



Who Benefits? Trump, Iran and the Bigger Picture

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Summary

The assassination of Qasem Soleimani caused tensions between the US and Iran to escalate dramatically. Relations between the two have simmered, though it is difficult to see for how long. But who are the real winners and losers from the crisis?

Introduction

Following a period of high tensions between the United States and Iran, culminating in the killing of the [Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps General](#), Qasem Soleimani followed by an Iranian retaliatory missile attack on bases in Iraq, relations have stabilised. But there are questions to ask over whether this is a long-term change in US-Iran tensions or more likely a brief interlude. It is also pertinent to examine how the main states and paramilitary movements involved see the recent events. This briefing looks at the global state of play in the aftermath of the Soleimani assassination and examines who the real beneficiaries of the crisis could be.

Assassination and aftermath

Following the Soleimani killing by a drone strike, the Iranian military responded with *Operation Martyr Soleimani*, a multi-missile attack on Ayn al-Asad airbase in Iraq. A base near Erbil, in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq was also hit. There are indications that the Iraqi government was forewarned of the impending attacks and may have communicated this to the US military, suggesting that this was a largely symbolic attack rather than one designed to

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cause loss of life and the possibility of a large-scale US military response. Immediately after the attack, President Trump [tweeted](#) that there had not been any US casualties and indicated that the United States would not respond, implying that the matter was now closed.

At present, this remains the position, although it does now appear that US personnel at Ayn al-Asad [did suffer casualties](#), with officials at the base reporting dozens of personnel suffering concussion-like symptoms. At least eleven of these were experiencing symptoms sufficiently serious to be treated outside Iraq, with some going initially to a medical facility in neighbouring Kuwait. Somewhat surprisingly, it was also reported that a number, possibly eight, had been sent to Landstuhl in Germany for observation and possible treatment, a number which was subsequently revised to 16. In all, 34 [were affected](#) by what have been described as traumatic brain injuries.

The Landstuhl Regional Medical Centre, established in 1953 in the early Cold War years, is the largest US military medical centre outside the United States and has been the key medical receiving and treatment centre for US military personnel serving in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past two decades. Casualties are typically stabilised in the countries in which they have been serving and then sent to Landstuhl. The sending of injured personnel in this case suggests that the attack was much more effective than originally indicated by Mr Trump.

This further indicates that the United States was not keen to pursue the conflict with Iran further, at least not by military means. However, given that the origins of the current tensions stem from the US decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) designed to curb any Iranian nuclear ambitions, the longer-term relationship remains deeply problematic.

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Furthermore, there are no plans to withdraw the substantial **US military reinforcements** that have been sent to the region, with some 30,000 personnel now in Iraq and neighbouring countries.

Although there were **massive demonstrations** throughout Iran opposing the US killing of Soleimani, there remains deep unease in the country, primarily at the state of the economy exacerbated by maladministration, corruption and the excessive power of the clergy. This has been expressed in mass demonstrations in recent months, some of which have been put down with considerable force including **many protestors killed**.

Prior to the upsurge in tensions between the United States and Iran there were also many demonstrations in Iraq against the government. Like Iran, these protests were also caused by deep resentment at the state of the economy, and the repression of the protests and the many deaths involved simply increased the anti-regime anger. This was discussed by Oxford Research Group in an **October 2019 briefing**. It is notable that the demonstrations came almost entirely from within the Shi'a majority, even though the government is essentially made up of Shi'a parties, and part of the motivation stemmed from a sense that Iran's influence in the country had grown far too large.

In the wake of the Soleimani killing, there were anti-American demonstrations and since then there has been a persistent undercurrent of anti-Americanism and pressure on political leaders for the expulsion of US troops from the country, which number approximately 5,000.

The Wider Region

Beyond Iraq and Iran there are different perceptions of how the recent crisis has affected power and influence. Normally, **Saudi Arabia** would have viewed the killing of Soleimani with some satisfaction, as would the UAE, but both countries are actually **exhibiting** a degree of **unease**. One reason is the unpredictability of President Trump coupled with a suspicion that he would like to lessen US involvement in the region, and the other is the vulnerability of both countries if there was a war.

The latter element has much to do with the missile attack on the huge Saudi oil-processing plant at Abqaiq last September, purportedly carried out by Yemeni Houthi rebels but believed to be of Iranian origin. The plant suffered quite extensive damage, but its real significance was to demonstrate the vulnerability of critical infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the UAE to attack in time of war. A subsidiary factor is that Saudi Arabia has a significant Shi'a minority that is concentrated in its main oil-bearing, processing and exporting areas, with some doubts within the House of Saud as to their loyalties. These concerns probably explain recent moves by the Saudis to open discussions with Iran on how tensions may be eased, a development that came as a surprise to many analysts and, no doubt, to Washington.

Turkey was not directly affected by the killing of Soleimani but remains content with its increased influence in northern Syria where it is comfortably entrenched in a buffer zone in the Kurdish region. In **Syria** itself Assad is consolidating control over most of the country with the exception of the Kurdish north-east and the rebel-held province of Idlib in the north-west. There appears to be little military action under way to take control of Idlib province, a move which would likely increase tensions with Turkey.

In any case, the Assad regime would be hard-pressed to take control of the province without the direct military support of **Russia**, one of the countries that has gained most from US military operations over the last three years. Russia now finds itself in a position of far greater influence in the Middle East than at any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union and is not keen to increase its military commitments in Syria given its political success so far. For the three **European Union** members directly involved in the JCPOA, **France, Germany** and the **UK**, there are fears that it will prove difficult to resuscitate the JCPOA and there is a worry that there remains considerable scope for renewed tensions. **Israel**, on the other hand, currently feels secure with the Trump administration in control and the US/Israel peace plan is well received in the country. But it is bitterly opposed by the Palestinians.

