

Iraqi Reactions to Soleimani's Assassination

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Jan 3, 2020

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Brief Analysis

After reports of Qassem Soleimani's death were confirmed, Twitter videos emerged depicting cheering Iraqi protesters heading to Baghdad's Tahrir Square to celebrate the death of a man who had until recently been deeply involved in Iraqi politics. However, whatever the public demonstrations suggest, the reality is that the Iraqi public is almost certainly deeply divided over this sensational incident.

Surely there are some Iraqis, particularly among the Shia Popular Mobilization Forces militias, who were truly loyal to Soleimani and are now angry and eager for revenge. And there are others who, even if not pro-Iran partisans, understandably resent this American escalation of its own feud with Iran on Iraqi soil, especially in so blatant and dangerously provocative a fashion. For these reasons, it was prudent for the U.S. State Department to urge American citizens to depart Iraq immediately in the aftermath of the latest events.

At the same time, however, many Iraqis have lately become increasingly bitter at Iran's interference in their country—and so they may not be furious about Soleimani's assassination. The evidence for this assertion lies, first of all, in the growing mass protests against Iran, which have featured the repeated torching of Iranian consulates in the Shia strongholds of Najaf and Basra over the past year.

Moreover, repeated, credible public opinion surveys by Iraq's leading independent pollster, Munqith Dagher, have demonstrated unequivocally that the majority of Iraq's public—including the majority of its Shia population—**have turned sharply against Iran (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/new-data-on-iraqi-political-trends-parsing-the-regional-implications>)** during the past two or three years. To reinforce that point, Washington should remind Iraqis and others that Soleimani's very presence inside Iraq violated international law, in the form of previous formal UN Security Council resolutions imposing a foreign travel ban on him for his illegal and malign activity.

Yet the fact that many Iraqis may not see the death of Soleimani as a tragedy is no reason for American officials to continue gloating over his demise, or to point to Iraqis dancing in the streets to celebrate his end. On the contrary, a far better course to demonstrate American commitment to an independent Iraq is to emphasize, as Secretary of

State Mike Pompeo just did, the American “commitment to de-escalation” in Iraq. That is surely what most Iraqis of whatever political stripe desire.

Indeed, President Barham Salih’s initial cautious statement in response to Soleimani’s killing—and even the statement issued by key Iraqi political figure Muqtada al-Sadr—echoed that desire. It would serve the interests of all involved to move in the direction of de-escalation, difficult though that will be. A tough but necessary first step would be for the United States to avoid further violent actions inside Iraq—even if Iran or its local agents take some retaliatory actions against American targets there. De-escalation on the American side would help enable Iraqis, Americans, and Iranians to keep coexisting, however uneasily, on Iraqi territory.

If, however, some Iraqis now put greater pressure within parliament and in the streets to expel Americans from their country, the United States will be faced with a new dilemma. This is a realistic possibility, especially since the United States’ recent strike on Kataib Hezbollah positions in response to their killing of a U.S. contractor already spurred calls for the removal of U.S. forces. Previously, senior Iraqi officials had assured their American counterparts that they would block a parliamentary vote on this question, but this internal political calculus may now have changed. In case pressures against maintaining an American presence in Iraq do increase, there is also a fallback American option to consider more seriously going forward.

This fallback position would be to keep expanding, quietly, the U.S. military footprint inside the northern Iraqi autonomous Kurdistan Region, even while withdrawing some or all troops further south. The Kurdistan Regional Government is much more united both in its friendship toward the United States and wariness toward Iran (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/iraqs-kurds-weigh-their-options>), so it might well acquiesce to this unorthodox yet mutually beneficial arrangement. It also has the legal and constitutional authority, while still under Iraqi sovereignty, to “conduct its own representation and relations with foreign nations.” Such an outcome, though not ideal, would maintain an important security presence in Iraq and the region as a whole, even as it might help defuse the tensions with both Baghdad and Tehran in the wake of the current Soleimani crisis. ❖

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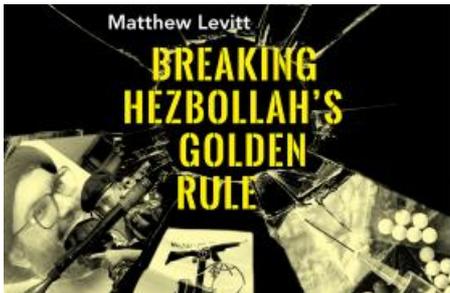
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