



Crown Center for
Middle East Studies

CROWN CONVERSATIONS

Brandeis
UNIVERSITY

Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon after Soleimani

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In the early hours of January 3, 2020, a U.S. Air Force drone targeted and killed General Qasim Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, along with nine other people, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a key leader in and the former deputy head of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces. Four days later, Iran responded with a barrage of ballistic missiles on Iraqi bases housing U.S. troops, which resulted in no deaths but was seen as a sign of Iran's ability to attack U.S. forces directly. Both the escalation of hostilities between the two countries and its seeming de-escalation took the international community by surprise. Largely lost in the midst of all this were the ongoing protests in Iraq, the country in which the drone strike occurred; Lebanon, where Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah immediately threatened retaliation for Soleimani's death; and Iran, which was still reeling from the aftermath of bloody protests in November 2019.

This *Crown Conversation* aims to shed light on how the events of January 3 and their aftermath have affected the region beyond the headlines and to emphasize linkages between regional actors and developments. We asked three members of the Crown Center research team—Maryam Alemzadeh, Harold Grinspoon Junior Research Fellow; David Siddhartha Patel, Associate Director for Research; and Kelly Stedem, PhD Candidate in Politics—to discuss the short- and medium-term effects of the Soleimani killing on domestic politics in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon with a focus on issues that have slipped through the U.S. media's attention.

At the end of 2019, there were protests in Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Give us a brief summary of what those protests have been about.

Maryam Alemzadeh: The Iranian government's decision to increase fuel prices on November 15, 2019 sparked violent protests around the country. Unprecedented inflation, triggered by strict U.S. sanctions and worsened by corruption and mismanagement, had already made everyday sustenance difficult for a great many citizens and forced others to downgrade their lifestyles. For

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many, the fuel price increase thus became the harbinger of even more economic hardship. Protests erupted immediately, mostly in poor margins of cities and in smaller towns that are populated by ethnic minorities. For several days, protesters blocked major streets and set banks and police stations on fire. In contrast to similar economically-driven protests of roughly two years earlier, which were initially triggered by hardliners against the moderate government, the political elite were in surprising harmony this time. Although the president's office was blamed by hardliners at first for the rushed and unnecessary decision to increase the price of gas, [Ayatollah Khamene'i spoke up in defense of the move to end these criticisms](#). It seemed like the increasing budget deficit, worsened by U.S.-led sanctions, had left the Iranian state no choice but to take this provocative measure.

From the prompt and decisive repression of the protests, one could speculate that the government was expecting such an outburst. Law enforcement organizations, including the Iranian Police Special Units and the ideological army and its militia, i.e., the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Basij, were in unison in their response: They were ready to kill, and they did. [Hundreds—and according to one report, up to 1,500—of protesters were killed, and thousands were arrested](#). Numbers notwithstanding, the multitude of graphic videos flooding social media after six days of internet blackout, showing citizens being shot dead on the streets, sometimes point blank, exacerbated the Islamic Republic's legitimacy crisis. Opposition news outlets and discontented citizens' conversations on social media were filled with commemorations of the dead and criticisms of the government's attempts to enforce order by brute police force.

Major General Soleimani's killing on January 3 changed that tide abruptly. The immediate concern became whether such a direct and consequential strike meant the beginning of a war between Iran and the United States.

David Siddhartha Patel: Since October 2019, Iraq has witnessed the largest and most sustained protests of the post-Saddam era. Grassroots demonstrations against corruption, youth unemployment, austerity, and poor public services [widened into a movement denouncing the post-2003 political system](#) in which, after each election, elite-dominated parties divvy up ministerial slots, government contracts, and the power to appoint many civil service positions. The protests reflect the inability of Iraqi governments, especially after [the decline of oil prices in 2015, to satisfy the expectations of the massive number of young Iraqis](#) who are demanding what they consider to be their rights. Security forces and militias that are part of the state-sponsored umbrella group called the Popular Mobilization Forces (or PMF) have killed over 500 protesters and injured more than 20,000 since October.

The protests led Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi to resign at the end of November, although he continues to lead a caretaker government. The leaders of the largest parties in parliament have tried to reach a consensus on an interim prime minister to govern until early elections can be held in 2020. The Construction Bloc (often called "Bina"), which is led by PMF factions close to Iran, saw both candidates it pushed for the premiership fail, in no small part due to opposition from protesters. In late December, the Iraqi parliament approved a new electoral law that met some of the protesters' demands: allowing voters to elect individual lawmakers (instead of party lists) and having each member of parliament represent a specific electoral district (instead of a number of

them representing an entire governate). The protesters see these as only initial steps and continue to call for drastic reform and the removal of the entire post-2003 ruling elite.

At the same time, security services have been adapting and implementing throughout the country [methods of coercion and cooptation that successfully contained protests in southern cities in previous years](#). Moqtada al-Sadr, the leader of Iraq's other large parliamentary bloc, the Reform and Reconstruction Bloc (often called "Islah"), supports the protesters, and his Peace Companies (*saraya al-salam*) clashed with other militias in the south and occasionally position themselves as unarmed "blue helmets" protecting protesters in Baghdad's Tahrir Square.

