



BRIEFING PAPER

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Iraq, Iranian influence and the death of Soleimani

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Summary

Iran/US clashes in Iraq

Domestic tensions in Iraq are closely associated with Iranian influence and the Hash al-Shaabi Shiite militias.

The regional standoff between Iran and the US sharply deteriorated in late 2019 with US air strikes on a Shiite militia and an assault on the US Embassy in Baghdad. Many observers were concerned that they marked an escalation towards open conflict.

Those fears were crystallised when the US killed Qassem Soleimani on 3 January 2020 in a drone strike. Many observers saw this as tantamount to a declaration of war and expected a strong Iranian response, albeit an 'asymmetrical' one; the response could take place in an unexpected country and might target assets of US allies rather than the US itself.

The UK and the EU have called for de-escalation.

Al-Mahdi falls

After demonstrations in which at least 400 people have died, the Iraqi Prime Minister resigned in December 2019. Iranian consulates have been attacked repeatedly, underscoring the anti-Iranian tone of much of the protest.

Iranian influence is associated with the present system, where election fraud, corruption and failure of governance leave ordinary Iraqis suffering and indignant.

In the absence of a candidate willing to try to form a majority in the existing parliament, fresh elections will be called, less than two years after the last round. Protesters have demanded a new electoral law and a new electoral commission.

Iranian influence

Many protesters have chanted anti-Iranian slogans and Iranian consulate have been attacked. Iran has invested time and money in strengthening its influence over Iraqi politics and security in order to prevent a nationalist drift that might threaten Iranian interests.

Demonstrators have accused unidentified Iranian-backed militiamen of attacking them.

Iran-backed individuals are in control of several Shiite militias and several are in powerful positions within the official security forces.

Iran backed the second most powerful coalition at the 2018 parliamentary election: Fatah.

Qassem Soleimani, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps overseas branch, had been seen in Iraq several times since the Iraqi Prime Minister's resignation, trying to influence the formation of a new government.

ISIS resurgence?

At the same time as the demonstrations have been growing, the *jihadi* group ISIS/Daesh (also known as the Islamic State) has re-grouped and is now increasing its terrorist activities, from a mountainous region near the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq.

"Slowly failing"?

One analyst describes Iraq as "slowly failing". Iraq needs to improve the lot of its population, and quickly, but how to replace a system born out of bitter sectarian and ethnic conflict with one less corrupt and more responsive to the people is not an easy question.

1. US/Iran clashes in Iraq

1.1 Escalation of attacks

The uneasy US/Iranian collaboration against ISIS is under strain over Iran's recent role. There were several unclaimed airstrikes against Hashd al-Shaabi assets in July and August, blamed by some Hashd figures on the US, although reports suggest that Israeli drones delivered the attacks.

There has also been a series of attacks against Iraqi military bases in Iraq. On 27 December, a rocket landed in an Iraqi military base near Kirkuk, killing a US national working as a contractor and wounding several US and Iraqi service personnel.

US response and the Embassy attack

On 29 December the US struck five Kata'ib Hezbollah bases, three in Iraq and two in Syria. The US blames Kata'ib, a Hashd al-Shaabi Shiite militia supported by Iran, for several attacks on Iraqi military bases that house US troops, including the rocket attack on 27 December.

The attacks, on what the US Administration said were "weapon storage facilities, and command and control locations",¹ killed some 25 Kata'ib militants.

On 31 December, a crowd of Iraqi protesters, reportedly angry at the attacks against Kata'ib, attacked the US Embassy in Baghdad, burning items outside the walls and smashing windows inside. There was otherwise no penetration of the Embassy's perimeter and the attack dissipated after the Iraqi authorities called for calm.

The US blamed Iran for the attack and threatened retaliation for any damage. Supreme Iranian leader Ali Khamanei said that the US could not do anything about it. The US announced the deployment of 750 more troops to Baghdad to protect the Embassy.

