



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**



**Bar-Ilan
University**

The Soleimani Killing: An Initial Assessment

Hillel Frisch, Eytan Gilboa, Gershon Hacohen,
Doron Itzchakov, and Alexander Joffe



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 168

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The Soleimani Killing: An Initial Assessment

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The Targeting of Soleimani Is a Major Blow to Iran

Hillel Frisch

Executive Summary: The targeting of Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force and arguably the second most powerful man in Iran after Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is a major blow to the Islamic Republic of Iran. His death will likely result in a devastating chain of suspicion and insecurity in Iran's nodes of power.

At first glance, one might think otherwise. The Islamic Republic and its proxies in Iraq and Lebanon have been, in the past two months, the target of massive demonstrations against the Iran-backed militias. Iranian consulates have been burned in, of all places, the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq. Instead of “Yankee Go Home”, the protesters chanted “Iran, bara, bara”—“Iran Go Home” in Arabic.

To deflect popular anger away from Iran, Kata'ib Hezbollah, a major militia in the larger pro-Iranian Hashd militia conglomerate, killed an American contractor. The intention of this killing was presumably to goad the US into a retaliatory strike that would defuse the anti-Iranian demonstrations in Iraq.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

The US did indeed retaliate, and its attack was no doubt a good deal more than the militia had bargained for. In a devastatingly precise helicopter strike, at least 25 militia fighters were killed and twice that number wounded.

Even less did the militia or its Iranian patron anticipate that Washington would keep going. In a far more dramatic move, the US killed Qassem Soleimani as well as Kata'ib Hezbollah commander Abu Hadi al-Muhandis, together with 13 others, in a targeted drone strike on Soleimani's car and an accompanying minibus as they left Baghdad airport.

The coffins were paraded through Baghdad from where they proceeded to Najaf and Karbala. The intention of the spectacle was not only to arouse major demonstrations against the continued American presence in Iraq, but also—in keeping with Tehran's original intention in goading the US—to terrorize and silence the demonstrators who have been protesting Iran's control in Iraq.

Some might argue that the drone strike at Baghdad Airport was another example of a high-tech operation by the US against its foes that was a tactical success but a strategic failure. Holders of this view might infer, in light of the Iranian regime's newly strengthened ability to stir outrage against the US, that it is coming out of this series of clashes as the winner despite the loss of Soleimani.

This is an erroneous reading.

Soleimani's death is a major blow to Iran.

Ayatollah Khamenei's designation of Esmail Ghaani, Soleimani's second-in-command, as Soleimani's successor as head of the Quds Force is an indicator of the magnitude of that blow. Ghaani is in his sixties (as was Soleimani)—not the ideal age to take over a major undercover organization with tentacles throughout much of the Middle East and beyond.

Over 20 years ago, sometime between the fall of 1997 and the first months of 1998, a younger, more vibrant Islamic revolutionary leadership chose 40-year-old Soleimani over his superiors to head this elite unit. Khamenei is older and less willing to take the risk of choosing a daring young commander, but that is not the only reason why he did not do so.

Even if the ayatollah were inclined to select a younger replacement, the targeting of Soleimani prevents him from making such a choice. The killing proves beyond doubt that the Iranian security system is riddled with informants. They knew when Soleimani left his secret hideout in Damascus, what plane he boarded, at which airport he was going to land, which vehicles he and his retinue entered upon landing, and exactly what time those vehicles were heading out of the airport.

This suggests an information flow involving tens if not hundreds of informants closely connected to the upper echelons of the Quds Force. These informants could and did provide this information to their American counterparts in real time to get the US helicopters in position for the kill.

The killing of Number Two in any country creates a devastating chain of destructive suspicion and anxiety in the corridors of power. Khamenei's only choice in naming a successor was to choose from among old stalwarts who are above suspicion. Every individual who is newer to the organization and to the wider security network is now suspect.

Many will no doubt be removed if not executed as Iranian counter-intelligence teams try to identify the informants. The problem for the regime is figuring out who is going to replace them.

