

The Killing of Qassem Soleimani: Regional Implications

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Introduction

General Qassem Soleimani, former head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) elite Quds Force, was the second-most powerful man after the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in Iran and the mastermind behind Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East. The head of the Quds Force was a key figure for Iran's operations in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Afghanistan. He was the man behind the strategy of the Middle East, and cultivated 50,000 Shiite paramilitary forces as Iran's proxies against the US interests, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and other Gulf countries. His instrumental role in the spread of Iranian influence in the Middle East made him number one target of the United States who designated Iran as "state sponsor of terrorism."

The West labelled him as a "shadow commander", whereas the Iranians saw him as a "living martyr." On January 3, 2020, his assassination by Donald Trump shocked Iran and many other countries in the world.

This incident has started a new phase of US-Iran antagonism.

According to Iranian media, Qassem Soleimani's funeral was described as the largest in Iran since the funeral of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. He was an influential figure in Iran and the Middle East with thousands of supporters, but for the United States he was a terrorist with American blood on his hands. Soleimani can be also held responsible for thousands of deaths in Syria where he led Iran's support for the Assad regime in its brutal crackdown on the opposition.

This info-pack aims to reveal the personality of Qassem Soleimani and his critical role in Iran's military strategy in the Middle East. It also examines how his killing might cause different results in the region, particularly for three countries: Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Last but not least, this study addresses the prospects for the future of US-Iran relations.



A drone photo shows thousands of Iranians attend the funeral ceremony of Qasem Soleimani, commander of Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Forces in Tehran, Iran on January 06, 2020. (Iranian Leader Press Office / Handout - Anadolu Agency)

Who was Qassem Soleimani?

Qassem Soleimani was born on March 11, 1957, in an impoverished county region in Kerman, Iran's south-eastern province. He did not come from a powerful and respected family, and his schooling ended at a very early age due to his family's economic difficulties. Soleimani left home to work to support his father, who was not capable of paying the agricultural loans to the government of the Shah. 13-year-old Soleimani started working as a labourer at a school construction site in Kerman for eight months. He spent his free time doing weight training in local gyms and

attending the sermons of Hojjat Kamyab, a protégé of Ali Khamenei, who had an influence on Soleimani about revolutionary ideas and activities.

Iran was moving towards a turning point in its history. In 1979, the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, last monarch of Iran, was overthrown by a collective movement of Iranian people. The Islamic Republic of Iran was established under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. At that time, Soleimani was twenty-two years old.



*A file photo dated September 18, 2016 shows Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani (C) during Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's meeting with Revolutionary Guards, in Tehran, Iran.
(Pool / Iranian Supreme Leader Press Office - Anadolu Agency)*

The Formation of the IRGC and the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88)

Following the Iranian revolution in 1979, he joined the IRGC which established in the same year. While the Islamic revolution was still ongoing, Kurdish groups in Mahabad province rebelled by taking advantage of instability across the country. Soleimani played a crucial role in quashing the separatist uprising. Referring to those difficult times in an interview in 2005, he said: [“we were all young and wanted to serve the revolution.”](#)

When the Iran-Iraq War broke out in 1980, Iran was already suffering from internal chaos. However, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's invasion solidified Khomeini's leadership and unified the country in resistance. During the Iran-Iraq war, Soleimani joined numerous military operations as a division commander and fought on the front lines. At the same time, he established relations with different groups opposed to Saddam regime such as Iraqi Kurdish leaders and [the Badr Organisation](#). The latter was established in 1983 as a paramilitary force that is described as Iran's oldest proxy in Iraq. During the Iran-Iraq war, the organization fought alongside the IRGC against the Iraqi military.

Soleimani's popularity increased after the Iran-Iraq war where he emerged as a national hero for the missions he conducted across Iraq's border. He earned a reputation for his bravery and passion in a very short time. Soleimani was seriously injured in several times but survived at the end. Therefore, the Supreme Leader Khamenei has always referred to Soleimani as [“a living martyr of the revolution.”](#)

In the late 1990s, Afghanistan was on the agenda when the Taliban posed a severe threat to Iran. In this critical period, Qassem Soleimani became the head of the Quds Force in 1997 with the support of Ali Khamenei. After the September 11 attacks, the Major-General was directing collaboration attempts with US officials to destroy the Taliban.