Iraqi response

The Iraqi government complained that the US strikes were an assault on Iraqi sovereignty.

The tension has left the Iraqi government in a difficult position. It does not want to become the battlefield if increasing US/Iranian tensions in the region turn into direct conflict rather than a proxy war.²

The anti-Kata'ib attacks, openly claimed by the US, indicated that that was beginning to happen.

¹ ['US bombs Shia group blamed for American's death in Iraq'](#), *Financial Times*, 29 December 2019

² ['Rescuing Iraq from the Iran-U.S. Crossfire'](#), International Crisis Group, 1 January 2019

2. Killing of Soleimani

In the early hours of Friday, 3 January the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps overseas branch, Qassem Soleimani, was killed in a US airstrike.

A US drone destroyed General Soleimani's convoy as it was preparing to leave Baghdad Airport. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Iraqi PMU commander, was also killed, along with a high official from Lebanese Hezbollah and several other security personnel.

The US Administration said the attack had been ordered by President Trump. The US Congress was not notified,³ and allies such as the EU were caught by surprise.

2.1 Justification

The US Department of Defense issued a statement saying that the killing of General Soleimani had been a defensive act: "General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region".⁴ It also mentioned that the IRGC Qods Force was designated a terrorist organisation by the United States.

In later comments, both President Trump and Secretary of State Pompeo talked of "imminent" attacks being planned by Soleimani;⁵ the imminence or otherwise of attacks could be a factor in arguments about whether the killing was justified under international law.

2.2 Reaction

Iran

Retaliation

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei said in response to the attack that the "criminals" who killed Soleimani would face "severe retaliation".⁶ A few days later, his senior military adviser said that that retaliation would "for sure be military" and that Iran would hit US "military sites".⁷ He also said that it would be a direct Iranian response rather than coming from one of Iran's regional proxies.

Nuclear deal

On 5 January Iran announced that it would no longer observe any of the limitations on its nuclear programme given in the 2015 nuclear deal with leading nuclear powers.

³ ['The Soleimani Strike and War Powers'](#), Justsecurity, 5 January 2020

⁴ [Statement by the Department of Defense](#), 2 January 2019

⁵ ['Trump says Soleimani plotted 'imminent' attacks, but critics question just how soon'](#), Reuters, 3 January 2020

⁶ ['Khamenei, Other Iran Officials Vow 'Severe Retaliation' For Soleimani Killing'](#), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 3 January 2020

⁷ ['Exclusive: Iran's response to US will be military -- Khamenei's adviser'](#), CNN, 5 January 2019

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Since Donald Trump had pulled the US from the deal in May 2018 and opted for his “maximum pressure” policy, Iran had already breached some of the deal’s limits.⁸

Now Iran would no longer observe any restriction on either its stockpiles of enriched uranium or the level to which Iran would enrich uranium. Both of these limits were designed to lengthen the time it would take Iran to produce a nuclear warhead. Disregarding those limits could significantly reduce this ‘breakout’ time, presently estimated at about a year, to perhaps 6 months or less.⁹

That did not mean that Iran had completely withdrawn from the agreement, however: Iran would still abide by undertakings in the nuclear deal to inform the International Atomic Energy Agency and allow the Agency access to its sites.

Iran said it would return to the deal if it enjoyed the trade benefits envisaged for it in the original negotiations.

Funeral

Hundreds of thousands of Iranians turned out to “give Soleimani a hero’s welcome” on 5 January.¹⁰ A ceremony would be held in the capital, Tehran, on 6 January then the funeral was planned for 7 January in the General’s home town of Kerman.

Iraq

The Iraqi Parliament approved a motion calling for the removal of US troops from Iraq. The motion was not binding and many Iraqi MPs who might support a continued US presence did not attend the debate.

