



### RECENT IRAN-US TENSIONS: AN ASSESSMENT

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The year 2020 dawned with an ominous shadow of war looming upon the world and the Middle Eastern region in particular. Although the entire previous year has seen numerous instances of dangerous escalations in this region; the most recent one by far has been the closest scenario to a possible regional war. On January 3, 2020, a US drone attack targeted a convoy at the Baghdad International airport in the early hours of the morning killing the head of the Iranian Quds Force, Major General Qassem Soleimani.<sup>1</sup>

The attack carried out on direct orders from the US President Donald Trump also resulted in the killing of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Chairman of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces.<sup>2</sup> The killing of the Iranian General came as a reaction to the death of an American defense contractor in Iraq in late December 2019 and storming of the US embassy in Iraq where hordes of pro-Iran Iraqi militia fighters breached the high-security Green Zone.<sup>3</sup>

Iranian reaction to the General's killing was that of extreme rage and grief while warning America of severe revenge. In the early hours of January 8, 2020; more than two dozen Iranian ballistic missiles

<sup>1</sup> News Desk, "US drone strike ordered by Trump kills top Iranian commander in Baghdad", *CNN*, January 3, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/02/middleeast/baghdad-airport-rockets/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Falih Hassan and Alissa J. Rubin, "Pro-Iranian Protesters End Siege of U.S. Embassy in Baghdad", *The New York Times*, January 1, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/01/01/world/middleeast/us-embassy-baghdad-iraq.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/01/world/middleeast/us-embassy-baghdad-iraq.html)

were fired on two airbases housing US troops in Western and Northern Iraq; in Ain Assad and Erbil.<sup>4</sup> No US troops were harmed in the aftermath of these attacks while only minimal damage occurred to the US airbases, said President Trump in his address as he announced de-escalation.

This almost war-like situation between Iran and US has had wide-ranging implications for regional security, global oil trade and overall international system. It has also posed serious questions about the future of mutual relations of all countries involved. What will be the future of US-Iran relations? What is the future of US-Iraq ties regarding the presence of US troops in Iraq? What will be the overall impact of these tensions for the regional security atmosphere? What role has Pakistan played to help diffuse the tensions?

### **Future of Iran-US Relations**

Although the imminent fear of escalation has somewhat diminished between the two; chances of any reconciliation is quite slim. By slapping even more sanctions against Iran in the aftermath of the missile attack, US has indicated that it plans to continue with Trump's 'maximum pressure campaign' against Iran.

After retaliating in a proportionate manner through missile strikes against the US airbases in Iraq; Iran has also decided to take the last step away from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement. Although the Iranian officials have announced that they will continue cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). "As 5th & final REMEDIAL step under paragraph 36 of JCPOA, there will no longer be any restriction on the number of centrifuges," said the Iranian Foreign Minister in a tweet. "This step is within JCPOA & all 5 steps are reversible upon EFFECTIVE implementation of reciprocal obligations."<sup>5</sup> Thus, it seems that Iran is playing hard ball with the United States, all the while keeping its commitment to the international agreement intact, in case it decides to go back.

A heavily sanctioned Iran is also currently in hot waters at home as the unfortunate Ukrainian plane crash has caused furor among the general public in the country. As the enraged protestors storm the streets of the Islamic republic, the Trump administration has resorted to its favorite antics; vociferous expression of solidarity with the Iranian protestors that are chanting against the government. President Trump even tweeted, "don't kill your protestors" in a message directed at

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<sup>4</sup> News Desk, "Iran fires missiles at US targets in Iraq", *DW*, January 8, 2020  
[www.dw.com/en/iran-fires-missiles-at-us-targets-in-iraq-live-updates/a-51923868](http://www.dw.com/en/iran-fires-missiles-at-us-targets-in-iraq-live-updates/a-51923868)

<sup>5</sup> News Desk, Zarif says Iran still committed to continue cooperation with IAEA", *Tehran Times*, January 6, 2020.  
[www.tehrantimes.com/news/443849/Zarif-says-Iran-still-committed-to-continue-cooperation-with](http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/443849/Zarif-says-Iran-still-committed-to-continue-cooperation-with)

the Iranian government. These tactics being used by the US administration to support the unrest within Iran will further widen the gulf between the two governments.