1997 was also a significant time inside Iran when reformist Mohammad Khatami became the president. Khatami sought to break the influence of the IRGC; on the other hand, Khamenei was trying to strengthen them. In July 1999, while student protests against the government reached their peak, Soleimani signed a letter with other commanders of IRGC to warn President Khatami that if he failed to quash the demonstrations, the IRGC's patience would begin to run out.

The structure and operations of the Quds Force changed dramatically under the command of Soleimani who transformed it into a special force providing intelligence, conducting sabotage attacks and assassinations.

During the Iran-Iraq war, Soleimani joined numerous military operations as a division commander and fought on the front lines. At the same time, he established relations with different groups opposed to Saddam regime such as Iraqi Kurdish leaders and the Badr Organisation.

The “Shadow Commander”: Soleimani’s Activities in Iraq

Soleimani was one of the key figures not only in Lebanon, but also in Iraq with the group of proxies consisting of the Badr Organisation, Mahdi Army, Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl Al-Haq and so on. Despite their hostility against the US presence in Iraq, these groups initially cooperated with Americans against their common enemy, the Saddam regime. After Saddam’s overthrow in 2003, these same militias raised their arms against American forces. Saddam Hussein’s removal destabilised much of the Middle East, and ever since, Iran has positioned itself as an increasingly influential political force in the region. Soleimani became a more influential actor following the re-establishment of government in Iraq in 2005 under the leadership of Ibrahim al-Jafari and Nouri al-Maliki. Throughout this time, the Badr Organization took part in the state with group’s military wing controlling the interior and transport ministries. The head of Badr Organization, Hadi al-Ameri, had been a close associate of Qassem Soleimani since the Iran-Iraq war.

The United States suffered its biggest losses in Iraq between 2004 and 2006 at the hands of Iranian-backed militias. In 2008, Major General David Petraeus, former Commanding General, Multi-National Force – Iraq (MNF-I), got a message from Soleimani saying “Dear General Petraeus, you should know that I, Qassem Soleimani, control the policy for Iran concerning Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan.” He called on Petraeus to ignore the standard way of

diplomacy between countries, and to negotiate between himself and his US counterpart. In the later years, [David Petraeus told](#) the “foremost threat to Iraq’s long-term stability and the broader regional equilibrium is not the Islamic State; rather, it is Shiite militias, many backed by—and some guided by—Iran.”

Before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Quds Force detained hundreds of al-Qaeda fighters fleeing Afghanistan who were subsequently released, reportedly at Soleimani’s behest, as a means of causing problems for US forces. These terrorists which reportedly included high profile figures such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq – subsequently conducted several deadly bombings in Iraq against the UN headquarters, the Jordanian embassy in Baghdad, and major Shiite shrines in Najaf and Karbala. The last one was one of the biggest atrocities which killed over 180 people in Karbala, in addition to car bomb attacks in Najaf and Karbala which left 60 dead. These incidents helped to radicalise Iraqi Shiite groups, bringing them closer to Iran where Soleimani provided a safe haven for them.

Popularly known as the ‘Shadow Commander’, he maintained a largely secretive role. The Syrian civil war changed this position and he increasingly stepped into the public eye.

Iran’s Support to the Assad Regime

Since the civil war broke out in Syria in 2011, Iran has been the staunchest supporter of Bashar Assad which has had a strong relationship with Tehran since the 1980s. Iran sees Syria as an existential war where all other warring parties can afford to lose, to protect Iran. “[Syria is Iran’s 35th province. If we lose Syria, we won’t be able to hold Tehran.](#)” This famous statement belongs to Mahdi Taeb, the head of the Revolutionary Guards’ intelligence wing and a close advisor to Supreme Leader Khamenei. From the very beginning, Iran has been moving with this motivation to maintain Assad’s grip on power. Not surprisingly, Soleimani was the key actor directing the Syrian civil war in favour of the Assad regime.

