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**Bar-Ilan
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Uzi Rubin



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 170

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Cover image: Iranian leadership at the funeral of Qassem Soleimani, photo
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Operation Shahid Soleimani” was the name given by Iran to its strike against US targets in revenge for the Americans’ killing of Qassem Soleimani, one of its most senior leaders, on January 3, 2020. Tehran’s revenge came five days later, when it fired ballistic missiles at two US bases, striking one and missing the other. No American lives were lost in this attack, allowing President Donald Trump to step back from retribution and further escalation.

Judging from the incomplete information available, Iran’s missiles were highly accurate but unreliable, with more than half failing to hit any target. The missiles that did hit caused significant damage, however, as well as the near loss of a squadron of US Predator UAVs.

The absence of US casualties was explained by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Air Force commander as a consequence of prudent targeting policy. However, available information indicates that

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it was more a matter of sheer luck. The Iranians were willing to face the consequences of killing US troops and had accordingly put all their military forces on full alert—and that alert resulted in the downing of a Ukrainian passenger airliner and the deaths of everyone on board.

In general terms, Iran's public diplomacy during this crisis was more focused and coherent than was that of the US.

Operation Shahid Soleimani was less spectacular than the Iranian attack on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities last September and was apparently controversial even within Iran's top leadership. Still, Israel should study it carefully and learn lessons from it: first, that Iran's regime is willing to take extraordinary risks when it feels humiliated; second, that in certain scenarios precision missiles can be as effective as combat aircraft; third, that even a few precision missiles can disrupt the operation of modern air bases; and fourth, that good public diplomacy is crucial for crisis management.

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In the predawn hours of January 8, 2020, the US base in Ein Assad, a former Iraqi Army military base built by Saddam Hussein, was struck by salvos of precision missiles launched from Iran. Reportedly, at about the same time, the US base located in the airport of Erbil—the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan—was also struck by a missile or two from Iran.

Iran’s FM Muhammad Zarif was quick to assert Tehran’s responsibility for the attack, tweeting that it was Iran’s “proportionate measure in self-defense against a cowardly attack on our citizens and senior officials.” This was a reference to the US strike five days earlier that had killed Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps’s (IRGC) Quds Force, who was in charge of exporting the Iranian revolution. Several senior commanders of Iranian-controlled militias in Iraq were killed along with him.

This was the fourth time since 2018 that Iran has taken full responsibility for missiles fired from its territory against targets in Syria and Iraq. It was also the first time Tehran ever admitted—nay, even bragged about—a direct attack on US forces in the Middle East.

The Iranian missile strike threatened to unleash a full-scale war between the US and its regional allies on one side and Iran with its proxies on the other. The attack became a focus of political controversy within the US. At the same time, while the missile strike caused significant material

damage at Ein Assad, it caused no fatalities among US personnel or among other nationals at the targeted bases. The absence of fatalities allowed President Trump to forgo retaliation, thereby ratcheting down the crisis, at least for the time being.

In a Tehran press conference held the day after the missile attack, IRGC Air Force commander, Gen. Amir Hadjizadeh, disclosed that it had been named “Operation Shahid Soleimani.” In his detailed briefing to Iranian and world press, Hadjizadeh spoke about the operation, its objectives, and its results, and addressed Iran’s future intentions with regard to the Soleimani killing. His comments provide instructive insights into the regime’s thinking.

Qassem Soleimani was one of the more energetic, capable, and extreme members of Iran’s Islamic ruling elite. As a result of his impressive success at saving Bashar Assad’s regime in Syria, he gained immense stature and became the closest confidant of Iran’s Supreme Leader and his chief counsel in charting Tehran’s strategic and tactical moves in the region.

Soleimani, who did not suffer from an excess of humility, was a media darling in Iran and widely admired as a national hero. Though his demise did not take place on Iranian soil, the country’s leadership declared the killing an act of aggression against Iran itself.