Khamenei also understands the destructive relationship between imperialist expansion and the danger that the state's security services will be penetrated.

If Israel could uncover secret nuclear installations in Tehran, consider how much more readily the Americans, who have a massive presence in Iraq and Lebanon, can recruit Iraqis and Lebanese to penetrate the Iranian labyrinth in both states and from there work their way into Iran itself.

The killing of Soleimani suggests that just as thousands have shown themselves willing to demonstrate openly against Iran, many others are choosing to be informers at a time when the Iranian rial is worth two-thirds of its value less than two years ago.

Most Iraqis love neither Iran nor the US and are sitting on the sidelines waiting to see which state's influence prevails over their country. The killing of Soleimani was a massive show of American force because he was touted by Iran as invincible.

Photos of the funeral cortege show vehicles moving down a narrow Baghdad street, not a wide avenue. Had the cortege moved down a wider street, the relatively small number of mourning participants (in the hundreds to thousands) would have been revealed. This suggests that the many Iraqis, including Shiites, sitting on the sidelines are not with Iran.

This interpretation is bolstered by Shiite spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Sistani's decision to refrain from condemning the killing, a choice that no doubt reflects his reading of Shiite Iraqi opinion. Between "Yankees Go Home" and "Iran, bara, bara", the second chant seems more attuned to the future.

Thirty years ago, Yale historian Paul Kennedy wrote of the dangers of over-extended empires. Britain was his prime example. Tehran's dwindling coffers as a result of US sanctions and this clear demonstration of American military supremacy suggest that a terrible fate awaits the Iranian ayatollahs: not only imperial retrenchment, but oblivion.

Why Did the US Kill Qassem Soleimani?

Eytan Gilboa

Executive Summary: The targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani was a major blow to the Islamic regime in Tehran. Soleimani misperceived and miscalculated Donald Trump's intentions, took his aggressive designs a step too far, and crossed the American president's red lines.

President Trump wanted to disengage from the Middle East and showed much restraint in the face of Iranian provocations in the Gulf, but refused to tolerate the attacks by pro-Iranian militias on an American base and the American embassy in Baghdad.

It is extremely difficult to forecast what will happen next. The future could entail a major war, negotiations, or several scenarios in between, including an American withdrawal from the Middle East.

While the US and Iran have quarreled over the nuclear deal, they share two major interests: neither wants a major war, and both want the US to disengage from the Middle East. Trump has stated these interests several times and has demonstrated them by tolerating repeated Iranian violent provocations in the Gulf, allowing the Turkish invasion and occupation of northern Syria, and withdrawing American forces from that area.

Prof. Eytan Gilboa is an expert on American politics and foreign policy and a Senior Research Associate at the BESA Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University.

Both countries have expressed interest in negotiating to settle the conflict over the 2015 nuclear deal. At the last meeting of the UN General Assembly, President Trump practically begged for a meeting with President Rouhani. He was rebuffed because Tehran set a precondition that was unacceptable to Trump: an immediate removal of the harsh US sanctions.

How, then, did Iran and the US come to a direct violent confrontation that could lead to a major war they both want to avoid? The answer may be found in missed perceptions and miscalculations, primarily on the Iranian side.

The targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani was not a retaliation for the attack by his Shiite militias on the US embassy. That attack was simply the straw that broke the camel's back. Throughout the second half of 2019, Trump has showed great restraint in the face of a series of violent Iranian provocations in the Gulf.

In May, Iran attacked oil tankers in the Gulf. In June, it downed an expensive American drone. In September, it attacked major oil facilities in Saudi Arabia. All these provocations were designed to counter the American sanctions. Trump didn't respond to any of them, to the chagrin of the US's Arab allies and Israel.

Soleimani and his immediate superior and mentor Ayatollah Khamenei interpreted Trump's statements and inaction in the Gulf and in northern Syria to mean he was timid. They also likely assumed that because a presidential election is looming in the US, Trump would not dare risking a major war. They miscalculated and were caught by surprise. They were correct that Trump does not want another entanglement in the region, but particularly in an election year he can't afford to look wimpy and withdraw under Iranian military pressure.