Thousands of mainly Shia Iraqis had demonstrated against the killing, with shouts of “Death to America”. Some Iraqi celebrated, however; polls indicate that Iran’s popularity in Iraq has declined sharply over the last year, including among Shia Iraqis.¹¹

UK

On 3 January the UK Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, issued a statement saying the UK “recognised” the Iranian threat:

We have always recognised the aggressive threat posed by the Iranian Quds force led by Qasem Soleimani. Following his death, we urge all parties to de-escalate. Further conflict is in none of our interests.¹²

On 6 January Prime Minister Johnson said “we will not lament” the death of Soleimani.

⁸ For more on this, see the Commons Briefing Paper [The Iran nuclear deal and rising tensions in the Gulf](#), October 2019

⁹ [‘Iran rolls back nuclear deal commitments’](#), *BBC News Online*, 5 January 2020

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ David Pollock, [‘Iraqi Reactions to Soleimani’s Assassination’](#), Washington Institute, 3 January 2019

¹² [‘Iran: UK responds to US airstrike on military commander in Iraq’](#), Foreign and Commonwealth Office press release, 3 January 2020

EU

On 6 January, the EU countries that led on the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal, France, Germany and the UK, issued a joint statement urging Iran to stick to its commitments under the JCPOA nuclear deal and calling for restraint from all sides.¹³

¹³ [‘Joint statement from President Macron, Chancellor Merkel and Prime Minister Johnson on the situation in Iraq’](#), Downing Street press release, 6 January 2020

3. Iraqi government in chaos

Iran's involvement in Iraq was an important factor in the political instability that has shaken the country over the past few months. That instability led to the resignation of the Prime Minister in December 2019.

3.1 Abd al-Mahdi resigns over demonstrations

On 1 December 2019 the Iraqi parliament accepted Prime Minister Adel Abd al-Mahdi's resignation. It came after months of protests, during which some 400 people had died and at least 15,000 have been wounded.¹⁴ The security forces and others have used deadly force against the demonstrators.

In late November and early December protesters in the southern city of Najaf set fire to the Iranian consulate there on three separate occasions. The Iranian consulate in Karbala, another southern Iraqi city, has also been attacked. The most influential Shiite cleric in Iraq, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, called at the end of November for fresh elections:

The parliament is invited to accelerate the preparation of the new electoral legislation package in a way that satisfies the people and then hold free and fair elections whose results sincerely reflect the will of the Iraqi people.¹⁵

On the night of 6 December, between 29 and 80 protestors reportedly died when the demonstration in Tahrir Square, Baghdad, was attacked by men wielding knives and shooting from unmarked cars.¹⁶

3.2 What is behind the demonstrations?

Protests had been building since early 2018, especially in Basra province but spreading all over the south and centre of the country. They concentrated on allegations of corruption, poor government services, lack of job opportunities and Iranian influence. Demonstrators also denounce "elections that are at best rigged but are increasingly outright stolen".¹⁷ The government initiated an investigation into vote-rigging after the 2018 election, confirmed that there was considerable fraud, and then did little effective about it.¹⁸

The demonstrations, despite being composed mainly of people from a Shiite background, are relatively secular affairs, appealing across the board and calling for improved governance. The Iraqi Communist Party

¹⁴ ['Brutal crackdown on Iraq protests echoes Saddam Hussein era'](#), *Financial Times*, 24 November 2019

¹⁵ ['As Iraq bloodshed spreads, Sistani calls for early elections'](#), *Al-Monitor*, 29 December 2019

¹⁶ ['Iraq: State Appears Complicit in Massacre of Protesters'](#), Human Rights Watch press release, 16 December 2019

¹⁷ Michael Knights, ['U.S. Interests and the Unsustainable Status Quo in Iraq'](#), Washington Institute, 12 November 2019

¹⁸ Kirk Sowell, ['Iraq's Democracy Under a Cloud'](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 October 2019

has been involved in organising them. They have also been supported by Moqtada al-Sadr, former leader of the Mahdi Army militia, who has often criticised Iranian influence.

