



# SPOTLIGHT ON IRAN

**Timothy Compston** weighs up the security ramifications of the death of General Soleimani and Iran's response

Even before the killing of General Soleimani in a drone strike, relations between the West – most notably the US – and Iran were turbulent. In fact the seeds of animosity were sown more than four decades earlier with the overthrow of the Shah – the last Iranian monarch – in the Islamic Revolution; his replacement with an anti-Western theocracy led by Ayatollah Khomeini, and the storming of the US Embassy in Tehran leading to the taking of American hostages and a failed rescue attempt.

Today the US and Iran's views are diametrically opposed, whether that be about the future direction of the Middle

East, the status of Israel, how to resolve the conflict in Syria – where Iran is allied with Russia; what is happening in Yemen and Iraq; the value of the Iran nuclear deal and what does and does not constitute a terrorist organisation. Given this backdrop, the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani is likely to sow further discord in the short and longer term and has already resulted in retaliatory action by the Iranians, albeit on a limited scale, alongside the accidental bringing down of an airliner.

Aside from a couple of rockets hitting Balad airbase near Baghdad and mortars being aimed at Baghdad's Green

**The funeral of Qasem Soleimani in Tehran in January 2020**

Zone in January by Iran-backed militias, Iran's official military response to General Soleimani's death came less than a week later in the form of multiple Fateh-313 and Qiam ballistic missile strikes on two airbases in Iraq – Ayn al-Asad and Erbil – housing US and coalition forces at around 2.00 am local time on 8 January, with the Iraqi military estimating that a total of 22 missiles were fired by the Iranians into their territory. Iran's Supreme Leader – Ayatollah Khamenei described the ballistic missile attack as a “slap in the face” for the US.

Thankfully, no US personnel were killed at Ayn al-Asad or Erbil, although the Pentagon confirmed that 109 US service members had been diagnosed with mild traumatic brain injury. On reflection, whether the lack of fatalities was due to the way the Iranians had planned their attacks or thanks to the US having intelligence that something was going to happen, how events transpired probably prevented a further escalation. Given the febrile atmosphere, there was always the potential if US personnel had been killed that the situation might have spiralled quickly out of control leading to a much wider confrontation between US forces and the Iranians. After all, President Trump had already warned, ominously, in the aftermath of the American strike on General Soleimani, that any retaliation by Iran would be met by the US targeting 52 significant Iranian sites, including cultural sites – the cultural site reference being widely criticised.

With Iranian forces on heightened alert in the expectation of a US response to their ballistic missile launches a commercial passenger plane that had just taken off from Tehran bound for Ukraine found itself in the firing line with tragic consequences. This incident echoed the accidental shooting down of an Iranian Airbus A300 by the USS Vincennes, a US Navy guided missile cruiser, back in 1988 when it was flying from Tehran to Dubai, with the airliner being mistaken for an Iranian F14 Tomcat. Fast-forwarding to 8 January this year and this time the miscalculation was on the Iranian side. In this case about four hours after the Iranian ballistic missiles had struck sites in Iraq an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) unit shot down a Ukraine International Airline's Boeing 737-800, killing all 176 passengers and crew on board.

Although, initially, Iranian authorities had stuck to the line that a technical issue had caused the plane to come down Western Intelligence agencies and video taken at the time pointed to another explanation, basically that of one or more surface-to-air missiles impacting the plane. Eventually Iran did admit responsibility with Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh of the IRGC Aerospace Defense saying that a missile operator in Bidganeh had acted independently, believing that the aircraft was a US cruise missile. The fact that, according to Western intelligence, the aircraft's flight path had taken it near sensitive Iranian ballistic missile bases may have put it in greater danger at a time of heightened alert. For safety, some commentators suggest, that Iran should really have closed its airspace to commercial flights, especially when US military action was expected and Iranian air defences were on high alert.

Considering the fate of General Soleimani, until his death he was reckoned to be the second most important figure in Iran after the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and headed up the Quds Force, an elite unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It was at around 1.00 am local time on 3 January that the General was killed in a US drone strike shortly after leaving

a plane at Baghdad International Airport. According to Iraq's caretaker Prime Minister – Adel Abdul Mahdi – Soleimani was bringing a reply to a letter, which Iraq had sent on behalf of Saudi Arabia, to ease tensions between the two regional rivals. As well as the General, the strike is also said to have killed four members of the PMF (Popular Mobilization Forces) – an umbrella organisation of mainly Shia Muslim militias in Iraq.