What tipped Trump out of restraint and into retaliation was the attack by Soleimani's pro-Iranian militias on an American base in Baghdad and the killing of an American citizen.

The same phenomenon occurred during Barack Obama's tenure in the White House. He, like Trump, wanted to disengage from the Middle East. He minimized the threat of ISIS and felt forced to wage war only when the jihadists started beheading American journalists and aid workers.

Several international conventions in which both Iran and Iraq participate define diplomatic missions as extraterritorial. The host country is forbidden from entry to the premises of a mission without the permission of the represented country, even to put out a fire. International rules also define an attack on an embassy as an attack on the represented country. Iran violated these rules.

Attacks on US diplomatic missions also touch a highly sensitive nerve in the history of American foreign policy. The chaotic desertion of the US embassy in Saigon in 1975, the obliteration of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979 and the holding of 52 American diplomats hostage for 444 days, and the attack on the US diplomatic post and the CIA annex in Benghazi, Libya in 2012 left deep scars on American prestige and honor. Soleimani did not learn lessons from these previous embassy incidents. To make matters worse, Khamenei infuriated Trump on a personal level by taunting him with the words “You can't do a damn thing.”

The next steps are hard to foresee. Iran has promised a painful retaliation against the US and its allies. If Tehran pursues a harsh revenge, Trump would have to respond in kind. A cycle of escalating retaliations could lead to a major war, but also to other scenarios such as a US withdrawal from the region or negotiations over a new nuclear deal and an end to the conflict.

Iran would like to see a Democrat win the 2020 presidential election and may take steps to help secure that outcome. Regardless, the main lesson for the US from the recent exchanges of fire is to avoid mixed messages and confusing actions that can lead to misperceptions and miscalculations.

Qassem Soleimani's Unique Strategic Significance

Gershon Hacoheh

Executive Summary: In terms of influencing Middle Eastern strategic developments, Qassem Soleimani can probably be considered “the man of the decade.” Skillfully using his unique preeminence within the Islamist regime, he exploited the so-called “Arab Spring” to revitalize Tehran’s imperialist ambitions, personally overseeing the regime’s effort to create a “Shiite Crescent” and expand Iranian influence across the region. His death leaves a deep leadership vacuum that will not be easily filled.

At its highest level, military leadership embodies much more than an agglomeration of professional, technical and operational skills. Just as an architect needs to collaboratively synchronize among entrepreneurs, contractors, and artisans, so too does a top military commander, facing far more daunting challenges, have to maintain a dialogue with both the political leadership and subordinate military echelons. Of course, the political echelon is equally responsible for creating the right conditions for such a strategic dialogue, but the issues under discussion and the depth of their substance, as well as the identification of evolving vicissitudes and moments of decision, are largely dependent on the military echelon.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for 42 years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.

Military leaders capable of traversing the inherent tension between the political and military echelons are a rarity. The unique working relationship between Moshe Dayan as IDF Chief of Staff and David Ben-Gurion as Prime Minister and Minister of Defense offers a salient exception. So did the unique bond between Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Capitalizing on his exceptional ability to establish an honest and intimate dialogue involving mutual and frank weighing of opportunities and risks, Soleimani gained Khamenei's highest esteem and trust. This put him in a unique position of power and influence, far above his official post (and, for that matter, that of other Iranian leaders, including President Rouhani). This extraordinary feat will be hard for his successors to emulate.

Nor should Soleimani's military skills be understated. A quintessential product of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which bore the brunt of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War (most of the Shah's generals were executed after the Iranian revolution and many officers incarcerated), Soleimani earned his stripes as a young division commander who had no fear of confronting IRGC Commander Mohsen Rezai. Forced to fight against tremendous material odds, lacking critical major weapons systems such as fighting aircraft and tanks, the IRGC spearheaded the advent of Iran's non-conventional conception of war, with Soleimani playing an important role in this development.