Protesters have denounced the whole political scene: "I hope to get rid of all the parties that participated in the political process from 2003 to today," said one young demonstrator in Baghdad.¹⁹

3.3 What next?

Slow process of government formation

Iraq needs a new Prime Minister and government. The President could either invite a new nominee to try to find majority support in the existing parliament, or new elections could be held. President Barham Salih, a Kurd under the apportionment of offices to different groups, accepted that a new election would be necessary.

After the 2018 election negotiations over government formation lasted six months.

This time, Moqtada al-Sadr, leader of the biggest bloc in parliament, has announced that he does not want to nominate a candidate for Prime Minister, and there are no obvious choices for the unenviable job.

Governorate or provincial elections are due to take place on 20 April 2020 but, if the present demonstrations are as much a challenge to the system as they appear, those elections must be in question.

Governorate elections

The last governorate elections were held in 2013 meaning that governorate authorities have already exceeded their normal four-year term. Governorate authorities automatically have their mandate extended if no election has been held, however, so they remain in office.

Postponing the April 2020 governorate elections would have been relatively straightforward, then, had not the date been set on primary legislation, in the new governorate elections law, passed in July 2019.²⁰

¹⁹ [‘Protesters seek end of sectarian power-sharing in Iraq and Lebanon’](#), *Financial Times*, 4 November 2019

²⁰ Kirk Sowell, [‘Iraq’s Democracy Under a Cloud’](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 October 2019

4. Iranian influence

The overthrow of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein is widely seen as a strategic gift to Iran. From a hostile, Sunni-led state, Iraq was converted into a Shiite-led country with natural affinities with Iran.

Many anti-Saddam Shiite activists had been in exiled and trained in Iran during the Saddam years, and form the leadership of some of the militias in Iraq today.

Since 2003, Iran's influence in Iraq as steadily grown, particularly as Western countries, especially the US, have reduced their presence.

Iran seeks to prevent Iraq moving in a secular, Arab nationalist direction, something that would be regarded as a security threat to Iran.

4.1 Iran's proxy forces

Alongside that development, Iran's policy of sponsoring proxy forces throughout the region has grown in importance. Iran sponsored the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah to foster Shiite power in that country, and to give Iran the power to hit Israel, which has probably the region's strongest military and Iran regards as an existential threat.

Iran also has links to the Houthi movement in Yemen, supporting that organisation in order to frustrate rival Saudi Arabia's aims in the Kingdom's southern neighbour.

Popular Mobilisation Units

Iran was already supporting Shiite militias in Iraq when the ISIS/Daesh insurgency started in Iraq in 2014. Iran was quick to help Iraqi forces fight back against the Sunni terrorist organisation. The crisis was also an opportunity for Iran to strengthen its influence over Iraq, however.

Iran controls Shiite militias numbering 60,000 Iraqi fighters, who cost the Iraqi Government more than [\\$2 billion per year](#).²¹

The largely Shiite militias (Popular Mobilisation Units, PMU, or Hashd al-Shaabi) may be majority-funded by Iraq, but many were led or at least trained by Iran's Quds Force, the overseas branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Iran provided some heavy weaponry to the militias, too.²²

The effective commander of the PMU was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an Iraqi Shia of mixed Iraqi/Iranian parentage, who became Iran's top Iraqi ally. He had been a commander in the Badr Corps (see below) and founded the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia.

Lebanese Hezbollah has also participated in the training and facilitation of the PMU and PMU units are reported to have been active in Syria, supporting Syrian government forces.

²¹ Michael Knights, '[U.S. Interests and the Unsustainable Status Quo in Iraq](#)', Washington Institute, 12 November 2019

²² [Iran's networks of influence in the Middle East](#), International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 2019

Iraq's official security forces

Iranian influence has also permeated Iraq's police and army, with individuals close to Iran (many of whom were in exile in Iran under Saddam) gaining rapid promotion because of their political connections.

There are also stories of militiamen using police and army uniforms to remain in areas such as Mosul when declared policy was for the official security forces only to handle the aftermath of the ISIS occupation.