For that reason, revenge was taken overtly and with full responsibility taken by the Islamic regime, unlike the covert responses by proxy when Iran is not directly attacked.

Over the past few years, Iran has been conducting an extensive expansionist campaign in the Middle East using rockets, ballistic missiles, and unmanned air vehicles (UAVs) against rival forces. This campaign has been conducted primarily by local pro-Iranian militias, with Tehran taking steps—sometimes quite elaborate ones—to stay above the fray and remain at a distance from the operations. Iranian or Iranian-inspired rocket and UAV attacks on northern Israel remained unattributed, with no one taking responsibility for them. Last year’s sabotage and hijacking of oil tankers in the Persian Gulf were similarly anonymous. Rocket and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia’s major cities

and oil installations were launched by Tehran's proxy Houthi regime in Yemen, not by Iran itself. The devastating attack on September 14, 2019 on Saudi oil installations, while originating in southern Iran, was skillfully disguised as a Houthi operation originating from Yemen, with Iran denying it had anything to do with it.

However, when the regime feels it can put up a convincing case for "justified retaliation," it assumes full responsibility and declares the Iranian origin of its operations. This was the case on three occasions. Two missile strikes on ISIS forces in Syria were launched in June and October 2018, the first in retaliation for a lethal ISIS terror attack in Tehran and the second in retaliation for a no less lethal ISIS attack in Ahwaz. The third occasion was a September 2018 missile strike on a meeting of senior commanders of the KDPI (a resistance movement of Iranian Kurds) that was held in Koya, a town in Kurdish Iraq. In all three instances, Iran declared its role in the attacks, claiming justified retaliation against actual (or, in the case of the Kurds, perhaps imaginary) acts of aggression within Iran's territory. Whenever Iran itself is not attacked and the excuse of justified retaliation does not hold water, Tehran subcontracts its acts of aggression to its proxies, or remains silent while conducting them itself. By proclaiming the killing of Soleimani an act of aggression against Iran, its leaders committed themselves to a direct, fully declared response.

Tehran dubbed the missile strikes of January 8 "Operation Shahid Soleimani" and extolled them as "the first time since WWII that US forces are being directly attacked," an assertion that relies on the short memory of the audience. In reality, US forces have been attacked repeatedly since WWII in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and sundry other locations around the globe. To add to the attack's narrative power, the hour of the missile strike was chosen to match the time of Soleimani's demise, 1:30 a.m.

Iran's official media trumpeted the attack, broadcasting video clips showing missiles roaring upward atop flaming rocket exhausts. The Iranian media also offered purported views of the targets featuring dozens of huge explosions. These were obviously lifted from other conflicts, probably from YouTube clips showing scenes of fighting in the Syrian civil war.

The operational aspects of the strike are still somewhat ambiguous. One of the main unknowns is the number of missiles fired and from where. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a total of 22 were fired, of which 17 struck Ein Assad and the other five were aimed at the US base in Erbil. The Pentagon announced a total of 15 missiles fired, of which 10 struck Ein Assad, one hit Erbil, and the other four failed (the destinations of the failed missiles were not specified). US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper corrected this to a total of 16 missiles fired, of which 11 struck Ein Assad. A leading American news magazine quoted an unnamed US official as saying no fewer than 18 missiles had landed in Ein Assad.

It stands to reason that these conflicting numbers are simply initial guesstimates rather than the results of rigorous analysis of raw data, an analysis that will be performed and will, one hopes, be published. Be that as it may, the Iranians claim a lower figure: during his press conference, Gen. Hadjizadeh said only 13 missiles had been fired in the entire operation. In view of the doubtful reliability of some of his other comments during that event, this number is questionable.

Hadjizadeh's assessment of the number of missiles far exceeds the number used against ISIS and the Kurdish rebels in Iraq (eight and seven, respectively). At the same time, the number is much less than one might have expected considering the scale of the emotional outburst unleashed by the Iranians at the news of Soleimani's death, the millions-strong funeral processions (some orchestrated) from Baghdad to the city of Kerman, and the tears, wails, and gnashing of teeth of Iran's masses and leaders during the burial services.

