

THE RISK OF A DOMINO EFFECT

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Following the killing of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani by the U.S., regional tensions have threatened the fragile political consensus that has kept two neighbouring states, Lebanon and Iraq, from disintegrating.

Lebanon is home to Iran's most important regional collaborator, Hezbollah. Although an autonomous political player, Hezbollah is beholden to Iran for financial and military support that has helped it solidify its base in Lebanon and confront Israel, a strong U.S. ally. It has acted as Iran's foremost proxy in the Syrian civil war and has contributed substantially to the Assad regime's victory over rebels. Hezbollah considers Israel its foremost enemy against whom it last fought a major war in 2006. Analysts assumed that Iran's immediate reaction to Soleimani's assassination would be to unleash Iranian-supplied Hezbollah rockets on northern Israel. Better sense appears to have prevailed in Tehran. Had a lethal conflict occurred between Hezbollah and Israel, Tel Aviv would have again destroyed much of Lebanese infrastructure and wreaked havoc on its population as it did in 2006. The Lebanese political structure, based on a delicate confessional balance and under stress from mass protests against the political elite, most likely would have collapsed leading to Lebanon joining the ranks of failed states.

Iraq's problems are even greater. It has borne the brunt of the fallout of the latest round of U.S.-Iran confrontation, for which it has been the battleground. The U.S. strike that killed Soleimani took place in Iraqi territory. The attack not only violated Iraqi sovereignty, but also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy head of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the commander of Kata'ib Hezbollah, which played a leading role in the storming of the American embassy a few days earlier. PMF is a coalition of Shia militias that now acts as an arm of the Iraqi armed forces. In retaliation for Soleimani's assassination, Iran targeted two U.S. military bases again in Iraq, further confirming its centrality in the U.S.-Iran confrontation.

Soleimani's assassination and the events that followed it have had four major consequences for Iraq. First, they have heightened anti-American feelings in its populace, especially among the majority Shia, which has led to the Iraqi parliament passing a resolution demanding the expulsion of all foreign forces from Iraqi soil. Second, it has brought to an abrupt end the demonstrations calling for an end to Iranian intervention in Iraqi affairs; instead, a sympathy wave has turned the tide of popular opinion in favour of Iran. Third, the wave of anti-Americanism also clearly depicts the fissure within the Iraqi polity between the Kurds and the Shia Arab majority: the Kurdish representatives, in addition to most Sunni Arab members, boycotted the parliamentary session that passed the resolution calling for U.S. withdrawal as most Kurds consider American military presence essential to safeguard their autonomy in the north and to continue the fight against the Islamic State (IS). Finally, the projected removal of U.S. forces and Soleimani's killing are likely to embolden IS cells in Iraq to increase their terrorist attacks in the country and emerge once again as a threat to the Iraqi state and its population.

Since 2003, Iraq has become the principal arena in which U.S.-Iran competition has played out in West Asia. The escalation of this rivalry is likely to add to its inherent fragility, once again opening up the possibility of its eventual descent into a failed state. Iraq is the centrepiece of the regional order that was constructed at the end of World War I. Its unravelling is bound to affect Syria and Lebanon, both suffering from state debilitation, and could lead to an unstoppable domino effect that may well change the map of West Asia as we know it today.

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