In the early months of the Syrian civil war, Iranian support was mostly limited to providing technical and financial support to the Quds Force. Then, [Iran played a crucial role](#) in creating the National Defence Forces, a Syrian paramilitary organisation comprising of 100,000 fighters, under the guidance of the Quds Force. Soleimani was the mastermind behind the formation of this coalition by recruiting numerous militias from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

One of the battles that changed the course of the war in favour of the Assad regime was the battle of al-Qusayr in 2013. Hezbollah in Lebanon entered the war avowedly to take back the city from the opposition forces. Soleimani

asked Hasan Nasrallah, Secretary-General of Hezbollah, to send more than two thousand troops to al-Qusayr. Hezbollah's victory in al-Qusayr strengthened Assad's hand and weakened the opposition since that date. The Head of the IRGC had a pivotal role in supporting the Assad regime logistically via Iraq. Iran has used Iraqi airspace to fly planeloads of weapons and troops to Damascus owing to Soleimani's meetings with Baqir Jabr al-Zubeidi, former minister of transport and finance of Iraq.

Since many Iranian people criticised Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war, Tehran sought public support by depicting the battle as a holy cause for the country. [Khamenei stated](#): "the door for martyrdom which was closed by the end of the Iran-Iraq war, is now open in Syria." Although

this depiction got support from pro-regime people in Iran, the war crimes and human rights violations by the IRGC and Iran-backed forces in Syria have been criticised by many.

While Iran has been heavily involved in the Syrian civil war, a new threat in Iraq changed Soleimani's military headquarters once again.



Soleimani in Aleppo, Syria.
(Anadolu Agency)

The Fight against Daesh

In 2014, Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity came under threat after Daesh captured the city of Mosul. Iran's quick response in Iraq was carried out under the command of General Soleimani. He ordered some of the Iraqi militia forces tasked with defending Assad regime to come back from Syria and protect the Iraqi state. The militias organised themselves under an umbrella organization known as the Hashd al-Shaabi, also known as Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU). Even though all groups inside PMU were not loyal to Soleimani, his forces were among the biggest and most powerful on the ground.

Mosul played a crucial role in Daesh becoming a legitimate threat in the region. In July 2014, the leader of the terrorist

group, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, announced the creation of a worldwide caliphate. During Daesh's rule in the city, the group massacred hundreds of Iraqis who attempted to flee the city to deter others from doing the same. On December 9, 2017, former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory over Daesh with emphasis on the role of PMU forces in defeating the group.

In the course of the fight against Daesh in Iraq, Soleimani's pictures on the battlefield began being widely shared on social media. Largely as a result of his role in Iraq, Soleimani became a "national hero" among the Iranian people and other groups in the Middle East who are collaborating with Iran.

Protests in Iraq

[The widespread demonstrations in Iraq](#) that began at the beginning of October 2019, alarmed Iran as the protesters demanded regime change and overhaul of the political system in Iraq. Iran's concerns have increased since the demonstrators attacked and burned down the Iranian consulates in Karbala and Najaf. During the protests, unidentified shooters, later identified as members of Hashd al-Shaabi, killed dozens of protesters. Iraqi security forces' harsh response and lethal violence against the demonstrators murdered more than 500 people in two months.

Iran's involvement in Iraqi protests not only arises from the concern from Iranian authorities that they could create a type of domino effect in Iran but also due to concerns regarding the potential loss of a influence within the Iraqi government. Iraq is also significant to Iran as a neighbour where the majority of the population are Shiite Muslims and

is home to the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. Since 2003, it has also formed a central element of Iran's "axis of resistance" strategy - an anti-Western and anti-Israeli alliance between Iran, Iraqi Shia paramilitary forces, the Syrian government and Lebanese Hezbollah - particularly as a transit route for logistical and military support to Lebanon. Iraq became even more critical when the Syrian civil war began as the country became crucial to maintaining the supply of weapons and troops supporting the Assad regime.

As protests continued, Soleimani was frequently in Iraq - in defiance of a UN travel ban - to continue the work of cultivating an extensive network of allied militias. On the morning of January 3, 2020, the day Soleimani was killed along with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy chief of Hashd al-Shaabi, the two were scheduled to meet with Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi.

