



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Killing of Soleimani Will Not Stop Iranian Aggression

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The killing by the US of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani will not temper Tehran's intention to continue its aggressive regional policy, either directly or through its proxy organizations. Israel would do well to continue the cautious policy that has characterized its surgical military strikes against Iran's entrenchment in Syria.

In Israel and the West, particularly in the US, the prevailing assessment of the killing of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani is that it created a vacuum of authority in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and in the Quds Force specifically. According to this view, the spectacular killing unraveled the network of Shiite militias and militant pro-Iranian elements in the Middle East and severed the thread that links these forces. It is believed that much time and resources will be required to rehabilitate this network, especially in Iraq and Syria, and Iran's entrenchment in those countries will therefore be slowed substantially.

This optimistic assessment is also influenced by the widespread protests in Iran that were sparked by the tragic downing of a Ukrainian civilian aircraft by the Iranian air defense system and the Tehran authorities' denial of responsibility.

In Washington, senior administration officials made haste to claim that Soleimani's killing had restored US deterrence against Iran. This was borne out, they claimed, by the restrained Iranian response, which took the form of the launching of a number of ballistic missiles at Iraqi bases that also serve the US. This restrained response indicates, according to these officials, that Iran does not want an all-out military confrontation with America.

Furthermore, the fact that Tehran conveyed a prior warning via the Iraqi government was seen as reflecting Iran's desire to make only a limited, demonstrative move that was not meant to cause American casualties but only to maintain the regime's prestige in the eyes of its Iranian subjects.

Non-nuclear deterrence is believed to be established and/or restored in a sequential fashion involving power displays and demonstrative confrontations. In many cases, deterrence is more a matter of instilling an impression than creating a fact.

It is not in dispute that Soleimani's killing was a blow to Iran's regional influence. He was the mover and shaker, the glue that held the various Shiite militias together. He was in charge of maintaining and expanding Iran's influence in its spheres of patronage. It is doubtful, however, that his loss created an unfillable vacuum.

Soleimani was the symbol and identity card of the Quds Force. But the Force's command structure, including its link with the IRGC leadership, creates reasonable conditions in which to maintain a hierarchical continuity, including an immediate transfer of authority that does not entail a significant disruption of the chain of command.

Tehran made clear to Washington through diplomatic channels that its attack on the Iraqi/American bases in Iraq would be its full military response to Soleimani's killing, on the assumption that the Trump administration would show restraint in turn. Despite the placatory signal contained in this message, it is doubtful that Washington can regard it as a shift in Iran's policy in the Persian Gulf, especially as Tehran is not concealing its ongoing aim to bring about a full US military withdrawal from Iraq. As far as the Iranian leadership is concerned, all means remain on the table to achieve that objective.

Furthermore, Tehran takes heart from US domestic affairs, particularly the Democratic Party's initiative to restrict President Trump's military freedom of action toward Iran. The Iranians see this as a trend that plays into their hands regarding their ability to pursue their nuclear program with impunity.

A sober consideration of Iran's strategy in the Middle East indicates that the killing of Soleimani will not affect Tehran's intention to continue to implement its aggressive regional policy, directly or through proxy organizations. If that proves true, then the killing was but a minor blow.

As the Iranian leadership sees it, Tehran came out of this round of quasi-warfare with the US with the upper hand. The ballistic missile attack, however

limited, conveyed a convincing deterrent message to both President Trump and the Gulf states.

The declarations by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper that the US has “restored its deterrence” vis-à-vis Iran are therefore premature. Such claims could foster a dangerous illusion among local actors regarding supposed weakness in the Iranian leadership, a misconception that could have regional ramifications.

When it comes to Iran’s ongoing activity in Syria and Iraq, either directly or through Shiite militias under the authority of the Quds Force, Israel should take Washington’s optimistic view of the situation with a grain of salt. Jerusalem should be wary of an overly confident intelligence assessment that encourages a more militant approach to Iran’s presence in Syria based on the assumption that Tehran will be more restrained now that Soleimani is gone.

This is a very real concern. When the main points of the intelligence assessment for 2020 were publicized, it was shown that Aman (Israeli Military Intelligence) is indeed recommending that the political echelon make the most of Soleimani’s killing and step up attacks on Iranian positions in Syria. If such a recommendation were indeed made, it would constitute a dangerous gamble that goes beyond the accepted parameters of an intelligence assessment. This is an operational recommendation that goes way beyond Aman’s professional mandate, the practical feasibility of which should be determined by the political echelon’s situation assessment.

This overstepping of its boundaries notwithstanding, the Israeli intelligence community must derive its assessments as far as Iran is concerned from worst-case scenarios based on analysis of Tehran’s capabilities and intentions in the Middle East. The Iranians already believe they can now deter the US from escalating tensions in the wake of their ballistic missile fire at the bases in Iraq.

Coming just a few months after Iran’s remarkable targeted strike on the Saudi oil-processing facilities, the impressive accuracy and substantial damage wrought by the retaliatory missile attack on the Iraqi bases has considerably reinforced Tehran’s deterrence. It is doubtful that this deterrence was undermined by the US’s boldness in killing Soleimani.

Israel cannot allow itself to bask in Washington’s overoptimistic message. It would do well to continue the cautious, calculated policy that has characterized its surgical military strikes against Iran’s entrenchment in Syria.

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