

The Iranian response to Soleimani's killing

Fabrizio Minniti



Report n.17, January 2020

The Iranian response to Soleimani's killing

Fabrizio Minniti

European Eye on Radicalization



Introduction

On January 2, the Pentagon announced that a U.S. drone strike killed Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, head of the elite Quds Force unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The killing took place as Soleimani was leaving Baghdad International Airport. United States President Donald Trump said he gave the order to kill the Iranian general because he posed an imminent threat to U.S. and allied personnel in the country. US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper defended the White House decision, and when asked by journalists, explained that Soleimani was planning attacks on US military installations and was therefore a legitimate target. [Esper](#) added that the U.S. did not want to go to war with Iran. However, it is certain that the killing of such an influential and important figure in Iran, with a direct link to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, will have serious repercussions within Iranian politics and in areas that fall under Tehran's influence such as Syria, Yemen, Iraq and the Gaza strip. Tensions between the U.S. and Iran increased following Washington's [maximum pressure](#) campaign against Tehran, designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) as a [Foreign Terrorist Organization \(FTO\)](#).

Defending the killing, the State Department [stated](#) that the IRGC used the resources it had to plan and carry out attacks on the U.S. and its allies. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps is an official armed force (with land, sea and air assets) which includes the Basij national militia, with internal security responsibilities, and the IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) which supports pro-Iranian movements and governments of the region.

IRGC designated a terrorist organization

The designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization has had a modest economic and financial impact, with significant political and legal implications. First of all, Iran's Supreme National Security Committee declared U.S. forces in the Near East region as terrorists, thus increasing the chances of an attack on US forces in Syria and Iraq. It should be noted that the State Department's authority to designate FTOs was established under Section 302 of the [Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996](#) (PL 104-132), so [*Iran is not only a state sponsor of terrorism, but the IRGC actively participates in, finances, and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft. The IRGC is the Iranian government's primary means of directing and implementing its global terrorist campaign.*](#)

From a legal point of view, it was easier to authorize the elimination of the head of an organization defined as a terrorist group active in the region and acting against US interests. There is no real armed conflict between the U.S. and Iran, but the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist group gave Trump's decision to kill Soleimani legal cover. In May, Soleimani authorized a missile attack against Saudi Arabia's Aramco refineries. In August, Soleimani again ordered a drone attack against Israel. In recent months, there have been multiple rocket attacks against US bases in Iraq, all carried out by militias controlled by the IRGC. Soleimani's strategy was to force coalition forces to leave Iraq so that Shiite militias could control the country. Killing Soleimani was intended to prevent future Iranian aggression through its militias.

The Iranian response to Soleimani's killing

Fabrizio Minniti

Iran's response to Soleimani's killing

After the U.S. strike, the Iranian regime immediately stated there would be a military response aimed at avenging Soleimani's killing. Despite the fact that Iran was not in a position to face the U.S. in a conventional military clash, it *did* carry out a conventional response. It attacked two Iraqi bases, the Ain al-Assad air base and a base in Irbil, which both hosts U.S. and coalition troops. The attack allowed Tehran to retaliate for Soleimani's killing, but its proportional response was aimed at avoiding a conventional escalation with Washington. Indeed, Iran certainly inflicted tangible damage to infrastructure, but, acting in the early hours of the morning and notifying the action to the Iraqi government just before launching the attack, it limited the impact of the attack.

Several observations can be made from Tehran's response. The first concerns the conventional methods of response: a military attack, limited and proportionate enough to both avenge Soleimani's death and directly engage the U.S. by hitting bases hosting its forces. Going forward, however, it is much more likely Tehran — which is militarily weak — will hit US interests and their allies with multiple asymmetric attacks that will involve Shiite proxies in the Middle East. So, the risk of military escalation is still there, the events of the last few weeks involving the two countries are as close as possible to a direct confrontation after decades of relative calm, the tones on both sides are aimed at calm and de-escalation, but the combination of U.S. maximum pressure strategy over the last few years, together with an Iranian economic and political fragility, will almost certainly lead to rising tensions. Iranian parliamentary elections will take place in February for the renewal of the [Majles-E-Shura-Ye-Eslami](#) (Iranian Islamic Consultative Assembly) but the additional sanctions that the White House is about to adopt has led to vicious internal political debate which could favor a more hawkish approach with the West.

On January 10, the U.S. administration, in response to the Iranian attack on Iraq, took further [sanctioning measures](#) against Tehran's leadership, including Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and other senior leaders, along with strict economic measures. The additional economic sanctions, aimed at Iran's textile, manufacturing and extraction sectors, increase the maximum pressure strategy adopted so far. But, what does it mean for Iran?