Timeline of Political Escalation between Washington and Tehran

- **May 8, 2018:** The United States withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
- **May 21, 2018:** Mike Pompeo, US Secretary of State, listed 12 demands that Iran needed to fulfil. The conditions were rejected by Tehran.
- **August 7, 2018:** The US brought the first phase of sanctions into force by prohibiting trade with Iranian business sectors.
- **November 5, 2018:** The second round of sanctions was imposed, explicitly targeting key oil and banking sectors.
- **April 8, 2019:** US President Trump designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a foreign terrorist organisation. The designation followed economic and travel sanctions on the IRGC. In response to this decision, Iran's Supreme National Council branded the United States as a "state sponsor of terrorism".
- **May 5, 2019:** Trump's then-national security advisor John Bolton announced that the US was deploying ships and bombers to the Middle East to "send a clear and unmistakable message" to Iran.
- **May 8, 2019:** Iran stated that it was preparing to increase enriched uranium and heavy water production. Right after, Trump announced new measures against Iran's steel and mining sectors.
- **May 12, 2019:** Four commercial ships, including two Saudi Aramco oil tankers, were targeted by a "sabotage attack" in the Gulf of Oman according to United Arab Emirates (UAE). The United States claimed that Iran is behind the attacks without showing any evidence.
- **May 14, 2019:** Houthi rebels in Yemen claimed responsibility for an attack against the Abqaiq oil facility in Saudi Arabia. The United States and Saudi Arabia blamed Iran for the attack and accused Tehran of arming the Houthis.
- **May 19, 2019:** A rocket landed near the US embassy in Baghdad. Trump tweeted: "If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again."
- **May 27, 2019:** President Trump said the US was not looking for a regime change in Iran after meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who offered to broker dialogue between Washington and Tehran.
- **June 13, 2019:** A Japanese and a Norwegian tanker were attacked in the Gulf of Oman while the Japanese Prime Minister was still in Iran.
- **June 17, 2019:** The US authorised the deployment of 1000 additional troops to the Middle East.
- **June 20, 2019:** Iranian forces shot down a US military drone by claiming that the drone was flying in Iranian airspace, while the US stated it was flying above international waters.
- **June 25, 2019:** President Trump signed an order imposing sanctions on the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei as well as other senior military figures and blocked their access to any financial assets under US jurisdiction.
- **July 1, 2019:** Iran exceeded the limit on the amount of enriched uranium in its stockpile set out in the nuclear deal. Foreign Minister of Iran, Javad Zarif stated the accumulation of more enriched uranium than permitted under the nuclear deal was not a violation of the pact.
- **July 4, 2019:** British Royal Marines in Gibraltar seized a supertanker accused of carrying Iranian crude oil to Syria in breach of European Union sanctions.
- **July 8, 2019:** Iran surpassed the uranium enrichment cap set in the nuclear deal, marking the second time in a week.
- **July 19, 2019:** The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) seized a British oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz.
- **August 1, 2019:** The US imposed sanctions on Javad Zarif for acting behalf of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