The modest scale of the attack may have been dictated by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who reportedly decreed that the revenge for Soleimani's killing will be "direct, proportionate, and carried out by Iran's own forces" rather than by proxies. Gen. Hadjizadeh offered another reason for the modest size of the strike: the need to preserve ammunition for future actions. In addition to these possibilities, it could be that the small number of missiles fired during the operation reflected inherent limitations on Iran's capability to launch mass missile attacks.

There is also some ambiguity about the operational profile of the missile strike. One report says the missiles were fired in two waves about one

hour apart. American troops in Ein Assad told reporters the missiles came in four waves about 15 minutes apart, and that the duration of the entire attack was two and a half hours. Taken literally, that would mean the missiles had dribbled in at a rate of one every 10 minutes—an obviously unlikely scenario. It can be assumed those statements were just the first impressions of US troops fresh from undergoing their first combat experience and likely upset by it.

Yet the common denominator in the various reports is that the Iranians fired their missiles in waves, rather than timing their launch for synchronized arrival at the target for maximum effect. Why it was done this way is unclear. The reason could be technical or operational. As far as can be judged, the Iranians should not have had any trouble timing their missile launches for simultaneous arrival.

One possible explanation is that the number of launchers was smaller than the number of missiles, requiring time-consuming reloads. Again, the Iranians should not have had any difficulty deploying enough launchers to fire all the missiles at one go. If they did deploy a smaller number of launchers, it could have been in the expectation of a US counterstrike and the desire to expose as few launchers as possible to possible destruction.

Another possibility is that the operation was carried out from separate launch sites, and the lull between salvos reflected some difficulty in synchronizing fire.

A further theory was suggested by a senior US general, who said the Iranians fired in waves to maximize American casualties. A defender obviously has no way of knowing whether the last missile to arrive is the last missile in the strike, and a lull could be misinterpreted as the end of the strike with dangerous results.

This is by no means impossible. The tactic of attacking in waves to maximize casualties has been employed against Israeli civilians many times. Numerous civilian casualties have occurred when Israelis left their shelters in the mistaken belief that an attack was over, only to be caught out in the open when the next wave arrived.

But as is generally the case, the simplest explanation is the likeliest. Unless new information emerges, the most probable reason for the separate salvos during the Iranian attack was trouble synchronizing fire from multiple launch sites.

Gen. Hadjizadeh disclosed that two types of missiles were used in the operation. One was the solid propellant Fatah 313, an advanced version of the Fatah 110 precision rocket with its range extended to 500 km by replacing its steel structure with lightweight material. The other was the liquid propellant Quiam 2, a modernized Scud with its range extended to 700 km. The Quiam as it was unveiled in 2011 had mediocre accuracy, but the more recent version, the Quiam 2, is equipped with a GPS-guided warhead that gives it pinpoint accuracy. This version saw action in the September 2018 strike on ISIS headquarters in Syria, and it stands to reason that it was also used in Operation Shahid Soleimani.

The video clips released by Iran clearly show the takeoff of solid and liquid propellant missiles. Both types—the Fatah 313 and the Quiam 2—carry heavy warheads containing hundreds of kilograms of explosives. In the Quiam 2, the warhead breaks away from the missile's body once the rocket motor shuts down. It detaches from the rocket body when the fuel is spent and continues its flight on its own. The spent rocket body falls short of the target by several kilometers.

On the morning after the missile strikes, debris of at least one or perhaps two spent Quiam 2 bodies was found in the desert about 40 km southeast of Ein Assad. This is incontestable evidence of the use of the liquid propellant rockets against the US base. The lack of spent bodies of the solid propellant Fatah 313 could indicate that none were used against Ein Assad, or—much more likely—that their warheads remained attached to the bodies and all hit the target together.

