

WEST ASIA AFTER SOLEIMANI

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

Not many in India are aware of Major [General Qassem Soleimani](#), the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of Iran — the man who was killed by a surgical drone airstrike near Baghdad airport on the morning of January 3. The killing began the New Year and decade with a trigger that may have far-reaching consequences. But first, Soleimani needs a brief introduction.

“His brilliance, effectiveness, and commitment to his country have been revered by his allies and denounced by his critics in equal measure,” wrote US General Stanley McChrystal in 2018. “Soleimani is arguably the most powerful and unconstrained actor in the Middle East today. A ghostly puppet master, a practical strategist.” It was Soleimani who put the Quds Force among the top few forces of the world that have the rare capability to combine intelligence with special forces strike capability and possess a fiercely strategic ideological orientation. The IRGC, with Quds Force at its core, is an organisation which oversees and executes Iran’s regional interests, maintains linkages with other friendly forces and also works through a system of local proxies. Its effectiveness over time has created linkages with the Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, Houthis in Yemen, militias in Iraq, Bashar al Assad’s forces in Syria and, very importantly, with the Russians in the Middle East. Iran’s Middle East strategy was developed through this capability and it gives out the message that it cannot be meddled with.

The US can use a sledgehammer to defeat and destroy Iran and its forces but after the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences, it is aware that victory in such wars does not necessarily belong to the stronger side.

Soleimani had been in the US’s crosshairs right from the time the US declared the Quds Force a terror organisation. His operational effectiveness had the US worried but it is learnt that even when opportunities to target him arose in the past, former President [Barack Obama](#) desisted from following up with an authorisation simply because the next steps in escalation gave no positive options. That is the issue now as well. While no one in the US laments Soleimani’s death, no one is happy with it either since it was not part of a strategy with a focused aim. Is that being fair to President Donald Trump, who is obviously revelling in this achievement?

A short chain of events in Iraq, set off in the last few days of 2019, led to the assassination. US military facilities in Kirkuk (Iraq) were attacked on December 27 by a Shia militia, killing a US contractor. The US responded on December 29, killing 25 militants — Iraq’s leadership was extremely upset. This sparked a retaliatory attack on the US base in Taji before a mob attacked the US Embassy compound in Baghdad on December 31. This is a flagship US embassy in the Middle East, spread over 100 acres, and the breach of its security unnerved the US — that is actually all the more reason that any attack on the Quds Force Commander should have been outside Iraq. The US cannot afford to yield space in Iraq to a Iran-driven popular people’s movement — very much a possibility as a consequence of Soleimani’s killing.

The question everyone seems to be asking is related to the feasibility of an all-out war. There is no doubt that the domestic political environment of the US is in flux and Trump would risk anything for a fillip to his chances of re-election. However, the US is war weary and if Trump thinks that an all-out war will help his re-election chances, he would be mistaken. A limited set of military actions from time to time — those that exploit US technological superiority — will draw more favourable support. Of course, a lot is contingent upon the nature of Iran’s retribution for

the death of the man who was often called a “living martyr”.

Iran’s leadership is aware of its limitations and would wish to stay short of a tipping point, which the US could use to commence an all-out war. For its own larger cause and image, the US would be least concerned about the worldwide economic ramifications of its subsequent actions. Energy price rise, risk to shipping and the economic collapse of the Gulf economies will probably be of less concern than it did in 1990 because the US is no longer dependent on the Middle East for energy. It will, of course, have to be mindful of the worldwide economic impact.

The other question for strategic minds is the nature of a future proxy war in the Middle East. Early reactions from US-based thinkers appear to conclude that a war between the US and Iran will now be direct and beyond proxies. This may not be entirely correct. Weaker nations, such as Iran in this case, choose to fight through proxies who are not exactly unorganised and undisciplined elements. If the US chooses to confront them directly without using its own proxies, it runs the risk of an Afghanistan or an Iraq type of commitment. For Iran’s proxies, borders remain just lines on maps; they can be crossed at will despite modern surveillance systems. In flat organisations, such as those the proxies are part of, there is minimum control and direction. That is where Iran too runs the risk of overplaying its strategy without presence of a strong and experienced commander like Soleimani, which could lead to a more direct confrontation. An irregular entity such as the Islamic State (IS) lacked air power, armed drones and missiles and yet displayed its conventional war fighting capability. All this will be available if irregular proxies receive a higher level of state support.

Finally, a look at the effect on Indian interests. Energy prices, a diaspora of eight million and \$40 billion in remittances form the core of India’s concerns. Energy prices are already on the rise, without even an inkling of the Iranian response. The diaspora presence is mainly in the Gulf countries, which have thus far been largely out of the theatre of proxy war, except for Saudi Arabia. However, this situation is not permanent. It is contingent on the intensity of escalation of the war by proxies and could extend beyond the current sub regions of the conflict, engulfing the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. That would be apocalyptic for Indian interests.

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