Future seems bleak for US-Iran bilateral ties as both sides continue to remain obstinate in their respective stances. Trump has called for a new deal or a 'Trump Deal' with Iran as mentioned in his tweet, while Iran says it is not interested in negotiating a new deal with the US but believes in diplomacy.<sup>6</sup> European signatories of the deal have warned Iran to rewind its violations and US to return to the deal by announcing to invoke the 'dispute resolution mechanism' clause of JCPOA. US presidential elections 2020 may be able to change the current trajectory of America's relations with Iran. A win for the Democratic party may help repair the damage. However, a second term for President Trump in the White House will certainly keep the situation as uncertain as it is now.

### **US Presence in the Region**

Soleimani's killing by the US drone strike in Baghdad was viewed as a major violation of Iraq's sovereignty. Iraqi parliament voted to oust US troops from Iraq amid threats of unrest from the pro-Iran militias in wake of Soleimani's assassination by US. However, US maintains that its regional security concerns, particularly regarding the threat of the Islamic State (IS), warrant its presence in the region. After a 10-day pause following US drone strike in Baghdad, US troops stationed in Iraq have resumed their joint activities with the Iraqi forces.<sup>7</sup> This resumption of US-Iraq military cooperation is a clear message to not only the IS elements active in different pockets of Iraq, but also to other non-state actors such as the different pro-Iran militias.

Although the looming fear of potential escalation has subsided for the time being; the several pro-Iran militias operating within Iraq remain enraged over US drone strike that killed their leader, Abu-Mahdi Al-Muhandis. Situation in Iraq may well remain turbulent as the US troops and the several pro-Iran militias could turn the already war-torn country into a battleground for the continuation of the US-Iran conflict. One potential danger for US troops could be the anti-American sentiments that flared up after Soleimani's killing which could also turn public opinion in Iran's favor. Thus, it can be construed that the US presence in Iraq particularly and overall in the region, will be long-term for the perceivable future.

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<sup>6</sup> News Desk, "Iran Rejects UK's Call for 'Trump deal' to replace nuclear accord", BBC News, January 15, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51118236>

<sup>7</sup> Alissa J. Rubin, Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Military Resumes Joint Operations with Iraq", *New York Times*, January 15, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/15/world/middleeast/us-military-iraq.html>

### **Impact on the Regional Security Situation**

US-Iran tensions have the potential to affect the overall situation in the entire region. Trump's decision to target an influential regional asset of Iran - General Qassem Soleimani- is undoubtedly an unnecessary escalation that has endangered the entire region. The reverberations of this killing will be felt all over Iraq, Syria and Lebanon in particular as all three are areas of Iranian influence. Hezbollah's dominant presence in Lebanon and strong links with Iran while sharing a border with Israel puts the country into the middle of a danger zone in case of any conflagration. Analysts had previously highlighted Lebanon as a plausible site for US-Iran conflict in case Hezbollah attacked northern Israel on Iran's behest.

As explained previously, Iraq has by far been the most unfortunate regional country to be caught in the Iran-US crossfire. However, it is entirely possible that the situation in Syria may also flare up as the Iranian influence there may cause it to become part of this conflict of regional proportions. This 'domino effect' leaving a trail of failing states in its wake is by far the most worrisome after effect of US-Iran tensions.

Pakistan has effectively played a reconciliatory role in these troubling times calling out for restraint from both sides. Foreign Minister Makhdoom Shah Mahmood Qureshi recently completed a two-day visit to Iran and Saudi Arabia in an effort to convey that escalation is not in any country's favor and that Pakistan will not be party to any regional conflict.