



## **The US and Israel Prepare for Iranian Revenge**

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,863, January 1, 2021

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Moments before Donald Trump leaves the White House, Iran may try to avenge the killing of Qassem Soleimani and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. The Gulf States are prepared, and they expect American protection.**

On January 20, 2021, President Donald Trump is slated to exit the scene and perhaps even the stage of history—but Iran remains. Its leaders took hard hits from Trump during his tenure, but worst of all is the way he humiliated them in the eyes of the world. The ayatollahs held on despite everything Trump threw at them, but their honor was trampled. For that there is no forgiving or forgetting.

And January 3, 2021 is the first anniversary of the killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the legendary figure who gave the Iranian leadership the ability to effectively take over Arab countries. His killing by US drone strike left a void that his successors have had a hard time filling. The Iranian leaders will not take Soleimani's killing in stride without seeking a form of revenge that suits his level of importance.

Also killed, in November 2020, was the father of Iran's military nuclear program, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Tehran claims Israel was responsible for this "crime," which similarly awaits a revenge operation that the Iranian regime has no choice but to carry out.

I expect the Iranian leaders to mount an impressive military operation on January 19 in Soleimani's, and possibly also Fakhrizadeh's, name—one that will restore their lost honor and their longstanding status as regional bully.

The Iranian revenge operation will not be conducted from Iranian soil but from two, possibly three, of its satellite states—Yemen, Iraq, and Syria—so as not to incriminate Tehran directly (certainly not in the eyes of US President-elect Biden) and to demonstrate Iran's control of those countries despite longstanding American and Israeli efforts to thwart it. The operation will be carried out by "local liberation

forces”—that is, local Shiite militias orchestrated by the Quds Force, which was Soleimani’s tool. It can reasonably be assumed that Iranian “advisers” will be present and active at the launch sites of missiles and drones that may be directed (again) at the US Embassy in Baghdad and at US military bases in Iraq and Syria, and possibly also at Saudi oil facilities (as in September 2019) as well as the oil facilities of the UAE and Bahrain so as to highlight the inability of their new ally, Israel, to protect them from their big, strong, respected neighbor.

Why January 19? Because that will be one day before Trump’s exit from the White House. He will not have time to put into motion any serious retaliation against Iran.

If the Iranian leaders are indeed aiming to mount an operation of this kind, the US, Saudi, and Israeli intelligence agencies are presumably aware of it. That is the likely reason why we have seen in recent weeks a boosting of the US presence in the Gulf. In just one month, the US dispatched three B-52 bombers to the region as well as a nuclear submarine and two missile-bearing battleships. An Israeli submarine has also reportedly left for the region. On December 18, US Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Mark Milley visited Israel and met with PM Netanyahu, Defense Minister Gantz, and Chief of Staff Kochavi. After the meeting, Gantz said, “We will act in partnership in the face of any scenario on the Iranian front. We will work together to deal with our common threats so as to preserve stability in the Middle East together with our allies.”

On December 20, the US Embassy in Baghdad was subjected to a rocket bombardment. The US administration said Tehran was behind the attack, which made use of Iranian-made rockets. Three days later, it was reported that the US security organizations would soon present Trump with several possibilities for retaliation without igniting a war.

On December 24, Trump conveyed a grave warning to Tehran that it would be held responsible for any attack on an American citizen or soldier even if carried out by a Shiite militia, and called on Iranian leaders to “think it over” before instigating such an attack. On December 25, it was reported in Israel that the IDF had been placed on alert because of a possible US strike on Iran before Trump exits the White House.

Israel fears an attack on its infrastructure facilities like the attack on the Saudi oil installations. An attack of that nature could come from Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, or Syria. It is possible that this concern explains operations in Syria in recent weeks that have been attributed to Israel. The IDF spokesperson told the Saudi Elaph website that Israel is closely monitoring Iran’s moves in Iraq and Yemen and has information about missiles and drones that Tehran is secretly developing and building in those countries.

The states of the Arabian Peninsula are divided into three distinct groups: Yemen and Qatar, which are Iranian satellites and serve it in every possible way; Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, which fear a confrontation that will make them a target of Iranian missiles; and Oman and Kuwait, which sit on the fence and try to reconcile between the US and Iran so as to save the combustible region from a war that would have no winners, only losers.

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE are in a very delicate and complex position. On the one hand, they fear an American or Iranian operation that could cause huge damage to the oil industry, to tourism, and to the notable economic stability they have built over decades. On the other hand, these states certainly do not want Iran to regain the power it wielded until four years ago, power that would be translated into diplomatic and military pressure from Tehran that would turn them into marionettes of the ayatollahs and force them to submit to Iranian political dictates (for example, to sever or freeze relations with Israel and the US and remove their military and perhaps even economic presence).

Nor is there any enthusiasm in Jerusalem over a possible conflagration in the Gulf that could extend to Israel in the form of a missile offensive from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, or Yemen. Warnings have also been heard recently from the Houthis in Yemen, who control the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the southern gateway to the Red Sea through which much of the world's (and also Israel's) maritime traffic passes.

To keep its allies safe from an Iranian revenge attack, Washington presumably will not launch a military strike on Iran from any of the countries in the region, should it launch a strike at all. The B-52s—America's strategic bombers—will take off for their Iran mission from bases in the US or from the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the US has submarines and battleships in the region, including aircraft carriers and destroyers. It is capable of hitting Iran and its proxies at any time without involving its allies, and perhaps without even taking their positions into account.

On the eve of 2021, the temperature in the Gulf region is rising despite the winter. It will likely reach boiling point at the very end of Trump's term in office.

*This is an edited version of an article published in Makor Rishon on December 29, 2020.*

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