Another ambiguity concerns the launch sites. According to the US Secretary of Defense, the Iranian missiles were fired from three different undisclosed locations. A private intelligence website claims that all the missiles were fired from a single site near the Iranian city of Karmanshah. It should be noted that the missiles fired against ISIS targets in Iraq in July and September 2018 also came from somewhere near that city. As for Ein Assad, the location of the spent Quiam bodies indicates that they

were launched from somewhere in Iran's southern province of Huzistan, from which the UAV attack on the Saudi oil installations in September 2019 originated.

It might be significant that the distance from the Omidiyeh air base—the origin of the Saudi oil installations attack—and Ein Assad is about 730 km, not much more than the claimed range of the Quiam. The shorter range of the Fatah 313 required a closer launch site. Thus, it can be speculated that the liquid propellant missiles were launched from Huzistan while the solid propellant ones were launched from Karmanshah, about 400 km northeast of Ein Assad. If the operation did include a strike on Erbil (more about the "if" later), it was probably launched from a more northerly launch site—thus the three launch sites referred to by the US Secretary of Defense.

The missile strike did not cause any casualties among US troops or other personnel at the Ein Assad base, at least according to the traditional definition of "casualties." Two weeks later, though, the Pentagon disclosed that it had flown out some US personnel for medical checks in Germany for symptoms that manifested some time after the strike, and that 50 US troops had been "injured" in the strike.

In the politically charged atmosphere of Washington, critics of the US administration were quick to fault President Trump for allegedly lying in declaring right after the Iranian attack that there had been no casualties. This is a matter of definition, however. In former times, "casualties" meant dead or wounded persons identified as such immediately after a life-threatening event, whether war, natural calamity, or man-made disaster. In recent times, however, the definition of this term has stretched to embrace less tangible and immediate effects. In Israel today, mental stress is counted as a "wound," much bloating the lists of casualties from rocket or terror attacks.

It seems that after the Iranian missile strike, the definition of "casualties" was broadened to include three rather than two categories: dead, wounded, and—a new category—"injured." This paper refers to "casualties" in the traditional sense.

The precise reason for the absence of casualties is debatable. Some observers believe the Iranians planned the operation to maximize material damage while minimizing casualties. Others, like the US general quoted above, believe the opposite is true and that the Iranians fired in waves to maximize casualties. There is no doubt, however, that there were ample warnings of an impending strike from Iraqi government sources (who had been alerted by Iran), from intelligence sources, and from early warning systems, both space-based and ground-based. The warnings were timely enough for the US troops to take cover in shelters, some dating from Saddam Hussein's era.

At the same time, the Americans could not ignore the possibility that the missile strike might be accompanied by some kind of ground attack from pro-Iranian militias. For that reason, perimeter guards remained on duty throughout the attack. To better forestall a ground attack, the Americans lofted most of their Predator UAVs for reconnaissance missions above the base. Their operators stayed on duty inside above-ground, thin-walled control cubicles. The perimeter guards as well as the UAV operators were thus most definitely in harm's way: two US soldiers manning a watchtower were reportedly blown off of it by one of the incoming blasts. The absence of casualties thus appears to have been more a matter of luck than of Iranian design.

On the morning after the missile strike, a US research center published satellite images showing the damage to the Ein Assad base. The pattern of impact is not typical of the dispersions of ordinary ballistic missiles, suggesting that the damaged structures were deliberately targeted. Assuming this is the case, the precision of the Iranian missiles was very impressive, achieving miss distances of just a few meters after flights of several hundred kilometers.

Images from the base show several craters, reportedly about three meters deep and about four meters wide—similar to craters caused by the Iranian missiles that hit the Kurdish headquarters building in September 2018.

The US Army opened the Ein Assad base to the press about a week after the strike. Pictures taken by visiting journalists show significant damage to several structures. Reports about damage to equipment varied from “light damage” to one helicopter gunship destroyed and one UAV damaged.

