

What the attack achieved and what comes next – Tehran’s view

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TAKEAWAYS:

Iranian leaders are satisfied with the symbolic and compelling nature of their response to the US’s assassination of Qassem Soleimani and have no intention to escalate further.

Tehran expects regional capitals to exert diplomatic pressure on Washington not to strike back considering the threat levels they would face in this event.

Regardless of the US response, the next escalatory move could come from Iraq’s PMF units who still wish to exact revenge on the US.

BACKGROUND: The Iranian ballistic missile strikes on two US bases in Iraq were meant to restore Iran’s regional deterrence and had three objectives: to demonstrate its ability to retaliate proportionally from Iranian territory using its own army against US and allied bases; to reassert its threats of regional, all-out war in the event of retaliation by identifying 104 targets linked to the US and its allies (this was echoed by separate threats from non-state allies, including the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces, PMF); and to prove that the killing of Qassem Soleimani has not crippled the capabilities of its forces.

IRGC Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami had warned on Jan 7 that Iran “would hit back where [the enemy] knows it will hit” should the US retaliate following these latest attacks. The comment intended to signal that Iran would consider targeting Israel under such conditions. Following the attack, the IRGC continued the warning by calling on US forces to leave the Middle East to avoid loss of life. The Iraqi PM says he was informed of the attack prior to its start.

In addition to building a legal case by referring to UNC Article 51, and to the Iraqi Parliament’s bill to expel US forces, Iranian leaders have followed the attack with diplomatic outreach. Remarks from the supreme leader that “even if a country outside or inside the region says something against us, we don’t consider it an enemy” were a clear message to GCC countries that regional peace is still on the table and that their help in defusing tensions is needed.

IRAN'S NARRATIVE: The Islamic Republic is now engaged in the mediatic phase of Operation Qassem Soleimani. After raising the stakes with mythmaking around the Quds force commander, including the largest funeral since that of former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, Iranian officials are leveraging the media to convince the people that they are victorious. To achieve this end, Iranian media outlets have pointed to President Donald Trump's isolation domestically and internationally, casualties among US troops, and the fact that no Iranian missiles were intercepted by anti-missile defence systems on the ground.

Furthermore, the strikes intentionally bore clear symbolism, starting at the exact time when the US drones killed Soleimani, and ending with his burial. Whatever the reality on the ground, by going with this narrative Iran is showing its satisfaction with the strikes and developing the myth of Soleimani, claiming that he represented Iran's security, and so his killing was a direct attack on the country's security. The sizeable funeral crowds inside Iran and Iraq (as well as shows of sympathy from countries both inside and outside the region) are being heralded as clear proof that foreign-backed protests have been quashed in both countries and as a symbol of the unity of the "resistance movement." In this moment, Iran's response is both nationalistic and transnational, hailing Iraq's alliance with Iran.

Despite this powerful rhetoric, Iranian leadership has made it extremely clear that they are satisfied with the retaliation, and that they have no intention of escalating, assuming the US also refrains from further retaliation.

NEXT STEPS: Iran's leadership is now content with delivering what they have referred to as a "punch in the face" to the US. There is sufficient commentary from Iran to support this view. The eulogies from the supreme leader and President Hassan Rouhani following Soleimani's burial all show a cutback in rhetoric, wrapping up the ceremony with more emphasis on Soleimani being deserving of "martyrdom" than the need to exact revenge for his blood. (Soleimani is now at rest in the ground, this is what matters).

That being said, it is important to note that last night's strikes do not represent an abrupt and clear end to tensions. Iranian fighter jets and helicopters were circling Iran's western and southern borders in the aftermath of the attacks in the event of a US response. Its missile systems are still on high alert, and the president claims that the "hard revenge" for Soleimani's killing will only be concluded

with the eviction of US forces.

While the US and Iran appear prepared to press pause on tensions at this time, the same cannot be expected of the PMF units, which are still likely to seek revenge for the US killing of Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, Kataib Hezbollah's founder. Rouhani has sought to shield Iran from blame in the event of such a scenario by claiming that Iran does not have proxies, and Iran cannot be held accountable for the actions of groups such as the Houthis and the PMF, which respond to their own commanders (Qais Khazali, the head of Asaib Al Haq has already pledged to exact revenge). The PMF are seen by Tehran as part and parcel of the Iraqi government, which in turn is split between Iran and the US.

The important indicator now for further escalation in the area is whether and how the US might respond to any PMF (suicide) attacks against its troops. Will it choose to directly retaliate against Iran as it did with Soleimani or refrain from response and allow the situation to de-escalate?

While there is no proven link between Iran and the Jan 8 hacking of Kuwaiti state news agency KUNA, one could assume that Iran or its affiliates will pursue a strategy of cyber-hacking to perpetuate the message of a US troop withdrawal. However, this inexpensive tactic is unlikely to yield any results, apart from narrative building.