



Iran Works to Overcome the Loss of Soleimani

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The killing by US drone strike of Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani on January 3 has the potential to seriously dent Iran's malign activity in the Middle East and beyond. But how long this effect will last is still very much an open question. The answer depends on how the US responds to future tests.

Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani was undoubtedly a central component of Iran's aggression and terrorist export program. The months leading up to his assassination provide ample examples of that leadership.

The Iranian regime, led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has been economically bled by American sanctions, and it responded by activating Soleimani and his Quds Force, as well as the wider Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to take increasingly aggressive action.

These steps included a piracy-like campaign of [mine attacks](#) on international shipping in the Persian Gulf area, the June [downing](#) of an American drone, and September's surprise [assault](#) on Saudi oil fields. In that incident, 25 Iranian cruise missile and drone strikes caused substantial damage to the Saudi oil industry. The Islamic Republic exhibited high-end offensive capabilities, intimidating the Sunni-Arab countries.

The IRGC and Quds Force have been busy proliferating these capabilities around the region. Soleimani's arms network planted advanced cruise missiles in Syria to target Israel, trafficked mid-range ballistic missiles to Shiite militias in Iraq, and proliferated long-range ballistic missiles to the Houthi forces in Yemen, who are also part of the Iranian terror axis and who routinely fire missiles at Saudi cities.

Soleimani's role should be seen in the broader context of Iran's pattern of conduct. He was a key enabler in boosting the country's malign regional activity. His actions, and those of the broader IRGC, demonstrated that Iran has increased its confidence, ability, and willingness to take bold action.

The killing of Soleimani, and the accompanying (and sorely needed) restoration of American deterrence, has the potential to turn this trend on its head.

Soleimani's role was unique. He was not just another military-terrorist commander. He formulated an entire doctrine based on the idea of installing armed proxies throughout the region, on the borders of Israel and US-allied Arab states, and using them to activate force. These proxies meant Iran could go much further than threatening the region with missiles on its territory.

Soleimani was not just another link in the chain of command. It is far from clear whether his successor, Esmail Gha'ani, can use the same funds and resources that were at Soleimani's disposal and achieve the same things.

Part of Soleimani's power stemmed from his charismatic personality, which gave him the ability to [fly to Russia](#) in 2015 and convince President Vladimir Putin to become involved in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Assad regime.

Soleimani's ability to sit down with Assad to formulate a war strategy for defeating the Sunni rebels was another expression of his character. Replicating these actions is not merely a question of funds or resources. A certain leadership personality is also required.

It does appear that Gha'ani is hard at work. The [reported February 14 airstrikes](#) on Iranian targets around Damascus seem to be an indication of fresh IRGC and Quds Force efforts to traffic advanced weapons into Syria.

Soleimani was a driving force behind the ongoing arms flow to Iran's Lebanese proxy force, Hezbollah. Its arsenal of 150,000 rockets and missiles has been at the center of an Iranian upgrade effort, which aims to take inaccurate projectiles and turn them into precision guided missiles (PGMs).

Hezbollah, a terrorist army that is not accountable to any government except the Iranian regime, is considering building factories on Lebanese soil that would convert such rockets into PGMs. Israel has made it abundantly clear that it will not tolerate this development, and Soleimani's elimination from the scene, together with Israel's warnings, may help postpone Iranian-Hezbollah plans for constructing such factories.

The creation of precision missile bases throughout the Middle East, which Iran could activate at any time against Israel, Arab-Sunni states, or American forces, was a vision Soleimani worked hard to achieve, with only partial success.

An Israeli prevention campaign involving hundreds of air strikes stopped some of this vision from turning into reality, but Soleimani and his subordinates in the IRGC and Quds Force were able to create a number of such missile bases.

An Iranian proxy like Hezbollah, armed with the ability to hit targets with an accuracy radius of 30 meters, can decide to hit a building with precision, causing major disruption to the targeted country. This capability means the Iranians and their proxies can threaten strategic sites or try to assassinate high-profile leaders.

Within Iran, military industries continue to churn out accurate missiles, using miniaturized technology and new navigation technology. The IRGC and Quds Force's role under Soleimani was to get those missiles into the hands of radical militias. It is safe to assume that Gha'ani, Soleimani's replacement, will try to continue that work.

Only consistent American, Israeli, and international determination to stop these actions has the potential to make Iran abandon this objective.

The upheaval that Soleimani was so instrumental in fomenting in the region is likely to have aftershocks well into the future. The war between the Iranian-Russian-Assad coalition and Sunni organizations created some 9.5 million displaced people in Syria, resulting in a whole generation of people who lack homes, jobs, or, for that matter, hope.

The chances that people growing up under such conditions will be receptive to Westernized democratic ideas is not high. In contrast, messages from radical Islamist actors could be well received by young people living such unstable lives. The next recruitment ground for radical ideas is already taking shape.

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