The journalists were told by US troops that the most significant damage was to the fiber optics landlines linking the UAV controllers' stations to the radio transmitters that communicate with the UAVs. As mentioned, most of the Predator UAVs were flying at the time of the strike. The severed connection between the control stations and the data links caused the loss of control of all the Predators then in the air, and there was no way to land them. The American operators worked for several hours to reestablish control over their aircraft by improvising satellite communication links. They did eventually regain control and succeeded in bringing all the Predators down to safe landings.

Ambiguity also surrounds the Iranian strike on Erbil. The Pentagon said it involved a single missile aimed at the US bases near Erbil's international airport, but Kurdish sources report three missile impacts in the province of Iraqi Kurdistan—one near Erbil itself, but the others several tens of kilometers west of it, as if some missiles had overflowed their target.

Adding to the ambiguity, in his briefing, Gen. Hadjizadeh spoke of "attacking one single US base" and did not even mention Erbil in the list of culpable US bases involved in the killing of Soleimani.

Yet another mystery here is why the same Iranian missiles that were so impressively accurate in Ein Assad failed to hit anything in Erbil, perhaps even missing it by tens of kilometers. There are three possible explanations for this. First, it could be that the attack on Erbil never happened and all the evidence suggesting it had is erroneous. The impact craters discovered near Erbil and elsewhere might be natural terrain features or craters from former wars in the region (e.g., the Kurdish rebellion against Saddam Hussein). Second, it could be that there was a missile strike on Erbil but it was not part of Operation Shahid Soleimani but rather an unauthorized initiative taken by a local Revolutionary Guards commander enraged by Soleimani's killing. That would explain why, if a strike in fact occurred, it was ignored by Hadjizadeh during his briefing. A third possibility is that there was indeed an authorized missile strike on the Erbil base but it failed for reasons unknown and was therefore ignored by Hadjizadeh in accordance with the longstanding Iranian practice of never admitting to failures.

As ever, the simplest explanation is the most likely. It is reasonable to assume that Erbil was targeted in Operation Shahid Soleimani but that that part of the operation was a failure.

As noted, Gen. Hadjizadeh said the number of missiles fired at the single US base selected for retribution was 13 and “all missiles hit their targets.” But his televised briefing featured an enlarged satellite image of Ein Assad after the strike, with each damaged structure tagged with an Arabic numeral—and the number of tagged structures was only six. The Iranian general did not explain—nor was he asked—where the other seven missiles had gone.

In contrast with their former practice of flying a UAV above the target to capture real-time imagery of the hits, the Iranians refrained from doing so this time, and their assessment of the raid’s effects was based instead on commercial satellite imagery. Some published satellite photos—not featured in the Iranian press conference—show nine impacts within the Ein Assad base, of which six hit structures and the other three fell in open areas. This still leaves four missiles unaccounted for—perhaps the four failed missiles mentioned in the Pentagon statement.

If we take Hadjizadeh's claim of 13 missiles fired, the Pentagon’s statement of 10 missile hits inside the base perimeter, and the satellite evidence of six precise hits at face value, the overall reliability of the Iranian missiles used in this strike is not too impressive. Of the total number of missiles fired, only 77% reached the vicinity of the target and only 46% achieved precise hits. If Erbil was in fact attacked, which is likely, the reliability of the Iranian missiles goes down even further.

The conclusion is that the Iranian missiles are very precise when working properly, but they don’t work properly almost half the time. This conclusion is of course tentative, based as it is on incomplete evidence—but it confirms impressions from previous occasions. It appears the Iranians are not concerned about this, compensating for poor reliability by sheer numbers to achieve the desired effects. This is an unthinkable practice among the more thrifty Western armies.