These strategically-placed senior figures in the security forces, plus the blurring of the division between them and the militias, have given Iran significant control over Iraq.

4.2 2018 election and Fatah

Iran also cultivated Iraqi political groups and individuals and, since the ISIS conflict, many militias have now morphed into political parties, the most important of which is the Badr Organisation, formerly known as the Badr Corps militia.

Several mainly Iranian-influenced political groups came together as the Fatah coalition for the 2018 parliamentary elections, under the leadership of the Badr Organisation and its head, Hadi al-Ameri. Fatah came second in the election, just behind Sairun, the Iraqi nationalist Shiite coalition led by Moqtada al-Sadr.²³

One commentator argues that since the 2014 surge in militia influence and the 2018 election, the IRGC's power in Iraq is enormous: "The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) no longer just influences: it now controls the Iraqi government".²⁴

4.3 Iran and the demonstrations

Iran is accused by many Iraqis of orchestrating the violent crackdown on the demonstrations – sending in fighters from militias it controls.

The largely secular demonstrations, associated with Iraqi nationalist Moqtada al-Sadr and groups such as Iraqi communists, could be exactly the kind of development that Iran has invested so much in order to be able to prevent.

Soleimani and forming the new government

Qassem Soleimani, head of the Islamic Republic Guards Corps overseas branch, was seen regularly in Iraq, trying to facilitate a deal with Iraqi parties. Iranian involvement may provoke the protesters further, but Iranian influence in Iraq is now pervasive and any successful new candidate for Prime Minister will need the support of Tehran, according to analysts.

²³ For more information on the Badr Organisation and other Iraqi political parties see the Commons Briefing Paper [Iraq and the 2018 election](#), June 2018

²⁴ Michael Knights, '[U.S. Interests and the Unsustainable Status Quo in Iraq](#)', Washington Institute, 12 November 2019

5. ISIS resurgence?

Despite the October 2019 death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Syria and the removal of the group from the territory it controlled, ISIS/Daesh (also known as the Islamic State) remains a threat in Iraq.

In December 2019 Kurdish and Western intelligence sources reported that ISIS had re-grouped in the Hamrin Mountains to the west of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan.²⁵

With this phase now complete, the organisation is now increasing the frequency of attacks, according to reports. ISIS has changed its strategy, however, and no longer aims to control territory, which makes it an easier target.²⁶

The governance failures that have fuelled the demonstrations in the south and centre of Iraq are also being suffered in majority-Sunni areas. ISIS feeds off the resulting dissatisfaction and benefits from the disruption caused by the demonstrations.

There is also a stand-off between the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdish Autonomous Region and the Iraqi security forces, since Iraqi forces moved to re-take control over disputed territory held by Kurdish forces, after the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum.²⁷ The resulting no-man's land between Kurdish Peshmerga forces and Iraqi federal forces is ideal territory for ISIS. The Hamrin Mountains are also peppered with caves, providing hideouts for ISIS militants.

The killing of General Soleimani could be a setback for the anti-ISIS coalition. US troops may be expelled from Iraq and the uneasy collaboration between the US, Iran and Iraq against ISIS may be over.

UK anti ISIS deployment

UK and other foreign forces are in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi Government either as part of the US-led Global Coalition against Daesh/ISIS in Iraq and Syria and/or the NATO training mission in Iraq.

Exact numbers for UK troops in Iraq are not available but the [British Army](#) and previous [government estimates](#) suggest approximately 400 personnel are on the ground.²⁸

²⁵ ['Isis in Iraq: Militants 'getting stronger again'](#), *BBC News online*, 23 December 2019

²⁶ ISIS is a proscribed organisation in the UK. See the Commons Briefing Paper [Proscribed Terrorist Organisations](#), December 2019

²⁷ For more information see the Commons Briefing Paper [Iraq and the 2018 election](#), June 2018

²⁸ For more information, see the Commons Briefing Paper [UK troops in Iraq](#), 06 January 2020

6. Outlook

6.1 A failing Iraqi state?

President Salih said in October, in comments broadcast on television: “The status quo is no longer sustainable.”²⁹

Although he was referring to the need for new elections, his comments could have encompassed all of Iraq’s constitutional setup; protesters are certainly taking aim at the whole system.