- **September 3, 2019:** The US imposed sanctions on Iran's civilian space agency and two research organisations, announcing that they were being used to advance Tehran's ballistic missile programme.
- **September 14, 2019:** The US accused Iran over drone attacks on Saudi Aramco oil facilities that Houthi rebels claimed responsibility. Iran dismissed US allegations and called "meaningless".
- **September 24, 2019:** President Trump lashed out at Iran at the UN General Assembly by saying that "one of the greatest security threats facing peace-loving nations today is the repressive regime in Iran".
- **November 4, 2019:** The US imposed new sanctions on the inner circle of Supreme Leader Khamenei.
- **November 7, 2019:** US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Iran of "positioning itself for a rapid nuclear breakout".
- **November 15, 2019:** Unrest in Iran erupted after the government raised fuel prices by as much as 300 per cent.
- **November 22, 2019:** The US imposed sanctions on Iran's communication minister Mohammad Javad Azari-Johrami for his role in restricting internet access during the unrest in Iran.
- **November 27, 2019:** Iranian security agents arrested at least eight people allegedly linked to the CIA during deadly unrest.
- **December 8, 2019:** Iran's President Hassan Rouhani announced a \$39 billion "budget of resistance" to counter US sanctions and to help Iran's people.
- **December 11, 2019:** The US Treasury imposed new sanctions on Iran's biggest airline and its shipping industry, accusing them of smuggling lethal aid from Iran to Yemen.
- **December 27, 2019:** A rocket attack in Kirkuk, northern Iraq, killed an American contractor and wounded several service personnel. US officials blamed Iran-backed paramilitary force Kataib Hezbollah for the attack.
- **December 29, 2019:** The US military carried out "defensive strikes" on areas in Iraq and Syria belonging to Kataib Hezbollah as a retaliation for the killing of the US contractor.
- **December 31, 2019:** Supporters and members of Hashd al-Shaabi stormed the US Embassy compound in Baghdad. Trump accused Iran of orchestrating an attack on the US Embassy.
- **January 2, 2020:** US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper warned that Iran or affiliated groups "may be planning additional attacks" on US interests in the Middle East. Pentagon stated that the US will take pre-emptive action to protect American forces.
- **January 3, 2020:** The US killed Qassem Soleimani, the head of IRGC Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of Iran-backed militias Hashd al-Shaabi (PMU) in an airstrike near to Baghdad airport.
- **January 5, 2020:** Iran has announced that they will no longer abide by the enrichment limits designated by the 2015 nuclear deal.
- **January 7, 2020:** Iran's parliament passed a bill designating the Pentagon and all subsidiaries as terrorist over Soleimani assassination.
- **January 8, 2020:** Iran launched a missile attack on two US military bases, located in Ain al-Asad in Anbar province and Erbil. Foreign Minister Zarif stated that Iran does not seek escalation or war, but it will defend themselves against any aggression. Iran threatened the US for "more crushing responses" if the US launches a fresh attack. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei defined the missile attacks as a slap for the US and said: "the more important thing is that the corrupt presence of the US in this region should come to an end". President Trump stated that "no Americans were harmed in the last night attack by the Iranian regime (...) and Iran appears to be standing down". He also announced the US would immediately impose new "powerful" sanctions until "Iran changes its behavior".
- **January 11, 2020:** The Iranian government announced that the IRGC unintentionally shot down a Ukrainian plane, killing 176 people. It is stated that the incident occurred because of "human error", the military misidentified Flight 752 as a "hostile target". Following the government's admission, protests started in Tehran against the Iranian regime with chants "we don't want the Islamic Republic" and "Commander-In-Chief (Khamenei) resign, resign!"

Reactions from Key Figures

After Soleimani's Killing

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei: "Dear Iranian Nation! Years of sincere, brave efforts fighting against the devils and villainous in the world, and years of wishing for martyrdom on the path of God, God finally took the dear Commander of Islam, Soleimani, to this lofty status. His blood was shed by the most barbaric of men. Martyrdom was the reward for his tireless efforts over the years. His efforts and path won't be stopped by his martyrdom, by God's Power, rather a severe revenge awaits the criminals who have stained their hands with his and the other martyrs' blood last night. Martyr Soleimani is an international figure of resistance & all such people will seek revenge."

Foreign Minister of Iran, Javad Zarif: "The US' act of international terrorism, targeting

and assassinating General Soleimani—the most effective force fighting Daesh, Al Nusrah, Al Qaeda et al—is extremely dangerous and a foolish escalation. The US bears responsibility for all consequences of its rogue adventurism."

President Hassan Rouhani: "The flag of General Soleimani in defence of the country's territorial integrity and the fight against terrorism and extremism in the region will be raised, and the path of resistance to US excesses will continue. The great nation of Iran will take revenge for this heinous crime."

US President Donald Trump: "As President my highest and most solemn duty is the defence our nation and its citizens. Last night at my direction, the United States military successfully executed a flawless precision strike

that killed the number one terrorist anywhere in the world Qassem Soleimani. Soleimani was plotting imminent and sinister attacks on American diplomats and military personnel.... We do not seek regime change however the Iranian regime's aggression in the region including the use of proxy fighters to destabilize its neighbours must end."