Gen. Hadjizadeh insisted that the strike had killed Americans, though he stopped short of revealing how many. According to him, US cargo planes took off immediately after the attack to fly wounded American troops to Baghdad, Jordan, and Israel. "We have documentation on that," he said. US statements about the lack of casualties were lies, proven "by the refusal to admit newsmen into the base."

Moreover, the general disclosed that by using "special equipment prepared ahead of time," Iran unleashed a cyberattack that wrested control of the airborne UAVs circling the base from their American operators "for a short while." This statement, issued days before it became generally known that a missile had caused damage to the communication lines and had led to a loss of control over the UAVs, hints that the Iranians were in real-time phone communication with local collaborators inside the US base who fed them the scuttlebutt flying around the freshly attacked base and rife with rumors. The scuttlebutt contained "information" about US fatalities, planeloads of wounded being hastily evacuated, and a temporary loss of control over flying UAVs. The Iranian general exploited the rumors to magnify the image of a devastating strike by converting severed communication land lines into a "cyberattack."

The tone of Hadjizadeh's briefing to the Iranian public was apologetic over the modest scale of Iran's retaliation. He told his listeners that just one hour after Soleimani's killing, Tehran had identified the US bases that had been involved in it: Taji, located 23 km northeast of Baghdad; Ein Assad, near Ramadi; the Salti base in Jordan; and the Ali Salem base in Kuwait. Initially the target selected for retribution was the Taji base near Baghdad, but just hours before the strike it was decided not to hit Taji as the noise from the explosions "would have disturbed Baghdad's residents."

Hadjizadeh conceded the limited scope of the operation but stressed that this was just the first move in a much wider operation. "The proper revenge for the blood of (Soleimani and the other persons killed in the US strike) is the expulsion of the Americans from the region. The missile strike was only a first step in this grand strategy," he said. "In this operation we launched 13 missiles," he added, "but we were prepared

to fire several hundred more in the first hour or two after the strike” if the situation had escalated: “We anticipated an outbreak of a limited campaign lasting a couple of days or perhaps a full week.”

The general revealed that Iran’s entire military force had been put on alert for a full scale war with the US, not because this was likely but because it was the worst-case scenario “and it is always proper to prepare for the worst case.” The second excuse for the limited scope of Operation Shahid Soleimani was thus the need to preserve missile stockpiles for later action.

Hadjizadeh emphasized the lack of response from the US forces “who didn’t fire even one single bullet.” In a soaring flight of bravado, he bragged that the operation was the first in which US troops had been attacked by ballistic missiles “since WWII,” nimbly skipping over the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraqi war, when US troops were targeted by—and, in 1991, killed by—Saddam Hussein’s ballistic missiles.

According to Hadjizadeh, Operation Shahid Soleimani was a smashing success. America is a paper tiger that is “strong only against the weak.” The operation was merely the first installment in a comprehensive operation that will eventually expel the US from the entire region, from Afghanistan in the east all the way to north Africa in the west. He explained how this expulsion will be realized: the parliaments of countries hosting US forces will vote to expel them, and the local militias will take over and drive the Americans out. In other words, Iran does not intend to act directly but through its proxies, in keeping with the method it is already practicing in Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon.

About two and half hours after the last Iranian missile fell on Ein Assad, Ukrainian International Airlines Flight 752, which was taking off from Khomeini International Airport in Tehran, was shot down by two anti-aircraft missiles launched from a nearby Iranian military base northwest of Tehran. The attack killed all 176 passengers and crew on board. Iran’s government initially denied it had had anything to do with this. Not until three days later, on January 11, did the government recant and accept responsibility for the disaster, which had resulted, it was explained, from human error.

According to the official explanation, Iran's air defense mistakenly identified the Boeing 737 airliner as a cruise missile. This corroborates Hadjizadeh's statement that Iran's armed forces had been put on a state of high alert against an impending US retaliation. Unfortunately, high states of alert are deadly for civilian air traffic, as witnessed by the Soviet downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 in 1983 and the US Navy's downing of Iranian Air Flight 655 in 1988. These are just two occasions when the taut nerves of military controllers in a state of high alert misread their instruments and confused commercial flights for hostile attacks.