Recent Iraqi crises have often stemmed from the Sunni minority, many of whom felt dispossessed by the move to majority rule and the empowerment of the Shia.

This time, however, most protesters were from Iraq’s Shiite majority mainly in the south and centre of the country, signalling a new level of challenge to the post-2003 Iraqi State.

Many analysts describe a system that has been hijacked by powerful individuals since its inception:

It is simply inconceivable, for example, that a citizen from Basra might join the provincial branch of [former Prime Minister] Maliki’s State of Law Coalition, and then argue that Maliki should retire from politics or argue against his views.³⁰

Part of the problem with the present setup is the ethno-sectarian apportionment of political posts. By convention, the Presidency goes to a Kurd, the Prime Minister’s office goes to a Shiite and the Speaker’s office goes to a Sunni. The preferential allocation of jobs then percolates the Civil Service and other parts of the public service. This system has stultified democratic competition, fostered loyalty to sect and ethnicity, and encouraged corruption and inefficiency.³¹

Iran has invested much in preventing secular nationalism breaking out in Iraq. Allegations of Iran-backed militiamen’s involvement in the brutal suppression of the demonstrations would be consistent with Tehran’s fierce defence of Iranian surrogates including the Badr Organisation.

One analyst thinks that wholesale change is unlikely. Co-option of opposition figures, with the help of corruption, a range of forms of repression, possibly including torture, and “limited (and mostly cosmetic) reform” are the likely outcome.³²

For another analyst, Iraq’s need for reform is little short of existential: “The unprecedented protests in Iraq underline the reality that Iraq is slowly failing as a state.”³³

²⁹ [‘Iraqi president sees need for fresh elections’](#), *Financial Times*, 31 October 2019

³⁰ [‘Iraq’s Democracy Under a Cloud’](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 30 October 2019

³¹ [‘Protesters seek end of sectarian power-sharing in Iraq and Lebanon’](#), *Financial Times*, 4 November 2019

³² [Daniel Byman, ‘Is change likely in Iraq?’](#), Brookings Institution, 20 December 2019

³³ Michael Knights, [‘U.S. Interests and the Unsustainable Status Quo in Iraq’](#), Washington Institute, 12 November 2019

UK Government policy

Middle East minister Lord Ahmad responded to a Parliamentary Question in the House of Lords, setting out the Government's policy towards Iraq's domestic upheavals:

We are deeply concerned about the continued violence in Iraq. We continue to urge the Iraqi security forces to show restraint and call for the protests to be peaceful. The Foreign Secretary spoke to Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul Mehdi on 9 October to express UK concerns about the disproportionate security response and push for the Government to take action to respond to protesters' legitimate concerns. I spoke to Foreign Minister Al-Hakim on 10 October to underline these points. Our Ambassador in Baghdad has been in close contact with senior Iraqis including the Iraqi President and Prime Minister. We are also working with international partners and the UN to encourage and support the Government of Iraq to take quick and effective action on tackling corruption, creating jobs and improving services, in line with the protesters' legitimate demands.³⁴

6.2 Towards open conflict with Iran?

The open US attacks against Hashd al-Shaabi group Kata'ib Hezbollah and the subsequent assault on the US Embassy in Baghdad were signs that the difficult three-way relationship between Iraq, Iran and the US might finally be breaking down.

An Administration official said of the Embassy assault that US officials were "not going to assume it's an escalation",³⁵ but were aware that it might be. Donald Trump warned that Iran would pay a high price for any damage to US interests and that if it did come to war, Iran would be quickly defeated.

Death of Soleimani

The killing of Iran's most powerful military figure, and possibly the second most powerful man in Iran, is widely described as a turning point for the US and Iran, and perhaps the lowest point in their relations since the 1979 hostage crisis.

