

FUTURE TENSE IN WEST ASIA

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Iranians around the world started 2020 with the threat of a war with the US hanging over their country. The unexpected killing of Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards IRGC's Quds Force, by the American military in Iraq has opened a dangerous and lethal round of confrontation between the US and Iran. Soleimani's assassination might have been celebrated by the Donald Trump administration as a decisive step against the mastermind of Iran's proxy wars in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and elsewhere, but the prospects for West Asia do not look good from the perspective of the region's geopolitics.

The assassination has come at a time when the Iranian regime is facing unprecedented social unrest. It faces a huge legitimacy crisis because of the massacre of nearly a thousand people during the popular uprisings of November 2019. With the rapid decline of the economic situation in Iran as a result of American sanctions, living conditions have worsened in the country — inflation, unemployment, and a general sense of hopelessness across society are on the rise. The mourning processions for Soleimani provided the Iranian regime with an unexpected opportunity to manipulate public sentiment, boost its lost legitimacy and invite the people to participate in the parliamentary election of February 2020. However, it goes without saying that the Iranian government will have a hard time in ending the multiple sufferings of the Iranians. The US's pressure campaign also shows disregard for the Iranian people.

Tehran and Washington have been on a confrontation path since 1979. Around two-thirds of Iranians were born after the 1979 revolution and have grown up with the US-Iran tension. But despite the optimistic predictions of President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the solution to the problem of Iran's regime will not come from inside Iran. After nearly 41 years of revolution, young Iranians have lost all hope and are ready to die for another revolutionary cause. Despite the Iranian regime's propaganda machine statements, the replacements of Soleimani will not be Iranians, but some of Iran's proxies. There are two reasons for this: First, the myth of Soleimani has been stronger among the young Shiite insurgents in Lebanon and Iraq than in Iran. Second, as most analysts have pointed out, the Iranian regime is not looking for a direct confrontation with the US, even though Soleimani's assassination marks the most significant American military operation against Iran since an Iranian airliner was shot down by the US in 1988. According to a high-ranking source in Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government, the IRGC has asked its proxies in Iraq to abstain from attacking American and Western targets following Soleimani's assassination.

But even if Iran does not choose direct confrontation with the US for the time being, it is very likely to intensify its proxy war in West Asia. It would, therefore, be wrong to believe that Soleimani's death will bring to a halt the operations of the "Axis of the Resistance" comprising Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Palestine. The Iranian government has allocated billions of dollars to the Hezbollah to operate in Syria in favour of the Bashar al Assad regime. Despite the US and Israeli call for the immediate withdrawal of the Iranian forces from Syria, the IRGC will seek new opportunities to consolidate its power.

Some important questions remain unanswered: How will the US respond to the possibility of its interests in the region being attacked by Iranian proxies? How will the Trump administration handle a new chaos in the region in an election year?

Last but not least, Soleimani's assassination will also have political repercussions for Iran —the

difficult economic situation will be coupled with greater political uncertainty. Iranian politics will continue to face serious challenges due to the widening rift between Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the IRGC and the country's judiciary. Though Soleimani's death will directly influence the struggle to be Ayatollah Khamenei's successor, Iran's political and military future is also likely to be linked with a confrontation, or an all out war, with the US. But this is a very dangerous game that we prefer not to think about.

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