The tragedy exposed weaknesses in Iran's emergency procedures. It would have been reasonable to expect Iran, when war was anticipated, to close its airspace to commercial flights, or at least divert all air traffic to safe corridors.

Another noteworthy aspect of the operation was the Americans' preparations for and reactions to it. In spite of President Trump's threat to bomb 52 military and civilian targets in Iran if it the regime further attacked US forces, none of those bombings occurred, and the president seemed mollified by the lack of American casualties. It appears the US Army did not anticipate ballistic missile strikes on its bases and had not put missile defenses in place.

In the aftermath of the Iranian attack, US public diplomacy was confused and unfocused, as witnessed by the conflicting statements about the number of Iranian missiles fired at US forces. No comprehensive post-attack briefing on material damage was offered by US spokespersons, other than nebulous comments about "damaged tents." The single most significant effect of the Iranian missile strike—the near miss that severed communication landlines and left seven Predator UAVs flying without control—became public knowledge only a week later, and not from a briefing by a US spokesperson but from troops speaking to visiting journalists. The impression is that Soleimani's killing surprised the Pentagon and the US forces in Iraq no less than it did the Iranians themselves.

The Iranian missile strike on Ein Assad (and Erbil?) was without doubt a landmark event, as it was the first time Iran ever openly attacked US armed forces. As far as future war is concerned, the Iranian strike proved that in certain scenarios, precision missiles can substitute for combat aircraft.

Operation Shahid Soleimani appears to have been more hastily conceived and less carefully planned than the September 14, 2019 strike on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities, and it reaped none of the latter's spectacular results. The Iranian operation may have failed completely in Erbil; its remarkable precision in Ein Assad was blunted by poor reliability; and the entire operation was sullied by the negligent killing of 176 innocent people through faulty emergency procedures.

It also seems that the planning of the operation was accompanied by acrimonious quarrels between the IRGC and its political masters, as hinted in Hadjisadeh's remark about the last-minute change of main target. His implied apology for the modest size of the strike may have reflected raging behind-the-scenes quarrels between revenge-thirsty IRGC generals and cooler heads among Iran's leadership.

In any case, the ultimate result was that Tehran once again showed a significant degree of self-restraint. Operation Shahid Soleimani was ultimately more of a demonstration than a decisive strike. As such, it did not diminish—and perhaps even augmented—Iran's deterrence vis-à-vis the US.

The killing of Soleimani—apart from being a serious setback to Iran's quest for regional hegemony—was a body blow to the image and reputation of the Islamic regime and a humiliation within and without. This apparently crossed a threshold and compelled the Islamic regime to bet the whole house and take the almost suicidal risk of killing US troops just for the sake of regaining the respect of its citizens.

The Achilles' Heel of the Islamic regime is thus its dignity in the eyes of its subjects. This should be factored into Israel's future operations in the region. As for the doctrinal lessons of this operation, it was noted above that in certain scenarios, precision missiles can be an effective "airplane-free air force." Israel should look into this not only defensively but also offensively.

From an operational standpoint, the most noteworthy lesson is how sensitive air bases are to missile strikes. A single near miss that severed landlines was enough to paralyze a major command and control center and threaten the loss of an entire squadron of Predator UAVs.

Finally, from the perspective of the cognitive battlefield, the US administration's messaging was hesitant and contradictory and the Americans showed a lack of control over information directly provided to the media by individual US troops, rather than through their spokespersons. This stood in sharp contrast to the focused, fluent, and forceful messaging of the Iranians. In today's conflicts, the cognitive battlefield is only a fraction less important than the physical battlefield, if at all. It is the cognitive battlefield that decides the perception of victory or defeat. The IDF would be well advised to heed this lesson from Iran's act of revenge.

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