US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo: "President Trump made the decision, a serious decision which was necessary. There was an imminent attack. The orchestrator, the primary motivator for the attack was Qassem Soleimani, an attempt to disrupt that plot. He's got hundreds of American lives' blood on his hands. It was a strike that was aimed at both disrupting that plot, deterring further aggression, and we hope setting the conditions for de-escalation as well."

After Iranian Strikes against US Bases in Iraq

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei: "The United States were slapped last night, but such military actions are not enough. The corruptive presence of the US in the region of West Asia must be stopped. This region won't accept the US presence."

Foreign Minister of Iran, Javad Zarif: "Iran took and concluded proportionate measures in self-defence under Article 51 of UN Charter targeting base from which cowardly armed attack against our citizens and senior officials were launched. We do not seek escalation or war, but will defend ourselves against any aggression."

President Hassan Rouhani: "General Soleimani fought heroically against ISIS, Al Nusrah, Al Qaeda et al. If it weren't for his war on terror, European capitals would be in great danger now. Our final answer to his assassination will be to kick all US forces out of the region."

Commander of the Aerospace Division of IRGC, Amir-Ali Hajizadeh: "The IRGC's recent revenge strikes targeting the US' Ain al-Assad airbase in western Iraq as only the starting point of a great operation, which will grow in sphere to cover the entire region. The strikes were

not meant to cause fatalities. We [actually] intended to deliver a blow to the enemy's military machine."

US President Donald Trump: "As long as I'm President of the United States, Iran will never be allowed to have nuclear weapon. (...) No Americans were harmed in last night's attack by the Iranian regime. (...) Iran appears to be standing down which is a good thing for all parties concerned and a very good thing for the world. (...) The United States will immediately impose additional punishing economic sanctions on the Iranian regime. These powerful sanctions will remain until Iran changes its behaviour."

How might Soleimani's Death Impact Regional Politics?

Following Iranian attacks against US bases in Iraq, [Commander of the Aerospace Division of IRGC, Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, made a statement](#) about Iran's next plans in front of the flags belonging to IRGC and Iran-backed paramilitary forces in the Middle East: Hezbollah, Hashd al-Shaabi, Houthis, Fatemiyoun Brigade, Zainabiyoun Brigade and Hamas. This moment gave a clear message that Iran will likely retaliate against the US via its proxies by targeting US interests in the region. Since Iran has many different proxies ranging from Afghanistan to the Gulf, three countries are likely to play a central role in any conflict zone between Washington and Tehran: Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

Iraq

The killing of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy chief of Hashd al-Shaabi, in the same US strike, has been widely seen as a violation of Iraq's sovereignty and security agreements between Baghdad and Washington. On January 5, 2020, [the Iraqi parliament voted](#) to expel US troops in Iraq. Iranian counter strikes against US bases in Iraq have also irritated the Iraqi authorities who have concerns that Iraq will become the main battlefield in any US-Iran confrontation.

With al-Muhandis' death, Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of Badr Organization and Fateh coalition party, was announced as the new chairman of Hashd al-Shaabi. This decision seems to have been taken through a series of [meetings in Beirut, Tehran and Qom, where Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was 'tasked with uniting Iranian-allied Iraqi militias. He reportedly called on all paramilitary forces to "set aside differences" and create a united resistance against the US presence in](#)

the Middle East. Commentators have noted that this call may have been intended to send a message to Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of Saraya al-Salam brigades and Sairoon coalition party. He is an influential and populist Iraqi cleric known for the 'Mahdi Army' he founded to fight against US presence in 2003. Al-Sadr has been seen a challenge against Iran's influence in Iraq as [he has adopted a more of a nationalist approach](#) based on strengthening Iraq's independence and sovereignty. While the extent to which this may influence Al-Sadr's actions remains to be seen, [he has called a "million-man march"](#) against the US presence in Iraq.

Many observers have noted that Iraq is likely to face more political and social chaos as a result. The existence of Hashd al-Shaabi was already posing challenges against state sovereignty and stability. Hashd forces consist of sub-groups with varying agendas and operations, likely to maintain allegiance to the interests of the groups rather than to the central government of Iraq. Experts have argued that Soleimani's killing may push these groups to act more independently from the Iraqi state.



