

Iran's Supreme Leader Responds to the Soleimani Assassination

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Khamenei and other regime officials have been quick to swear revenge, but for now they may focus more on stoking patriotic and militaristic sentiment at home.

A few hours after Iran confirmed that Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani had been killed in Iraq, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei issued a statement describing those who shed his blood as “the most wretched of humankind.” Calling Soleimani the international symbol of “resistance,” he then announced three days of public mourning in Iran. He also declared that “severe revenge awaits the criminals” who killed Soleimani—an act that the United States had claimed credit for by the time he spoke. Other high-ranking officials echoed this sentiment, including President Hassan Rouhani, Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani, and Defense Minister Amir Hatami, who explicitly promised “revenge” on “all those” involved in the assassination.

Despite this rhetoric, however, and despite Soleimani’s unmatched role in carrying out Iran’s regional policy of adventurism and asymmetric warfare, the regime may avoid major, immediate retaliation if it sees such a move as too costly or as a potential trigger for serious military conflict with the United States. On January 1, amid escalating tensions in Iraq but before Soleimani’s assassination, Khamenei stated, “We would not take the country to war...but if others want to impose something on this country, we will stand before them forcefully.” In response to President Trump’s assertion that [Iran played a role \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-iraq-relations-at-a-crossroads-policy-options\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-iraq-relations-at-a-crossroads-policy-options) in the December 31 riot at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, Khamenei told listeners he had two messages for Washington: “First, how dare you! This has nothing to do with Iran. Second, you should be reasonable and understand what is the main cause for these problems. But of course they are not [reasonable].”

In the coming days, the regime will likely devote most of its attention to organizing massive funeral services and mourning ceremonies for Soleimani. After all, state propaganda has portrayed the commander as a national hero for the past decade, touting his efforts to defend the country against the Islamic State and other dangerous enemies. It has also highlighted his role abroad in order to underscore that “resistance” is more effective than negotiations in dealing with threats originating from the United States—the regime’s way of downplaying President Rouhani’s diplomatic efforts and foreign policy achievements on the nuclear deal and other matters. Other past tributes to Soleimani include printing a stamp with his picture, broadcasting hundreds of hours of television and radio programs glorifying his personality and sacrifices, and having the IRGC-affiliated production company Moj release a movie about him.

Given this long pattern of exalting Soleimani, his mourning period will probably be second only to the late Ruhollah Khomeini’s in scope. An overwhelming celebration could benefit the regime by diverting public attention from recent domestic crises—most crucially, **[the November gasoline protests](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-domestic-and-foreign-response-options-to-the-protests)** (**<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-domestic-and-foreign-response-options-to-the-protests>**) and the regime’s subsequent crackdown, whose violent consequences are still being suffered and mourned by many Iranians. This would be in keeping with the state’s past use of Soleimani as a symbol for arousing patriotic sentiments among those strata of society who are losing their commitment to Khamenei’s Islamic ideology and/or their respect for the regime’s legitimacy.

Indeed, a carefully fabricated and militaristic version of patriotism may have become the regime’s strongest tool for mobilization, compensating for the diminished appeal of its Islamist underpinnings. For instance, Mahmoud Dowlatbadi—a well-known Iranian novelist who is regarded as a leftist, secular, even anti-regime intellectual with no record of supporting the state—reflected this sentiment in an August 2015 interview with *Mehr Nameh* monthly, where he expressed admiration for Soleimani and insisted on the vital need to support his forces and the military in general given how they have “protected the country.” Similarly, right after the news broke about Soleimani’s death, regime supporters and officials such as Information Minister Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi began using the Farsi phrase “all together” as a hashtag in relevant Twitter posts, attempting to give the impression that all Iranians are mourning him regardless of their political views.

In theory, such propaganda and exaggerated mourning could further the regime’s efforts to reshape domestic opinion in several ways. First, it might help officials justify pursuing an even more aggressive regional policy. Second, the IRGC may try to restore its image from oppressor of nonviolent protest and civil society to protector of the nation—with the implication that it deserves respect from citizens regardless of their ideology or views on the regime’s legitimacy. Third, unified mourning for Soleimani could reinforce the notion that the government’s various factions agree on the regime’s aggressive foreign policy approach—a useful way to hide political infighting and accelerating disintegration among the regime elite ahead of next month’s planned parliamentary election.

Whatever the regime’s objectives, not all Iranians will react to Soleimani’s death by mourning. In fact, some citizens have already celebrated his death on social media. Propaganda aside, the truth is that many Iranians had begun to view him as a symbol of the regime’s failed regional policy rather than a national hero—especially after protestors in Iraq were seen shouting anti-Iran slogans late last year, and Soleimani began **[helping Iraqi forces crack down on the movement](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/punishing-irans-triggermen-in-iraq-opening-moves-in-a-long-campaign)** (**<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/punishing-irans-triggermen-in-iraq-opening-moves-in-a-long-campaign>**) in an unsuccessful bid to control public anger. Moreover, the IRGC has long proclaimed that it has “full intelligence mastery” in Iraq, so its failure to save such an important commander from assassination there could be seen as an embarrassment among Iranians and Iraqis alike.

Regardless of domestic reactions, one cannot rule out the possibility that the regime might exploit mourning ceremonies as a tactical military tool abroad. For instance, according to Iranian news agencies, tomorrow’s service

in Tehran will be preceded by funeral marches in the Iraqi holy cities of Karbala and Najaf “in response to the Iraqi people’s demand.” More important, Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces militia network reportedly announced a funeral march for the “martyr leaders” that will begin at the International Zone in Baghdad, home to the U.S. embassy and other foreign diplomatic facilities. The latter event holds significant potential for escalating clashes involving U.S., Iraqi, and Iranian proxy forces.

As for Soleimani’s successor, the Supreme Leader has selected Brig. Gen. Esmail Ghani as the new commander of the Qods Force. In his appointment letter, Khamenei stated that the force’s mandate “is the same as it was under the commandship of martyr Soleimani.” Prior to his promotion, Ghani served as Soleimani’s second-in-command, former deputy of intelligence at the IRGC Joint Staff, and a veteran commander of the Iran-Iraq War.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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