



How Qassem Soleimani Forced Donald Trump Back into the Middle East

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Qassem Soleimani was emboldened by the US administration's failure to respond to repeated Iranian efforts to destabilize the Persian Gulf—so much so that he felt it was safe to attack Americans directly in Iraq. President Trump, who so recently was eager to leave the Middle East, ordered the killing of Soleimani in retaliation—drawing the US back into the Middle East.

During his presidential campaign in 2016, Donald Trump promised to end America's "countless wars" in the Middle East. He found support among some military leaders who worried that the burden of the war on terror was distracting from new strategic challenges posed by China and Russia.

Following Trump's election, a new National Defense Strategy was announced that indicated a pivot away from the war on terror, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley moved quickly to implement that pivot. The Africa Command was affected, with US forces stationed in places where Russia and China threaten American interests. Trump's abrupt withdrawal from Syria (subsequently reversed) was part of the same policy.

Given this new direction, the killing of Qassem Soleimani, with its accompanying potential for renewed and significant American involvement in the Middle East, came as a huge surprise.

Trump is risk-averse and well aware that an unpopular war can cost an incumbent reelection. He nevertheless took the risk of ordering the targeted killing of Soleimani. To unravel this apparent contradiction, it is helpful to look at the outcome of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as it is commonly known.

In 2018, the US left the JCPOA because of its alleged flaws and the fact that Iran had not stopped either the production of missiles or its malign intervention in the region. On the contrary: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its foreign arm, the Quds Force (QF), led by Soleimani, spent their newly available budgets on bolstering those activities.

Trump's new sanctions regime, known as "maximum pressure," was designed to force a recalcitrant Iran to renegotiate the deal by degrading the Iranian economy. After all, the sanctions President Obama imposed created a crisis of legitimacy, something the Supreme Leader acknowledged. Against heavy resistance from the IRGC-QF at the time, Khamenei allowed President Hassan Rouhani and FM Muhammad Javad Zarif to proceed with negotiating the deal.

Unfortunately for the White House, "maximum pressure" did not succeed this time around in propelling the regime toward negotiations despite economic deprivation in Iran that culminated in nationwide riots at the end of 2019. Tehran was instead increasingly belligerent—driven, according to sources, by Soleimani, who was extremely close to the Supreme Leader.

Soleimani, who achieved stratospheric heights after saving the Assad regime in Syria, as well as other IRGC hardliners, claimed Iran could withstand the sanctions through the so-called "resistance economy" and degrade American staying power by destabilizing the Gulf. Ali Jafari, the veteran IRGC head, thought this strategy too risky and feared it would trigger a full-blown crisis.

On April 29, 2019, Khamenei ousted Jafari and replaced him with Hossein Salami, a close ally of Soleimani's and given to violent rhetoric against the US and Israel.

With the Supreme Leader's blessing, the IRGC-QF proceeded to destabilize the Gulf by seizing ships passing through the Straits of Hormuz, downing an American drone, and firing missiles at the Abqaiq-Khurais processing facility, which temporarily knocked out half the oil refining capacity of Saudi Arabia.

Unaware that Soleimani had taken over the Iranian response to sanctions, American intelligence was puzzled by the regime's increased belligerence. In the summer of 2019, intelligence officials informed the White House that the "maximum pressure" strategy was not working.

For his part, Soleimani developed some serious misconceptions. After Trump refused to retaliate for either the downing of the drone or the assault on the Saudi facilities, Soleimani concluded that the president was a cowardly loudmouth too scared to initiate a conflict, particularly in an election year. A

video emerged showing Soleimani mocking, taunting, and goading the president, something the Supreme Leader engaged in as well.

A former head of Israel's Mossad noted that Soleimani, who increasingly acted like a politician and traveled widely and openly, clearly believed that as one of the highest-ranking commanders of a sovereign country, he was immune from targeting. Equally important, he was aware that both Bush and Obama had objected to killing him.

Secure in the impression that he was attack-proof, Soleimani became downright reckless during the public protests in Iraq, ordering Shiite militias to kill hundreds of protesters.

In an apparent effort to divert attention from those massacres, Soleimani directed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Kataib Hezbollah (KH) chief and his most loyal follower, to hit an American base near Kirkuk. That strike killed an American contractor on December 27.

The US military responded two days later by targeting KH military bases and weapons depots across Iraq and Syria, killing 25 KH fighters.

Soleimani then ordered the KH to attack the American embassy in Baghdad, a 24-hour siege that caused considerable damage to the compound's outer perimeter. The assault, invoking as it did the storming of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979, was a warning that the Iranians were ready to "Carterize" Donald Trump.

The president was given several options with which to deal with the troublesome commander. Among them was a targeted hit, allegedly recommended by the CIA. Much to the surprise of some of Trump's aides, he chose that high-risk option.

On January 3, a missile from the MQ-9 Reaper drone killed both Soleimani and Muhandis. It was calculated that the drone, flown from a base in one of the Gulf states, had at least one hour's advance knowledge of Soleimani's arrival in Baghdad on an Air Shams flight from Damascus. Both the Iranians and the Iraqi security forces have started an investigation into the tipoff, which, it is hinted, might have come from inside the IRGC.

Confusion also surrounds Tehran's "revenge retaliation," in which 16 Iranian missiles struck the Assad base and an American facility near Irbil Airport. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, head of the IRGC Aerospace Force, claimed Iran "chose" not to kill 5,000 soldiers but that more than 80 were killed and hundreds wounded. According to the Pentagon, there were no casualties—and it points out that the two missiles used, Fateh-110 and Qiam, lack the precision required

to inflict severe damage. Further complicating things, there are conflicting messages from Tehran: Rouhani and Zarif declared that the retaliation had ended, but the Supreme Leader promised more retribution to come.

Given the power struggle in Tehran, it is not clear if, when, or how the regime will respond further. Several points, however, are quite clear. Trump is back in the Middle East and the rules of the game have changed. American deterrence has been restored, and the principle of proportional response has been abandoned. The IRGC-QF will now have to factor these changes into its net assessment of both direct and proxy operations.

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