Coercive diplomacy

At first, international sanctions adopted by the U.S. were considered as a valid alternative option to military action. The economic pressure — known as coercive diplomacy — is punitive in nature and discourages Iran from certain behaviors and doctrines. However, coercive diplomacy is not always a winning strategy, since the key factor is the level of pressure exerted and its resistance. The U.S. has unilaterally adopted a real sanctioning strategy — aimed at isolating Iran economically and politically. These measures concern the freezing of Iranian capital abroad, the ban on importing goods and services such as oil and gas and the freezing of Central Bank assets and of institutions connected to the regime. The sanctions have also caused economic tensions in the oil export sector although mitigated through illegal shipments.

Between 2012 and 2015, the international community adopted an approach of deterrence and pressure on Tehran. The Iranian economy has shrunk by 9% per year, its crude oil exports dropped significantly and the government was unable to access \$120 billion of Iranian reserves held in foreign banks.

This has prompted observers and analysts to argue that the sanctions strategy is destined to be unsuccessful if it is not accompanied by other measures such as dialogue, the will to negotiate or by the credible threat of military action.

In May 2018, Trump announced that the U.S. was withdrawing from JCPOA agreement and will re-impose unilateral sanctions related to the Iranian nuclear program previously lifted as a result of the deal.

In 2015, a multilateral nuclear agreement — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — was signed by the U.S., Iran, the United Kingdom, France, China, Russia and Germany. The JCPOA allowed Tehran to look with less concern at the consequences that the sanctions were having on the country's economy given that the restrictive measures adopted by the United Nations and also by the EU would have been lifted. A general ban on U.S. trade with Iran and some US sanctions imposed on various issues, including support for armed factions and human rights violations, would remain in place. With the renunciation of the JCPOA, the U.S. reinstated, pursuant to the [Executive Order 13846](#) of August 6, 2018, the previous provisions on sanctions against Iran, revoked or modified in January 2016.

With regard to smart sanctions, U.S. law appears to be quite strict. It may be forbidden, or in any case subject to sanction, even for a non-American company, to initiate transactions with some subjects or entities included in lists compiled by the U.S. Treasury Department's Foreign Exchange Control Authority (Office of Foreign Assets Control - OFAC).

Iran's threat perception

Over the years, Tehran has practiced a two-pronged approach on foreign policy: on the one hand, it has given financial, ideological and economic support to terrorist movements, establishing spheres of influence throughout the Middle East; on the other hand — through soft power tools — it has created a worldwide network of religious and cultural organizations including universities, charities, media and civic organizations geared towards spreading [Shiite ideology](#).

Iran's strategic doctrine starts from the awareness that, despite being a regional power, it cannot compete with America in a conventional conflict. Tehran has a nuclear program but does not have

weapon grade capabilities, so it does not have nuclear weapons that can be launched from land, sea or air assets. It has a missile program but has no ICBM to allow it to hit the United States. Years of international sanctions have made it impossible to update even the simplest weapon systems. Also, Tehran does not have reliable allies by its side.

The Iranian solution to its military weakness has been to engage in proxy wars — taking advantage of internal conflicts in weak states in its area of influence such as Shiite militias in Iraq, the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, the Houthi rebels in Yemen and the militant Hezbollah group in Lebanon — in order to build a network of alliances to compete with America's regional allies. This type of approach allows Tehran to maintain plausible deniability, strongly denying its involvement even when there is, and allowing to pursue its foreign policy objectives with minimal military risk. Over the years, Tehran has, therefore, developed as its most effective weapon the ability to conduct battles through its [proxies](#) with the advantage of avoiding direct confrontation and without the loss of life to Iranian soldiers.

At the forefront of this asymmetrical war is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and in particular its Quds Force unit. Following the death of Soleimani, the Supreme Leader of Iran appointed [Esmail Ghaani](#) as the commander of the Quds Force. The combination of unconventional elements of war combined with Iranian asymmetric capabilities aimed at exploiting the weaknesses of a superior opponent poses a serious threat to the [U.S. and its allies in the region](#). This doctrine is implemented by the IRGC and the conventional army, adopting guerrilla tactics combined with rockets, fleets of small boats and naval mines, which, if efficiently used in the Strait of Hormuz, have the ability to pose a serious threat to international trade. The particular perception of the threat of Tehran towards Israel, Saudi Arabia and the growth of Sunni-style subversion in the region has meant that Iran has adopted a [strategic doctrine](#) to face its regional opponents.

