

Hezbollah's Moment of Truth

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Articles & Testimony

The group has promised bloody retribution for Suleimani's death, but in reality it will likely stay focused on rebuilding its own diminished stature at home.

Even before he was assassinated by U.S. drones this month, Qassem Suleimani, the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, was having a difficult few months. For years, he had steadily expanded his operations through proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. But recently, his forces had taken numerous hits. The Israeli army had attacked many Iranian bases in Syria and Iraq (and potentially Lebanon), **[killing a large number \(https://www.newsweek.com/israel-attack-four-countries-bombing-iran-allies-1456161\)](https://www.newsweek.com/israel-attack-four-countries-bombing-iran-allies-1456161)** of Lebanese and Iraqi fighters and commanders and eliminating most of Suleimani's **[precision missile factories \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50485521\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50485521)**.

Despite the considerable losses, Suleimani had one thing going for him: that he was never forced to directly confront the United States. Eyes on the main prize of securing Iran's influence over the region, he played down any mishaps and promised a response at "the right time and place," a mantra for Iranian proxies and officials in recent years.

But the right time and place didn't come. Suleimani, the grand orchestrator of Iran's regional power, was killed. And now Iran is in a difficult position. Doing nothing will indicate weakness, but responding forcefully could also expose the regime and its proxies to more U.S. strikes. Given the constraints, it is likely that Iran will avoid drastic measures that could lead to war. Rather, it will continue the same path blazed by Suleimani: no direct confrontation with its main foe, but a serious effort to secure Iran's institutional influence in the region. And Hezbollah—one of its main regional partners, which in recent days has promised a campaign of fire and fury—will likely do the same.

Signs of Iran and Hezbollah's strategy have already started to surface. On Jan. 5, Iran declared that it would no longer abide by any limits of its 2015 nuclear deal. Iraq's parliament likewise passed a resolution calling for the removal of all remaining U.S. troops in Iraq. Days later, Iran struck American bases in Iraq, after which it claimed it does not

seek war.

Meanwhile, at a memorial service for Suleimani in Beirut's southern suburbs on Jan. 5, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah called for a far harsher response. The U.S. military, he said, would have to pay the price for the killing of Suleimani, warning that its soldiers and officers would return home in coffins. He declared that responding to the assassination would not be Iran's responsibility alone, but all of its allies' too. He cautioned, though, that U.S. civilians should not be targeted. "**Fair punishment (<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/coffins-of-american-soldiers-hezbollah-leader-threatens-us-troops>)**," he argued, would be aimed at "the American military presence in the region: American military bases, American naval ships, every American officer and soldier in our countries and region."

His comments came a day after Zainab Suleimani, Qassem Suleimani's daughter, was interviewed on **Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV channel (<https://www.english.almanar.com.lb/905533>)**. She said that she has faith in Nasrallah. "I know that he will avenge my father's blood," she added.

Her statement was not really an indication that Hezbollah will soon take the initiative to launch a military response against the United States. Rather, it was clever messaging, a reminder of Iran's regional power, and a hint at how Suleimani himself had cultivated Hezbollah into one of Iran's most valuable allies.

In fact, fiery rhetoric aside, Nasrallah knows that he cannot be directly involved in any kind of retribution. It is telling that, in his remarks, he didn't mention Lebanon once, nor did he hint at Israel as a target. Despite his bravado, Nasrallah knows that the best option for him and Iran is to continue to be pragmatic and not start a regional war.

For the past decade, Hezbollah's strategy in Lebanon has been to preserve stability, but the kind of stability that protects Iran's interests. That's exactly why the group saw the recent protests in Lebanon as a challenge that needed to be silenced. Hezbollah sent in its thugs to attack the protesters in the streets, mainly in Shiite towns and villages, and increased threats against Shiite dissidents and activists. Suleimani himself had frequently traveled to Beirut to help quell the marches by advising Hezbollah's officials on how and when to engage with the protestors. His strategy was focused on two goals: stopping Shiites from participating and pressuring security institutions to crush them. He understood that any turmoil could pose a risk to Iran's fragile interests and accomplishments in the region.

For now, Hezbollah still has control over the Lebanese state and its institutions, although its popularity has been damaged. Hezbollah will take the opportunity afforded by Suleimani's death to try to regain some of this popularity and revive its image by painting the United States as the bad guy, although this strategy has not recently worked for the group. Lebanese people seem more focused today on the economy and daily hardships, rather than ideological rhetoric. All this means that Hezbollah will have an uphill battle reconsolidating its power.

Beyond that, the group would have a hard time mustering a campaign of revenge even if it wanted to. It lost a large number of its elite forces in Syria and the rest of the region. Much of its current fighting force is made up of new recruits who still need to be organized and structured. That takes time, and it is also proving difficult, because many of the new fighters were hastily recruited during the Syria crisis and have been difficult to train. Its finances are also under strain, given Iran's own budgetary woes, and the group has limited bandwidth to take on any new adventures.

And so, as Iran tries to consolidate its power in Iraq via state institutions and limited maneuvers against U.S. troops, Hezbollah will try to do the same in Lebanon. First, it will likely make an effort to form a government in Lebanon that will be more closely affiliated with the group and its allies. And second, Hezbollah will try to sell this government as the only option that would ensure stability, hoping that the international community will value quiet over reform, especially as the region is boiling with tension.

At the same time, even as it avoids military confrontation, Hezbollah will most likely work to rebuild its arsenal of precision missiles and prepare for war in the future. And, finally, it will try to turn the Lebanese economic crisis to its

own advantage. For example, it may increase its smuggling across the Lebanese-Syrian borders to bring in food and medicine from Iraq and Syria. That is already happening at a small scale and has allowed Hezbollah to build a parallel economy in Lebanon. Bloody revenge may sound great to Iran and Hezbollah supporters, but a steady, bloodless takeover across the region will pay off better in the long term.

When the Hezbollah military commander Imad Mughniyeh was assassinated by the CIA and Mossad in Syria in February 2008, the group's most forceful response was inside Lebanon, where it deployed weapons against Lebanese throughout the summer. That was the moment Hezbollah took over Lebanon, by eliminating the adversary March 14 government and founding the national unity government, which has since put Lebanon under the group's authority.

Given Iran and Hezbollah's likely strategy, the best way to contain them is to support and empower the people of Lebanon and Iraq, who are the real faction that can offer or deny Iran's proxies support. They are the genuine agents of change in the region.

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