After the war, and especially after assuming command of the IRGC's Quds Force in 1997, Soleimani took this strategy to unprecedented heights by creating an extensive subversive and terrorist infrastructure throughout the Middle East and beyond, imbued with ingenious operational ideas and organized in flexible frameworks that corresponded to shifting local circumstances and changes in the nature of warfare.

In the process, Soleimani expanded existing terror groups, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah (and, to a lesser extent, Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad) into formidable war machines possessing hundreds of thousands of missiles and rockets; transformed the Houthis into a deadly terror organization that keeps Yemen at war and poses a clear and present danger to Saudi Arabia; created a host of Shiite militias that have played a key role in the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts; and established sleeping terrorist cells throughout the world.

Soleimani did all this to promote the Islamist regime's imperialist ambitions, which were redoubled in strength by the "Arab Spring." As he told students at a theological seminary in the city of Qom in May 2011: "Today, Iran's victory or defeat no longer takes place in Mehran and Khorramshahr. Our boundaries have expanded and we must witness victory in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. This is the fruit of the Islamic revolution."

Dilemmas Facing the Revolutionary Regime Following the Elimination of Qassem Soleimani

Doron Itzhakov

Executive Summary: The killing of Qassem Soleimani, who commanded a multinational army operating across the Middle East on behalf of the Iranian revolutionary regime, will not only demoralize that regime but will force it to confront several dilemmas.

Over the years, Soleimani positioned himself as a symbol of the revolution who worked tirelessly to promote Iran's status as a regional hegemon. By ruthlessly and determinedly implementing the "axis of resistance," he established himself as the Supreme Leader's top confidant, gaining a dual status as a national hero to those supporting the Iranian regime and an arch terrorist to the rest of the world.

The desire of regime officials to retaliate for the loss of a man they defined as a national symbol and nicknamed the "living martyr" has both external and internal implications.

From a foreign policy perspective, the regime wants to prove that Iran is an alternative to the US presence in the region. Ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, its leaders have preached constantly that the Iranian revolutionary model is intended to serve as a substitute for Western rule. Belligerent statements directed by regime

figures toward the US and its allies send a deterrent message that Tehran is not afraid to inflict significant damage on the world's strongest power.

Statements promising revenge were also directed toward the domestic audience. An insufficient reaction to the elimination of Soleimani might be interpreted as weakness and incompatible with the revolutionary spirit. From the revolution through the end of the Iran-Iraq War and beyond, the security establishment has worked to glorify military power as a fundamental component of national resilience.

Obviously, Iran's choice of response could be an escalation that threatens the entire region. But despite its leaders' belligerent statements, the Iranian regime is rational, aware of its weaknesses, and able to draw conclusions.

First of all, the sheer magnitude of the American response has proven that attacking its national symbols is dangerous. Equally important, Iran understands that escalation can lead to a swift and drastic change in US policy, which had sought originally to reduce its presence in the Middle East. The redeployment of a large-scale US military force would severely limit Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria and runs counter to Tehran's strategic interest.

Furthermore, the Iranian security establishment fully grasps the need to protect its natural resources, which are a major national revenue source. The regime has to assess the extent to which it will risk damage to energy reserves: at a time of crippling sanctions, economic considerations are an important factor in decision-making. An offensive policy would only increase the burden of sanctions on the country's deteriorating economy.

With that said, it is important to bear in mind that not all actors operating in the arena are rational. Shiite militias beholden to Tehran are deployed from Lebanon through Syria and Iraq to Yemen, and some of them suffered a severe blow with the death of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. They may be eager to take independent action—so much so that they stimulate the Iranian establishment to take bold action first.

The revolutionary regime seems to be considering a range of possible responses to the elimination of the Quds Force commander, but senior officials of the Iranian establishment are well aware that their reaction will lead to a counter-reaction that could place the regime in danger.

