

What Comes Next after the US Assassination of Qassem Soleimani? The Options

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The US did not plan to kill the vice commander of the Iraqi Hashd al-Shaabi brigade Abu Mahdi al-Muhandes when it assassinated Iranian Brigadier General Qassem Soleimani on Thursday at 11:00 PM local time at Baghdad airport. Usually, when Soleimani was arriving in Baghdad, security commander Abu Zeinab al-Lami, a deputy officer to al-Muhandes, would have welcomed him. This time, al-Lami was outside Iraq and al-Muhandes replaced him. The US plan was to assassinate an Iranian General on Iraqi soil, not to kill a high-ranking Iraqi officer. By killing al-Muhandes, the US violated its treaty obligation to respect the sovereignty of Iraq and to limit its activity to training and offering intelligence to fight the "Islamic State", ISIS. It has also violated its commitment to refrain from overflying Iraq without permission of the Iraqi authorities.

The double assassination has embarrassed both the US and the Iraqis. US embarrassment is evident from the fact that official statements by Pompeo, Esper et al. have made no mention of the killing of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandes. On the Iraqi side caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi has been forced to call a special meeting of the Iraqi Parliament to discuss withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. It will be difficult to achieve a consensus for asking US troops to depart.

But if the Iraqi Parliament does pass such a resolution, it will hit the US harshly. Anti-US resentment is not universal among Iraqi politicians; Iraqi leaders are divided on the US presence. That is one of the main reasons the US felt at ease in assassinating Soleimani on Iraqi soil.

The US changed the rules of engagement. They had decided to assassinate Soleimani when he was in Syria, having just returned from a short journey to Lebanon, before boarding a commercial flight from Damascus airport to Baghdad. The US killing machine was waiting for him to land in Baghdad and monitored his movements when he was picked up at the foot of the plane. The US hit the two cars, carrying Soleimani and the al-Muhandes protection team, when they were still inside the airport perimeter and were slowing down at the first check-point.



The Iranian leadership hopes that the Iraqi Parliament will ask US forces to leave Iraq. This decision may be reached if Moqtada al-Sadr joins his 53 MPs to those of the Al-Bina' coalition, enough to get an affirmative vote of 165 MPs. The Kurdish MPs, most of the Sunni, and the Shia Ammar al-Hakim and Haidar al-Abadi will not vote in favour of US withdrawal.

Notwithstanding the outcome of the vote, US forces will no longer be safe in Iraq, including inside the military bases where they are deployed. A potential danger or hit-man could be lurking at every corner; this will limit the free movement of US soldiers.

Iran would be delighted were the Iraqi groups to decide to hit the American forces and hunt them wherever they are. This would rekindle memories of the first clashes between Jaish al-Mahdi and US forces in Najaf in 2004-2005.

The leader of the Iranian Revolution Sayyed Ali Khamenei told the Iranian National Security Council in its first meeting after the assassination of Soleimani that "it is important to make a strong, severe and clear response". This means Sayyed Khamenei this time wants the world to know that it is Iran, and not its allies that is carrying out the retaliation against US forces, a practice of direct confrontation Iran has eschewed in the past.



Well-informed sources said, “Iran’s choices are various and objectives are not lacking in the region and abroad”.

“Iran can sink a US ship with over 100 personnel onboard or kill a high-ranking US officer at the level of Soleimani. In both cases, the situation will escalate, and Iran should be ready for it”, said the source.

All indications point to the Iraqi theatre. The US worked hard to kick Iran out of Iraq. Iran is now working to kick US forces out of Iraq on the basis of US behaviour. Magic is turning against the magician. However, achieving this goal will not be without complications.

Even if the Iraqi Parliament decides to expel the US forces, they can always pull back to Iraqi Kurdistan and position their troops at a distance from Baghdad, lending their support to Kurdish independence.

What is certain is that Iran’s allies in Iraq will be offered unlimited support to fight the US forces wherever they are. Iran’s first objective is to send back US soldiers in plastic bags, particularly before the US elections.



The initiative is in the hands of Iran. Washington has sent letters through the Swiss embassy in Tehran indicating that “it is not interested in war or escalation”. Iran responded that “all negotiations are over with this administration; the assassination of Soleimani will be punished”.

But Iran is known to be pragmatic, and will likely find a way to walk this crisis home without needing to go to war. Trump is pushing Iran out of its comfort zone, obliging Iran to respond with an assassination attack similar to that which the US just perpetrated. Last year, Iran refrained from downing a US spy plane with 38 officers on board. It is unlikely to show such forbearance in the near future.

Iran considers that the US has declared war on the country, demanding a “nuclear response.” In a few days, Iran is expected to announce another withdrawal from the “nuclear deal” that was shredded and violated by President Trump in 2018.

Iran will not likely rush into retaliating. It will more likely keep the US waiting for a possible attack on many fronts, exhausting its finances and security measures to protect its forces, its commanders and VIPs. Iranian retaliation will be considered and precise but will seek to avoid dragging Iran and the Middle East into an all-out-war. Iran’s response is unlikely to trigger a US prompt reply.

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