Iran's active deterrence strategy

Tehran's [national security strategy](#) is based on two premises: the first is to defend against internal or external threats and the second concerns the development of its military capabilities (conventional or asymmetric) aimed at achieving the most important foreign policy objective — becoming the dominant regional power in Middle East. Functional to these foreign policy objectives is the aim of reducing U.S. presence in the area as much as possible, together with the presence of Sunni subversive groups in the Iranian area of influence. Furthermore, Tehran has extended its capabilities by adopting an [active deterrence strategy](#). The combination of its conventional forces with asymmetric capabilities of unconventional operations through partners and proxies form the basis of this active deterrence. This process includes the use of another threat, in addition to the conventional one, as a deterrent in the event of an attack on Iran. Passive deterrence is based on military dominance while active deterrence is based on escalation dominance, therefore, it is possible to escalate conflict to a level where the enemy is at loss to improve its strategic situation. Tehran employs a complex set of military capabilities. Its strategy is primarily based on the ability to retaliate against an attacker through a complex network of militant partners and proxies — exacting a high price on its enemy. The strategic doctrine is, therefore, not only based on avoiding conventional conflict, but on the pursuit of foreign policy objectives through propaganda, unconventional warfare and proxy operations.

War by proxy

Iran has consistently shown a preference for using proxies to intervene in regional affairs because of the limitations of its conventional military capabilities and desire to maintain plausible deniability — minimizing the risk of escalation. Iran's dependence on [unconventional operations](#) — made possible by its relations with a wide range of militias — militant groups and terrorist organizations is central to its foreign policy and defence strategy. IRGC-QF is Tehran's primary tool for conducting such unconventional operations and providing support such as financial assistance, training and military support.

The re-imposition of sanctions by the US and the political tightening of the EU encourage Tehran to strengthen its proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen and to support extremist and radical fringes. Iran uses the term [Axis of Resistance](#) to define its alliance of like-minded state and non-state actors across the Middle East to counter Western influence. The axis — by ensuring strong allies — allows Tehran to increase its strategic depth and influence in the region. Iran — through its network of influence — silently but effectively counters the threats posed by Sunni extremist groups, rival states and western military presence in the region. The elimination of Soleimani, from a tactical point of view was a success, but, a strike against one of the highest Iranian military leaders could trigger a series of events that are difficult to predict.

Tehran is likely to increase its commitment to Iraq by sending weapons, military advisors and funds to the government in Baghdad and by boycotting Western interests across the Middle East, especially as Iraqi Kurds actually seem reluctant to give support to the West and are more likely to see Iran as a valid stakeholder.

On the other hand, deep Iraqi social and political fragmentation, shaped by decades of authoritarianism, makes the country very weak and an easy target of Iranian influence. The strong and substantial Iranian influence in Iraq dates back to Saddam Hussein's regime and continues with [Shiite militias](#) such as the [Hashd al-Shaabi](#) (Popular Mobilization Units) who were trained to fight American forces in Iraq. Tehran is also the main natural [gas supplier](#) in Iraq. Iran-aligned Shiite militias have established themselves as [Iraq's version of Lebanon's Hezbollah](#): socio-cultural movements with a military and social-welfare wing that operates independently of the state.

In Syria, Iran has given, and will likely continue to support the al-Assad regime. This is because Syria is Iran's main communication channel with the Shiite Hezbollah movement in Lebanon — considered the key tool in the confrontation between Tehran and Israel. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Tehran has provided direct military assistance, training and weapons to Shiite militias to support the Syrian regime, but also to fight the Islamic State. IS is seen as a direct threat to Iranian national security and an obstacle to the control of Shiite factions in Iraq. Iran has worked hard to defend the al-Assad regime against rebel groups — with Iran-affiliated forces acting as the main defenders of the regime. Iranian leaders have undertaken great efforts to keep Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power, who has been a key ally of Iran despite its secular ideology.

From a [strategic point of view](#), Iranian support for al-Assad will likely increase. This is because al-Assad is the only strong ally of Tehran in the region and also because failing to support him could bring the Sunni opposition into the government. Finally, al-Assad's regime serves as a deterrent to Sunni militias which could attack Hezbollah in Lebanon from the Syrian border.

Iran will continue to have strong defensive ties with Hezbollah in Lebanon — its most significant and oldest partner (from 1982) and a key member of Tehran's "Axis of Resistance" which includes Palestinian groups that oppose Israel. Iran shares the same political and religious interests with Hezbollah, and both are against U.S. presence in the region. Despite close political and ideological ties, however, the Shiite group maintains its autonomy in Lebanese internal affairs. Tehran uses the Shiite group to maintain constant pressure against Israel and subsequently the United States.