Soleimani, the Blob, and the Echo Chamber

Alex Joffe

Executive Summary: The killing of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani by an American drone strike will change the face of the Middle East in thus far unknown ways. But the responses of the American foreign policy apparatus and its media enablers, otherwise known as the Blob and the Echo Chamber, illustrate important features regarding these entities.

A review of initial comments from well-known former officials and journalists shows that their sense of their own wisdom and indispensability is undiminished. Given their links with the Democratic presidential candidates, their comments offer not only a critique of the Trump administration but a foreshadowing of a potential Democratic administration.

The killing of Qassem Soleimani will reverberate across the Middle East and the world for decades to come. The architect of Iran's imperial expansion and its worldwide terror networks, including hundreds if not thousands of attacks that killed American soldiers in Iraq, Soleimani was a unique and deadly figure. Iranian revenge attacks for his killing are inevitable.

In the meantime, however, it is useful to examine reactions to Soleimani's killing from the interlocked American foreign policy and media apparatus.

Dr. Alex Joffe is a senior non-resident fellow at the BESA Center and a Shillman-Ingerman fellow of the Middle East Forum.

Former Obama White House staffer Ben Rhodes introduced the term “the Blob” to refer to the shapeless and permanent bipartisan foreign policy establishment as a means of highlighting the Obama administration’s purportedly novel thinking.

Like a shapeless iceberg, the Blob is mostly underwater (that is, unseen). It is comprised of hundreds of individuals inside and outside government, with the latter to be found mostly at policy organizations, think tanks, the media, and academia before they cycle back into official positions.

Rhodes, a former speechwriter turned policy guru, also noted about journalists that “The average reporter we talk to is 27 years old, and their only reporting experience consists of being around political campaigns. That’s a sea change. They literally know nothing.” Together, these journalists formed what Rhodes labelled the “Echo Chamber,” which could be relied upon to “[say] things that validated what we had given them to say.”

This handy description is Rhodes’s only useful and lasting contribution to American foreign policy. Indeed, as if to illustrate both the permanence of the Blob/Echo Chamber revolving door and its vacuity, Rhodes currently runs an anti-Trump policy organization and appears frequently as a television commentator.

What then do the Blob and the Echo Chamber have to say about Soleimani’s death? The medium known as Twitter, with its short, impulsive, and poorly thought out messages, provides a unique window into what people are really thinking.

Rhodes himself, who was fundamentally invested in the Obama JCPOA nuclear deal, was quick to respond. Among his comments were: “Trump may have just started a war with no congressional debate. I really hope the worst case scenario doesn’t happen but everything about this situation suggests serious escalation to come,” and “Iraq and Lebanon are just two of the places where we have to be very concerned about the potential Iranian response which could play out over time - not to mention Iran’s nuclear program. Again, QS was as bad a guy as there was, but what is the strategy here?”

Former American Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power also condemned the action by pointing to the uncertainty of the outcome,

and specifically the allegedly precipitous manner in which the decision was made: “Trump is surrounded by sycophants (having fired those who’ve dissented). He has purged Iran specialists. He has abolished NSC processes to review contingencies. He is seen as a liar around the world.”

Lesser-known Blob members also weighed in. Kelly Magsamen, currently of the Center for American Progress and formerly principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, similarly lamented, “I worked the Iran account for years at the NSC under two Presidents. I’m honestly terrified right now that we don’t have a functioning national security process to evaluate options and prepare for contingencies. God help us.”

Finally, Brett McGurk, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq and Iran and Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, now of Stanford University, said, “We need to presume we are now in a state of war with Iran... and that is not something that the Trump administration appears to have been prepared for.”

The Echo Chamber expressed similar concerns. Charter member Ezra Klein of Vox fretted, “The question isn’t whether Soleimani was a bad guy. The questions are: 1. What are the likely consequences of his assassination? 2. Do you trust the Trump administration to have planned for those consequences and to manage what comes next?”