Soleimani was one of the architects of Iran's policy of projecting power across the region by arming proxies such as Hezbollah and propping up the Tehran-friendly Assad government in Syria.

A commentator for the Heritage Foundation in the US argues that the killing signaled that the US would now hit Iran directly for aggression carried out by proxies, and that it would be a big setback for Iran's regional policy:

Soleimani's death is a huge loss for Iran's regime and its Iraqi proxies. It also is a major operational and psychological victory for the United States.³⁶

³⁴ [Written question - HL550](#), 5 November 2019

³⁵ ['Trump threatens Iran after protesters attack US embassy in Baghdad'](#), CNN, 1 January 2010

³⁶ James Phillips, ['How U.S. Strike Against Iranian General Changes the Rules of the Game in Iraq, Region'](#), Heritage Foundation, 5 January 2019

Another analyst, this time for the Atlantic Council, said that the killing was a blow to Iran's image as the 'resistance' against the US:

From the point of view of Iranian foreign and security strategy, Soleimani's death is a painful failure. First of all, this harms Tehran's reputation. If Iranian security forces are unable to protect the most important military official in the country, how can it protect other officers and Tehran's allies in the region? Many high-rank officials in the region—from Lebanon to Yemen—must now be concerned that if the White House could kill Soleimani so easily, they can become a target too and that the Americans will not hesitate.³⁷

Several observers said that the action would unite Iranians behind the regime at a time when it was deeply unpopular. As for Iran's retaliation, however, one analyst argues that Tehran is in a weak position:

Since President Donald J. Trump withdrew from the Iran nuclear agreement and reimposed sanctions, Iran's economy has essentially collapsed. In November, Iran faced the most serious protests since the revolution. In both Iraq and Lebanon, Shias are protesting Iran's involvement in their national affairs. In sum, Iran is not in a position to go to war with the United States, and is likely not capable of mounting effective asymmetric attacks on U.S. positions.³⁸

The killing of Soleimani called the continuing US and Western involvement in Iraq into question. One analyst argues that the repercussions for Iraq will not be favourable to reform:

There is now unlikely to be any serious prospect of achieving good governance and reform in Iraq, and we may be witnessing the end of Iraq's fragile democracy. Soleimani's assassination represents the death knell of the civilian-led reform movement that has gripped the country in recent months.³⁹

Daniel Byman, writing for the Brookings Institution, called for efforts to keep up the US presence in Iraq:

It may be too late to salvage our role, and our presence, in Iraq. But we should try. Most of all, we should be willing to accept certain restrictions on any future U.S. uses of force within Iraq itself.⁴⁰

³⁷ '[Death of Soleimani is a mixed blessing for Tehran](#)', Atlantic Council, 3 January 2020

³⁸ Ray Takeyh, '[Soleimani's Death: A Crippling Blow to the Iranian Regime](#)', Council on Foreign Relations, 3 January 2020

³⁹ Ranj Alaaldin, '[Around the halls: Experts react to the killing of Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani](#)', Brookings Institution, 3 January 2020

⁴⁰ Daniel Byman, '[Around the halls: Experts react to the killing of Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani](#)', Brookings Institution, 3 January 2020

7. Further reading

[Operation Kipion: Royal Navy assets in the Gulf](#), CBP-8628, 6 January 2020

[UK troops in Iraq](#), CBP-8773 6 January 2020

[ISIS/Daesh: What now for the military campaign in Iraq and Syria?](#), CBP-8248, 10 July 2018

[ISIS/Daesh: the military response in Iraq and Syria](#), CBP-6995, 8 March 2017

['Did the President Have the Domestic Legal Authority to Kill Qassem Soleimani?'](#), Lawfare, 3 January 2019

Oona Hathaway, ['The Soleimani Strike Defied the U.S. Constitution'](#), *The Atlantic*, 4 January 2020

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