



PERSPECTIVES

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Soleimani's Death Opens Door to Alternative Security Arrangements in the Gulf

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The killing by the US of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani has widened the opening for a potential restructuring of the Gulf's security architecture.

In line with an Iranian plan launched at last year's UN General Assembly by president Hassan Rouhani that calls for a [security architecture that would exclude external forces](#), Tehran is arguing that an expulsion of all US troops from the Middle East would constitute revenge for the killing by the US of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Quds force.

While it likely would be a drawn-out process, Iraq's parliament took a first step in this direction by unanimously asking the government, in the absence of Kurdish and Sunni Muslim deputies, to expel US forces from the country.

Ultimately, Iran may get only part of what it wants, at best.

[Iraqi PM Adel Abdul Mahdi has dialed back his initial support for parliament's demand](#), saying any withdrawal would involve only US combat forces and not training and logistical support for the Iraqi military.

Similarly, Gulf states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar are unlikely to expel US forces and bases.

That does not mean the foundation for the Gulf's security architecture, which exists under a US defense umbrella primarily to shield the region's energy-rich monarchies from Iranian aggression, is not shifting.

In fact, it was already shifting prior to the killing of Soleimani.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have long supported President Donald Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran, which so far has involved the US

withdrawal from the 2015 international agreement that curbed Iran's nuclear program and the imposition of harsh economic sanctions—but both countries began hedging their bets in the second half of last year.

While the Gulf states may have privately celebrated the death of Soleimani, an architect of Iran's destructive and self-aggrandizing use of proxies across the Middle East, they may fear that his killing may have opened a Pandora's Box that could lead the region to all-out war.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE called for de-escalation in the wake of the killing. Khalid bin Salman, the kingdom's deputy defense minister and brother of Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, [traveled to Washington and London to urge restraint](#).

Ironically, the killing of Soleimani—rather than strategically pleasing Gulf leaders—may have reinforced their concerns that they can no longer fully rely on the US as their sole security guarantor.

If the US's refusal last year to respond forcefully to a string of Iranian provocations sparked Gulf doubts, Soleimani's killing raises the specter of US overreach when it does.

Notwithstanding Gulf animosity toward Iran and anti-Shiite sentiment in some Gulf quarters, Trump's threat to attack Iranian cultural sites likely reinforced their concern.

The Gulf states' hedging of their bets does not mean Rouhani's proposal is any more attractive to them, but it has led to direct and indirect diplomacy by the UAE and Saudi Arabia to reduce tensions with Iran.

Soleimani was killed on the morning he reportedly was to deliver to Abdul Mahdi, the Iraqi PM, an [Iranian response to a Saudi initiative to defuse tensions](#).

While Rouhani's proposal is a nonstarter, it contains one element that could prove to have legs: some form of non-aggression agreement or understanding between the Gulf states and Iran.

The notion of an understanding on non-aggression would align with a Russian proposal for an alternative multilateral arrangement that calls for a regional security conference along the lines of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Unlike Rouhani's proposition, the Russian proposal would involve multiple external powers, including Russia, China, and India, but—in the knowledge that no country can yet replace the US militarily—be centered around US military muscle.

The proposal, endorsed by China, could cater to Trump's demand for burden-sharing and financial compensation for a continued US role in security across the globe.

Russian officials and surrogates for the Kremlin stress that the proposal seeks to capitalize on the US's mushrooming predicament in the Middle East but does not mean Russia is willing to make the kind of commitment that would position it as an alternative to the US.

Similarly, the nature of China's participation in last month's [first-ever joint Chinese-Russian-Iranian naval exercise](#) signaled that closer Chinese military ties with a host of Middle Eastern nations will not translate into Chinese aspirations for a greater role in regional security any time soon.

China contributed elements of its anti-piracy fleet that were already in Somali waters to protect commercial vessels as well as peacekeeping and humanitarian relief personnel rather than combat troops.

Though they are keen to hedge their bets, the Gulf states might want to take their time as they consider a more multilateral security arrangement that includes but goes beyond the US.

Their problem is that fast-moving and unpredictable developments in the Middle East could change their calculus.

That is also true for Russia and particularly China, which has long maintained that its security interests in the region, based on the ability to freeride on the US defense umbrella, are best served by mutually beneficial economic and trade relations.

That approach could prove increasingly unsustainable.

Said Jiang Xudong, a Middle East scholar at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences: "Economic investment will not solve all other problems when there are religious and ethnic conflicts."

Xudong could just as well have included power struggles and regional rivalries in his analysis.

Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.