The commitment to the so-called "Arc of Influence" in the Middle East reflects Iran's strategic goal for the construction of the so-called "Shiite corridor", which connects the Islamic Republic with southern Iraq, Syria, and to Lebanon's [Mediterranean](#) port. This could allow Iran to not only expand its influence, but, also change the strategic balance of forces in the Middle East.

Iran — in order to maintain dominance through the asymmetric war — could also strengthen its relationship with the Houthis rebels in Yemen. The Gulf of Aden is an important transit area for international trade and as stated by the commander of the US Central Command, in the last few years, there has been an increase in the military capabilities of the rebels with the same Iranian modus operandi in the Strait of Hormuz. General Joseph Votel, in a [testimony](#) to Congress, spoke of multi-level defence from coastal defence missiles, radar systems, mines and explosive boats — a typical Iranian approach to asymmetric warfare used to project power and influence on the south-western coast of the Arabian Peninsula. The relationship with Houthis enabled Tehran to indirectly put pressure on Saudi Arabia without entering into a direct military confrontation.

Finding new, strong allies

Economic sanctions have also pushed Iran to move closer to new partners such as Turkey and China who were unwilling to give up Iranian oil and not at all worried about Tehran's nuclear power. In recent years, Russian exports to Iran have tripled and India, as well as China, has also sent exports and investments to it.

Although Turkey has been exempted for six months to import Iranian crude, Erdogan has, on his part, criticized the U.S. decision to impose sanctions on Tehran. Reaffirming the Turkish position on U.S. sanctions, Erdogan confirmed that trade with Iran will continue as well as the importation of crude oil, which, in 2018, averaged 170,000 barrels per day, while gas imports amounted to 10 billion cubic meters per year. Political rapprochement between Ankara and Tehran occurred in 2016, after the failed coup of July 15. Turkey and Iran, together with Russia, have launched the "Astana process" to resolve the Syrian crisis to each country's mutual benefit. Since the biggest buyers of Iranian and Saudi crude are India and China, there is nothing to prevent them from increasing their imports from Iran. In fact, for Tehran, the discount on barrel prices is the only way to ensure that these countries continue to buy crude oil. However, even if China uses the full volume of permitted imports, it will continue to import, as a result of the sanctions, about 45% less oil from Iran than the average of 655 thousand barrels purchased between January and September 2018.

Conclusion

Soleimani's death seems to have had the opposite effect than desired. It has boosted its popularity abroad and galvanized the most extremist factions of Iranian domestic politics. Khamenei declared

three days of national mourning in the country and personally visited Soleimani's family members. Meanwhile, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani condemned the American action and vowed revenge for Soleimani's death.

Soleimani was viewed as one of the most powerful and influential figures in Iran — second only to Khamenei with whom he had a direct channel. As head of the IRGC-QF, Soleimani was the driving force behind Iran's external military operations. Described as [the center of military gravity of Iran's regional hegemonic efforts](#), he was an incomparable strategist in the ranks of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

It is by no means certain that the military response that took place a few days ago in Iraq will be the only one. Surely, Iran is planning a more strategic response involving Shiite militias in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. The Houthi rebels are crucial in the doctrine of active deterrence and Iran's capacity to escalate tensions in the Gulf of Aden will be the key to press Saudi Arabia and subsequently, the United States.

There may be similar actions to the attack on Saudi Arabia last September 14. Iran — like many small states with limited military capabilities — will increase its cyber capabilities that ensure the deniability of the action. In order to have strong allies at its side, Iran could change the center of gravity of its foreign policy by participating in the [Chinese Belt and Road Initiative](#) and expanding its political and military cooperation. Indeed, Tehran has close relations with Belarus, [Oman](#), [Russia](#), South Africa, [Sudan](#), [Venezuela](#), Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Pakistan, [Turkey](#), Turkmenistan, Ukraine and North Korea. The Iranian strategic approach is also aimed at establishing a [secure land corridor](#) from Iran to Lebanon and in pressuring Israel from both the Lebanese and Syrian borders.

Additionally, the International Atomic Energy Agency, last year, verified that the limits of nuclear activities were exceeded with respect to what was decided upon by international agreements. On January 5, 2020 Tehran [declared](#) the reduction of its commitments under the JCPOA, revoking the restrictions relating to the number of the centrifuges. In the same statement it said it was ready to resume its international commitments only if sanctions were lifted. Considering that the U.S. has activated a new series of even more stringent economic sanctions than the previous ones, it could dramatically change Iranian domestic policy in much less favourable terms than desired. The apology offered by Rouhani, when an Iranian missile shot down a Ukrainian plane, showed that there is still hope for dialogue between the parties.