from the United States, albeit less than if U.S. installations were overrun.

However, Iran may also eschew a military response altogether and rely instead on political pressure inside Iraq. This fourth scenario would use Iran’s very powerful political allies in the country and include threats and promises aimed at Iraqi politicians to remove U.S. forces in the country. In certain respects, this strategy is already in play, but Iran could ratchet up its pressure to secure the Iraqi government’s commitment to pushing U.S. forces out of the country. Iran’s allies are already well-positioned for such a push, and the upsurge of anti-American anger caused by the attack on Soleimani and Muhandis—along with Iran’s strong influence in Iraq’s media market—would also benefit such a tactic.

This politically-focused strategy would be the least risky for the Iranians, as it would be difficult for the U.S. government to justify attacks on Iraqi Shia militia allies closely linked with Iran or Iranian targets themselves as a result of political pressure to leave Iraq. On the one hand, this strategy would be difficult to sell to Iran’s supporters as revenge for Soleimani’s killing, but the desire to avoid possibly onerous American military retaliation may outweigh Iranian domestic political concerns. However, this strategy could have serious costs for the Iraqis. While less likely to attack militias given this outcome, the United States might instead impose sanctions on Iraq, even as the loss of U.S. troops in Iraq would weaken the ongoing efforts to fight ISIS in the country. Iran would also suffer from U.S. sanctions against Iraq because of the importance of Iraqi markets to Iran. But for the staunchly pro-Iranian forces in Iraq and for the Iranian regime, they would likely be willing to weather these costs in order to remove the physical presence of the United States in Iraq.

Neither the U.S. nor Iranian governments want an all-out war between their countries. The Trump administration has promised to get the United States out of wars in the Middle East and elsewhere, while the Iranian government cannot easily afford more economic hardship. Moreover, such a conflict would be very costly for both states, and it is unlikely that either side could achieve a quick, decisive victory.

There are now reasons to believe that the United States and Iran may be headed toward a period of deescalating

tensions and efforts to arrive at some sort of accord. Yet until such an accord is created, Iraq will unfortunately continue to suffer from forces outside of its control. These are the most perilous times Iraq has faced since the invasion of 2003, and a caretaker government is faced with the country's need for steady and capable leadership to guide the country through them. ❖

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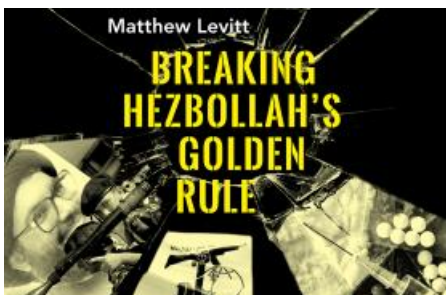
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