Badr Brigades commander Hadi Al-Amiri attends the funeral ceremony of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Forces, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, vice president of the Hashd al-Shaabi group, killed by US strike near Baghdad International Airport, in Baghdad, Iraq on January 4, 2020.

Syria

Soleimani has been credited as a key contributor to the strategy to keep Bashar al-Assad in power in Syria. It was even said that "[Soleimani is now running Syria](#), and Bashar is just his mayor." Some have interpreted his killing as the beginning of a decline of Iran's influence and support in Syria. However, others have pointed out that this is unlikely given that Iranian authorities have made clear their intention to stay the course. Iran's power may decline during the post-war reconstruction process in Syria since Russian authorities have made clear their suspicion of Iran's agenda in the country, having previously expressed their discomfort with the extent of Soleimani's influence over Bashar al-Assad.

Unsurprisingly, civilians are likely to bear the brunt in the aftermath of Soleimani's death. It has already been [reported that a horrific massacre](#) was carried out by Iran-backed forces as a response to Soleimani's killing in Maadan region, located between Raqqa and Deir al-Zour cities in eastern Syria.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) meets Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, Syria on January 07, 2020. (Kremlin Basın Ofisi - Anadolu Agency)

Lebanon

After Iran's strikes against American bases in Iraq, Hezbollah leader Nasrallah echoed Khamenei's statements regarding their further move against the US. Nasrallah said "the start of a new phase" in the region which is not only for Iran or Iraq but the whole region. The leader of Hezbollah stated that attacks on US military presence, including US bases, naval ships and military personnel, in the region would be "fair punishment" for Soleimani's killing.

While analysts have argued that Soleimani's assassination is unlikely to ignite a conflict in the Lebanese-Israeli border, which is not a preferred course of action for Iran, there is a possibility of provocations against American interests including the potential targeting of the US embassy in Lebanon or other fronts in the region. However, observers have been quick to point out that this is likely nothing more than rhetoric as Hezbollah is unlikely to directly antagonise the US in its backyard, particularly in the face of a fluid domestic situation.



(Ratib Al Safadi - Anadolu Agency)



(Fatemeh Bahrami - Anadolu Agency)

US-Iran Relations

Until the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, Iran had been pursuing a "controlled escalation" policy vis-à-vis the United States and the Gulf countries. Trump's decision targeting Soleimani reflects how his unpredictable moves might create unexpected consequences for Iran. Commentators have remarked that Iran may seek to exert pressure on US interests in the region without antagonising Washington without crossing any redlines. Iran's first retaliation move against US bases in Iraq was arguably meant to demonstrate power to the Iranian public. Iran's missile strikes aimed to send a message that all American bases in the Persian Gulf region are vulnerable. The fact that this strike did not cause any US casualties indicates, according to analysts, that Iran does not seek to initiate a direct conflict.

Some analysis has pointed to the fact that Iran has made most of its calculations in anticipation of Trump's failure to clinch a second term in the US presidency by resisting Washington's "[maximum pressure](#)" strategy. Tehran hoped that a new president would allow for a reopening of negotiations vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief.

For his part, Trump has shown his willingness to compromise with Iran even after the US strikes that killed Soleimani, stating: "[Iran never won a war, but never lost a negotiation!](#)" Iran has so far showed its determination to resist negotiations as long as the US imposes economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic. After the killing of Soleimani, the doors for any potential agreement seem to have been closed for the near future. Based on recent statements, Iran seems to be insistent to pressure the US to withdraw its troops out of Iraq, and the wider region in general. Tehran has also started to increase nuclear activities. Following Soleimani's death, [Iran stated](#) that it will no longer abide by the limits of nuclear enrichment and number of centrifuges designated in the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal.

While Washington appears to be driving Tehran into a corner by imposing heavier sanctions, the Islamic Republic seems set on continuing to resist American coercion without leading to a full-blown escalation. Given the power differential, observers have said that Iran will likely continue its long-time strategy of using unconventional methods of warfare.