The main benefactor of recent events may turn out to be **ISIS**, which will welcome the increased unrest in Iraq, especially as it comes primarily from within the Shi'a majority community and therefore diverts government security resources away from trying to maintain security in the North. Lahur Talabany, a Kurdish counter-terrorism official, recently gave a stark appraisal of the current threat posed by a resurgent ISIS:

“ They have better techniques, better tactics and a lot more money at their disposal...They are able to buy vehicles, weapons, food supplies and equipment. Technologically they're more savvy. It's more difficult to flush them out. So, they are like al-Qaeda on steroids. ”

In the aftermath of the Soleimani strike, the US announced a moratorium on its anti-ISIS operations in Iraq and Syria, a move which potentially gave the group more time and space to regroup and restructure, though the US did recently announce the resumption of its activities. Moreover, US military sources currently report more attacks on US forces from Shi'a militias, not from ISIS, which is concentrating on reorganising itself as it transitions into an [anti-government insurgency](#). In a further indication of tensions, five Katyusha rockets were fired at the heavily protected Green Zone in Baghdad on 26 January. There were no casualties and little damage, but it was the third attack this month. The current unrest in Baghdad could eventually make the situation ripe for ISIS to try and exploit the marginalisation of Sunni Muslims - a minority community. It has followed this strategic playbook of exploiting sectarian divisions in Iraq through polarisation to great effect in the past. But it may find doing this a more [difficult task](#) compared to the divided climate of 2013 and 2014. ISIS have also been making significant strategic gains elsewhere.

The Sahel and Somalia

Although ISIS affiliates in Afghanistan have experienced reversals in recent months, ISIS and al-Qaida affiliates across the Sahel region of the Sahara have further expanded their reach and impact, principally in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. According to the United Nations envoy for the region, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the region has experienced “a devastating surge in terrorist attacks against civilians and military targets.” He also reported; “Most significantly, the geographic focus has shifted eastwards from Mali to Burkina Faso and is increasingly threatening west African coastal states”. The main group responsible is a direct ISIS affiliate, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

This group formed in 2015 when its leader, Adnan Abu Walid al Sahrawi, a commander of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (an AQIM affiliate), pledged allegiance to the former ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. ISGS has followed a strategy of exploiting insecurity and existing ethnic fault lines. As Pauline Le Roux of the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies describes:

“ ISGS..stokes ethnic divisions to strengthen unity and cohesion among its members. To advance these interests, the Tuareg have often been singled out..... Given that it plays on ethnically-based and anti-government grievances, ISGS’s narrative shifts depending on what can garner the most support from local communities. ”

Its expansion has occurred despite the deployment of French and US troops, armed drones and extensive surveillance resources. Although not directly connected to ISIS, the expansion of paramilitary activities by the Islamist militias in **Somalia** is causing much concern in the Pentagon, especially a major attack on US and Kenyan facilities at a military base outside the coastal town of Manda Bay near the resort of Lamu in North East Kenya which is close to the border with Somalia. Numerous Shabab paramilitaries assaulted the base just as a US surveillance plane was taking off, causing it to crash. In an hour-long attack on the base many facilities were damaged, and casualties included three US military personnel killed.

The attack on 5 January was overshadowed by the killing of Soleimani two days earlier but the Pentagon **immediately moved** in reinforcements from the US Army’s 81st Airborne Division to secure the base. The United States has since

increased its support for the Kenyan armed forces with six attack helicopters delivered in the latter part of the month and a further six due.

The United States currently has between 5,000-6,000 defence and security personnel in Africa. The 2018 National Defence Strategy also identifies supporting relationships in Africa to “counter violent extremism, human trafficking, trans-national criminal activity, and illegal arms trade with limited outside assistance in the continent” as a major priority.

But there have been reports that Trump is considering a major reduction of US personnel in the continent, in addition to potential [cuts to the United Nations](#) mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Indeed, US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper has reportedly ordered a review into how to reduce America’s light footprint engagement around the globe as it calibrates towards competition and potentially confrontation with Russia and China. The US presence in the Sahel has been identified as an area for potential draw-down.

This has caused anxiety amongst its regional and international partners and allies such as France, as well as the G5 Sahel (i.e., Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania), the European Union, and the United Nations. French Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly recently warned Esper that a US cut-back could harm the fight against armed groups in the region. West African leaders have also raised concerns about a potential draw-down to US troops in Africa. Commenting on the prospects, Togolese President Faure Gnassingbé remarked “If one actor leaves the chain, it weakens the whole group”. Considering the threat of ISGS and other groups in the Sahel and Somalia and growing Chinese interests in Africa more broadly, it remains doubtful how withdrawn the US can become from the continent.

Conclusion

Although the Soleimani assassination appeared initially to be useful to Mr Trump in his bid for re-election, the longer-term consequences are far less clear. Indeed, it is reasonable to say that the main beneficiary so far appears to be ISIS, with this further aided by a marked increase in paramilitary jihadist activity in the Sahel and Somalia. Whatever Mr Trump's desire to [bring the troops home](#), both from the Middle East and northern Africa, the chances of that are now small. Meanwhile, the central point of conflict with Iran remains, with no sign of that easing as we get closer to the intense re-election period in the United States.

Image credit: Wikimedia Commons.

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