

An Iranian response to the Jan 3 assassination of Soleimani is all but inevitable, but the potential targets are numerous and geographically diverse with possible ripple effects across the Middle East and beyond.

Emily Stromquist | Director of Energy| e.stromquist@castlereagh.net

BACKGROUND: The Jan 3 drone attack that killed Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Major General Qasem Soleimani was not the first strike on Iranian assets in the region, but was by far the highest profile attack to date. Soleimani was the commander of the Quds Force, the international wing of the IRGC, and oversaw Iran's ties to major proxies and allies in the region, including Hezbollah, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMUs) and Yemen's Houthis. He was a direct link between the Supreme Leader and other regional actors (i.e., President Bashar al-Assad of Syria and Iraqi senior Shia officials). His assassination comes days after the US embassy in Baghdad was surrounded by a mob of protestors commanded by Iraqi PMUs.

On Dec 30, 2019, US President Donald Trump explicitly stated that the US red line with Iran is the killing of Americans. His comments came days after an attack by an Iraqi PMU group (Kataib Hezbollah) commanded by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis on a US base near Kirkuk in Iraq killed a US civilian contractor. Muhandis also was killed in the attack on Soleimani at Baghdad Airport; like Soleimani, he had been on the US sanctions list since 2009.

RESPONSES: An Iranian response to the Jan 3 assassination of Soleimani is all but inevitable, but the potential targets are numerous and geographically diverse with possible ripple effects across the Middle East and beyond. We outline some of these risks below.

The Iraqi PMUs have sent out statements vowing revenge, including a call for the Iraqi Parliament to force the US military presence out of Iraq, and a non-binding resolution from the Iraqi Parliament to end the military agreement with US forces. This echoes the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's statement announcing a three-day mourning period in Iran and severe repercussions for those involved in the attack.

The main categories of responses that can be expected in order of likelihood and severity:

Scenario 1: Limited quantitative response The US previously accused Soleimani of being the architect of Iran's transfer of missile systems to regional allies. Iran could choose to pursue a limited,

coordinated proxy attack signalling the ability of its Quds force to respond in coordination. The attack could come in one of the following forms:

A purging of US assets or troops in the region likely beginning in Iraq, where the process has been in motion for some time under Soleimani's guidance. Alternatively, they could start by opening the Tehran-Beirut road.

Missile attacks on select US or allied assets across the Middle East

Scenario 2: Limited qualitative response The Iranians will seek what they consider to be a maximum and reciprocal response (i.e. the targeting of senior US military or allied personnel and interests).

There are limited opportunities to carry out such a response, however, US military targets in countries such as Iraq and embassies remain exposed. The US has already sent additional troops to help secure key US military and diplomatic interests and installations across the Middle East, especially in Iraq in light of the Dec 31, 2019 attempts by PMUs to storm the US embassy.

Scenario 3: Coordinated full-scale Iranian response Iran will recruit the full spectrum of its forces and those of its regional allies, particularly IRGC proxies, such as paramilitary groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, the PMUs in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen. This would also include smaller cells in countries such as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. This could come in the form of large-scale and coordinated attacks, cyberattacks, full abandonment of the JCPOA, or localized targeting of US and US allied interests in these respective countries using Iran's missile capabilities and mobilizing ground forces. Potential targets include strategic energy assets, ports or airports (and other infrastructure) and key military positions. Iran is also poised to disrupt maritime flows through the Strait of Hormuz.

Scenario 4: Impactful qualitative response This would most likely come in the form of an attack on US soil or significant targeting of a large number of American interests and troops at home or abroad. This scenario is least likely given Iranian concerns that such a response would lend justification to US actions against Soleimani. Iran has been trying to leverage US pressure by pursuing a less aggressive line with European countries trying to preserve what remains of the JCPOA nuclear deal.

CONCLUSION: At the moment, there is little reason to believe that either the US or Iran is interested in escalating to a full-scale war. However, to understand the realm of possibility for Iranian responses, we must understand what it is Iran would like to accomplish. That answer is clear-cut: expel US interests in the Middle East, especially in Iraq, and demonstrate their scope of influence and strength across the Shia crescent.

Given this, any response by Iran is likely to start with localized attacks on US and allied interests and military presence (similar to Scenario 1), soliciting support from regional proxies established under

Soleimani, and only ratchet up to deliver more damaging, coordinated attacks across the region depending the severity of a subsequent US response. Direct conflict with Israel seems unlikely at this juncture, given the likely magnitude of response this would elicit from the US, but renewed Hezbollah missile strikes against northern Israel are possible.

The impacts of heightened US-Iranian tensions also will be felt more broadly across the Middle East, including in the Gulf. For sure, a resolution on Yemen will be back off the table. In addition, 2020 is a big year for both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are hosting the G20 and Expo 2020 Dubai, respectively. These events need to be a huge success for a range of political, economic and investment reasons, but an escalation in regional tensions will threaten to spook tourism, and most importantly the turnout for and impact of these key events.