

A Middle East Calamity Is about to Unfold



By Dr. Imad K. Harb

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Lebanese and Iraqi news outlets have **reported** the death, in a US air strike, of the leader of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Major General Qassem Soleimani, along with pro-Iran leader of Kataeb Hezbollah of Iraq Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and three other persons. The IRGC **confirmed** Soleimani's death, on Twitter, while the US Department of Defense **issued a statement** confirming that American assets carried out the operation and killed those who were "responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more."

Soleimani's assassination comes at a time of heightened tensions between the United States and Iran that, over the last week, included American strikes on Kataeb Hezbollah bases in Iraq and Syria and the resultant siege of the American embassy in Baghdad. Those strikes **were precipitated** by a rocket attack on an Iraqi base near Kirkuk where an American contractor was killed and several US soldiers were injured. Despite the need for cooler heads to prevail in the coming hours and days, the assassination has the potential to be a trigger for a wider military confrontation that may involve the United States, Iran and its proxies, Iraq, the Arab Gulf states, and Israel.

Soleimani's death is most assuredly going to be avenged by the Islamic Republic or its proxies. He had led Iran's efforts to widen its influence in Arab countries where Tehran cultivated close relations with Shia communities and, where possible, assisted in establishing and nourishing militias that both espoused the ideology of Iran's clerical regime and participated militarily in battles dear to Iran's religious and military leaders.

In fact, Soleimani was the linchpin in the Islamic Republic's program of joining revolutionary ideology and asymmetric military doctrine in the service of spreading a puritanical Islamic republican worldview. His assassination will thus not be easily overcome or quickly forgotten; instead, it is likely to have serious ramifications on many fronts.

First, and most immediately, is the likelihood that there will be new attacks on American assets in Iraq, especially the embassy in Baghdad and bases where American military personnel and assets are deployed, such as Al-Asad Air Base in the north of the country. Already, Kataeb Hezbollah and other militia members had laid siege to the embassy, following the US strike on the militia's bases in Iraq and Syria, and caused some physical damage to its buildings. What is ironic is that Soleimani's assassination came only a few hours after the siege **had ended** and those participating in it had broken camp. In other words, the message from the siege—that the militia and its allies are capable of inflicting proportionate damage on American assets and personnel—was apparently not enough for the Trump Administration to heed. Moreover, President Donald Trump, who ordered the Soleimani strike, did not want to be seen as backing down to Iran in Iraq. The next few days will show if the administration's calculations were accurate about the intentions, revenge, and possible repercussions of Iran and its surrogates.

Second, there is a distinct possibility that the caretaker Iraqi government of Adel Abdul-Mahdi will formally ask the United States to end its military presence in the country. Abdul-Mahdi's government **protested** the American strikes against Kataeb Hezbollah bases a few days ago, correctly claiming that they violated Iraq's sovereignty. Soleimani's assassination will now only make it impossible for Iraq's weak prime minister to withstand the pressure of Iran's friends in the Iraqi parliament or the militias it supports on the ground. If he refuses to abide by their demands, it is not that difficult to imagine that they would take matters into their own hands and indeed take over the country in a military putsch.

Third, the Iranian response beyond Iraq remains uncertain as to its targets or degree of severity. Iran's militias in Syria may find that it is now possible—in fact, desirable—to attack the Tanf American base on the Syrian-Iraqi border. American military officials used the base as a reserve post for checking Iran's supplies of military hardware to Syria and to Lebanese Hezbollah. Now, Iran-friendly assets in Syria have their justification to end this threat. In Lebanon, Hezbollah may judge Soleimani's assassination as not only an American operation but also one that Israel helped by providing intelligence or operational assistance. The Party of God may thus determine that it could retaliate from Syria or Lebanon against targets in Israel, a scenario that is likely to result in all-out war on the Lebanese-Israeli border. Further, there is a possibility that Iran could retaliate against American military assets in the Arabian Gulf, directly helping to start a serious and potentially dire confrontation.

Finally, it is important to note that a major escalation of hostilities between the United States and Iran was inevitable and expected since the Trump Administration's 2018 abrogation of the nuclear deal of July 2015, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. With that came economic pressure and sanctions on Iran and its affiliated militias, intended to inflict maximum damage on the Iranian economy. American economic pressure has now been coupled with the killing of one of Iran's most

important and consequential leaders. The Islamic Republic has not shied away from confronting the United States, which it long ago called “the Great Satan,” and it is not likely now to change that tradition. As things stand today, the Middle East may have just arrived at a very dangerous point of no return.

Image Credit

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