Interestingly, perhaps in a sign of things to come, back in April 2019 US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo had designated both the IRGC and the Quds Force as foreign terrorist organisations. What happened to General Soleimani certainly sent shock waves through the Middle East. Many security experts and diplomats had not believed that the US would risk targeting a person who was so prominent in the ranks of the Iranian leadership. Apparently, there had been numerous opportunities under President George W Bush and President Barack Obama for the US to take out General Soleimani and other high-ranking members of the Quds Force, but these had not been followed through on.

So, what was different this time and what rationale was given by the US for taking such a serious step?

## THE AMERICAN RESPONSE AFTER THE OIL REFINERY INCIDENT WAS TO RAMP UP SANCTIONS ON IRAN

Well the statement provided by the US Department of Defense immediately after the drone strike gives some insight into its thinking, noting that: “At the direction of the President, the US military has taken decisive defensive action to protect US personnel abroad by killing Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, a US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.” It went on to note that: “General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region.”

The Department of Defense statement also touched on the fact that over the years: “General Soleimani and his Quds Force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more.” Providing more detail on the General's more recent activities to justify his killing, the statement added that he had orchestrated attacks on coalition bases in Iraq over the last several months – including the attack on 27 December – culminating in the death and wounding of additional American and Iraqi personnel: “General Soleimani also approved the attacks on the US Embassy in Baghdad that took place this week”.

Of course, as mentioned at the outset, tensions had already been ramped up long before President Trump authorised the strike on the General Soleimani. We saw, for example, the incidents last year related to oil tankers, including: two Saudi Arabia-registered vessels, a Norwegian tanker and an Emirati-registered bunkering ship being damaged by what may have been explosive charges on or below the waterline while anchored off the Port of Fujairah in UAE territorial waters. One month later two oil tankers – one Japanese and the other Norwegian operated – were attacked by limpet mines.

Added to this there has been ongoing harassment of US naval vessels as they pass through the Strait of Hormuz. Last July there was also the seizure of the British-flagged Stena Impero by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Then there were the missile and drone strikes on Saudi Arabian oil infrastructure last September. At the time US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo dismissed the claims of Houthi rebels in Yemen that they had been involved and instead blamed Iran for what transpired, describing the developments as "an unprecedented attack on the world's energy supply." The US response after the oil refinery incident was to ramp up sanctions on Iran.

When it comes to longer-term security concerns with regards to Iran, nuclear proliferation coupled

## GENERAL SOLEIMANI WAS RECKONED TO BE THE SECOND MOST IMPORTANT FIGURE IN IRAN

with its advances in ballistic missile technology both remain high on the agenda. On the nuclear front, in the past great store was placed on the Iran nuclear deal agreed in 2015 at the time of the Obama administration which was backed by the P5+1 (USA, UK, France, China, Russia and Germany). Under the accord, which came into force in January 2016, Iran agreed to limit its sensitive nuclear activities such as uranium enrichment – including centrifuges – and to allow in international inspectors. As part of the deal in return for

making nuclear concessions, economic sweeteners for Iran included: access to \$100-billion in frozen overseas assets plus the ability to once again sell its oil on international markets and to access the global financial system for trade.

The future of the nuclear agreement was placed in doubt in May 2018 when President Trump pulled the US out of the deal and later in 2018 when he went on to reimpose sanctions with serious economic consequences. By last May, Iran had suspended its commitments under the agreement and the IAEA now claims that it has increased uranium enrichment. It will be interesting to see what the next steps are here. Certainly, the other P5+1 signatories are keen for the nuclear deal to get back on track, while the US may prefer a new tougher accord.

### FUTURE CHALLENGES

Ultimately, the killing of General Soleimani may serve to reign in some of Iran's activities in the short term to avoid a wider engagement with the US military, but a look around the Middle East underlines just how far Iranian influence now extends and the potential for future security challenges. In Lebanon Iran is an active supporter of Hezbollah, which now has tens of thousands of rockets and missiles aimed at Israel. Across the border in Syria, General Soleimani and the Iranian forces he controlled up to his death have been instrumental in helping the regime of Bashar al-Assad – in conjunction with Russia – push back against rebel groups, actions which have given cause for concern in Israel leading to regular airstrikes by the IAF.

Over in Iraq, Iranian-backed militias remain key power brokers and have attacked US interests while a strategic rivalry with Saudi Arabia is being played out in the support being given to the Houthi rebels in Yemen ●

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**The FBI announces a major cyber law enforcement action against Iranians charged with conducting cyber theft campaigns on behalf of the IRGC**



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