Higher up on the Echo Chamber food chain, the New York Times’s Max Fisher’s expressed concerns are not about the decision-making process but about the nature of the Iranian-American relationship: “If reports are true, assassinating Iran’s Soleimani would represent a major, overt act of war. Functionally and legally, it’s not a ‘risk of war’ or ‘tantamount to war.’ It is war outright, and against a country that has invested years of preparation into enduring just that.”

Washington Post columnist and CIA leak conduit David Ignatius warned ominously about “An eerie feeling reading this news, reminiscent of when the US invaded Iraq in 2003 to topple a brutal dictator—and set in motion a chain of consequences for which America was utterly unprepared.”

Finally, offering an academic’s distorted view of both history and contemporary reality, Harvard political scientist Stephen Walt pondered,

“Just imagine how we’d react if some adversary assassinated a member of the Joint Chiefs, an Undersecretary of State, or the DNI.”

Scores of similar examples are easily found. But what does this exercise in collecting ephemera suggest? One observation is that the Blob is uniquely and absolutely committed to its own indispensability in the decision-making process. Only they—in this case meaning Obama veterans—have the wisdom and patience to analyze situations and predict outcomes. When they act, as in the killing of Osama bin Laden, the action is wise; when others act, killing a no less dangerous terrorist mastermind, the action is foolish.

Another is that the Blob has a (supposedly) deep, if newly discovered, respect for the American Constitution and its war-making powers, namely the apparent need to consult Congress in order to take action against a designated terrorist and his associates. That this was not a concern with regard to the JCPOA is of little consequence. Similar complaints have been expressed by others regarding the Soleimani killing and the malleable fiction of “international law,” as opposed to the Obama administration’s immense global targeted killing program. The concern is simply who is pulling the trigger, not why.

At one level the criticisms are inescapably partisan; Democrat complaining about the Trump administration is the first and only law of American politics today. Parallel complaints regarding process, wisdom, and ultimate fitness for office were leveled at Obama by Republicans, though they hardly reached the current level of antipathy directed toward Trump. The question becomes not whether Trump’s policy decision was correct, but whether the critics adopting tones of ill-disguised hatred are themselves to be trusted.

The responses to the Soleimani killing have additional relevance not simply because of their partisanship and self-referential elevation of expertise, which illustrate if nothing else the processes of elite groupthink. They anticipate a possible future, namely the way Democratic presidential candidates uniformly disapproved of the killing.

Current frontrunner and former Obama VP Joe Biden likened the act to throwing “a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox.” Elizabeth Warren

acknowledged that “Soleimani was a murderer, responsible for the deaths of thousands, including hundreds of Americans. But this reckless move escalates the situation with Iran and increases the likelihood of more deaths and new Middle East conflict.” Finally, Bernie Sanders warned, “Trump’s dangerous escalation brings us closer to another disastrous war in the Middle East that could cost countless lives and trillions more dollars.”

The parallels between the Blob/Echo Chamber and the Democratic candidates illustrate their interlocking nature. Obama veterans would return under Biden or Warren, while Sanders would likely bring in ideologue outsiders, such as his foreign policy advisor, progressive blogger Matt Duss. But they also illustrate common intellectual foundations, the elevation of process and celebration of purported expertise, the search for predictability, and the corresponding avoidance of disruption. Readiness to be gamed by canny adversaries is thus built in.

The candidates’ responses are a foreshadowing of a future Democratic administration. Like most members of the Blob and the Echo Chamber, the candidates have already stated that they would recommit to the JCPOA nuclear deal (which of course may no longer be possible). They would likely return to the Obama policy of indulging Iran’s “legitimate regional aspirations,” “security concerns,” and revolutionary Islamic government, even as they offer tepid criticism, as a means of restructuring American relations away from Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Still, every new administration has to deal with the reality bequeathed by its predecessors. The killing of Soleimani may or may not upend the chessboard of Iranian imperial expansion, much less unleash World War III. As the new reality unfolds, the question remains whether experts on all sides of the equation are willing to rethink their premises and contend with the world as it is now. First indications are not promising.

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