[Anti-Iranian sentiment is present in the ongoing protests, but it is largely a by-product of anger with the Iraqi political system](#), directed at Iran as a chief guarantor and beneficiary of that corrupt order. Most protesters had mixed feelings when Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (a central PMF leader) were killed. Those two had orchestrated the violent repression of the protests and defended the political system, but protestors feared that Iraq and their struggle for reform would suffer if Iran and the U.S. clashed.

Kelly Stedem: The *kiloun yaani kiloun*, or "all of them means all of them" protests began in Lebanon on October 17. [The earliest demonstrations were centered in Beirut and largely comprised of civil society activists](#), but the protests quickly spread around the country. [The geographic scale and cross-sectarian nature of the protests are unprecedented in the post-civil war era](#). As the name implies, protestors are calling for the resignation of all politicians, whom they feel have failed to adequately manage the country since the end of the civil war in 1990.

There were two proximate causes for the unrest. First, Lebanon was ravaged by some of the worst wildfires in decades in October. [The government was forced to rely on international assistance to combat the fires because it had not allocated maintenance funds for three firefighting helicopters that had been donated to the government through crowdsourcing efforts in 2009](#). As the wildfires raged, the government proposed a new tax on internet messaging services, such as WhatsApp. Internet messaging is essential for nearly every Lebanese given that the country has some of [the most expensive telecommunication services in the region, despite being beset with poor quality](#). Furthermore, [telecommunications was already one of the most profitable financial sectors, comprising 12% of government revenue in 2017](#). Many Lebanese thus viewed the government's decision to impose further taxes as punishing citizens for its own inability to manage the budget.

These proximate causes, however, are representative of long-term government corruption and mismanagement that have plagued nearly every sector of the Lebanese state. [Transparency International ranks Lebanon as the 138th most corrupt country out of 180 total](#). Lebanon is also one of the most unequal countries in the world, [with roughly 25% of income being held by the top 1%](#). As the country's middle class shrinks, citizens are increasingly aghast at the wealth of the country's political elite, many of whom have lined their pockets with money siphoned from government institutions.

The protests are currently at a stalemate. Members of Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces resigned from the government a few days into the protests, [followed by Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in late October](#). The country's dominant political alliance—comprised of Parliament Speaker Nabih

Berri's Harakat Amal party, President Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), and Hezbollah—refused to step down from the previous government, per the protestors' demands, and is instead forging ahead with the creation of a new government following Hariri's resignation. Many protestors will refuse to accept any government comprised of anyone from the previous political establishment.

What immediate effect did the January 3, 2020 targeted killing of Soleimani have?

DP: Two days after the January 3 killings, the Council of Representatives of Iraq, in an extraordinary session, [unanimously voted to issue a “decision” to oblige the Iraqi cabinet to cancel the requests for assistance submitted by the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2014 that led to the formation of the international coalition to fight ISIS](#). If implemented, this would end the legal basis for the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq. Out of 329 seats, 172 deputies were officially present for the vote, just over the required quorum of 167. Iraq's Shi'i Islamists have aligned in separate coalitions since at least 2009, but MPs from Sadr's Sa'irun Alliance voted with their rivals in the Bina Bloc and issued similar calls for the Americans to be driven out. As Speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi boldly stated from the floor of parliament, this was a Shi'i vote, not one that reflected all of Iraq. [Only 1 of 59 Kurdish MPs and 15 of 70 Sunni Arab MPs reportedly attended the session](#). Instead of uniting Iraqis against the presence of U.S. forces, the hasty parliamentary move spurred protestors – including those in the Shi'i shrine city of Karbala – to hoist placards saying “Parliament does not represent me!”

Several Iraqi actors attempted to use the moment to their advantage. Caretaker PM Abd al-Mahdi, perhaps seeking Bina's backing to remain premier, instigated the parliamentary move and then took a strong stand, urging MPs to instruct his government to remove foreign troops. The Iranian-backed PMF militias – blamed for much of the violence on protestors since October – shifted their emphasis to resisting the U.S. and vowed to avenge Muhandis's killing, framing it as defending Iraq's sovereignty.

Yet, almost immediately on January 8 after the U.S. and Iran appeared to have backed away from open conflict and de-escalated the situation, Iraqi politics largely snapped back to the key issues being debated before the killings. Moqtada al-Sadr, who three days earlier appeared to be aligned with the Iranian-backed militias' desire to strike U.S. forces, issued [a statement saying that the crisis was over and calling on armed groups not to carry out additional attacks](#). He returned to emphasizing his pre-crisis demands, calling for a PM to be selected within 15 days and the closing of PMF offices and bases. Any semblance of a unified Shi'i front collapsed as Sadr and the PMF-dominated Bina Bloc returned to their impasse over the protests and selection of a new PM.

For their part, protestors continued their efforts to pressure the government to institute reforms and held demonstrations and sit-ins. They emphasized in [a four-paragraph statement](#) that their movement always has stood for “Iraq First” and blamed post-2003 Iraqi governments for the weakness that led to repeated violations of Iraq's sovereignty. Despite concerns that the protest movement would suffer from this crisis, its rapid de-escalation prevented the protestors from

facing any backlash and, surprisingly, might have left them in a relatively stronger position than before the killing.

MA: Just before Soleimani's targeted killing, at least two protest-related headlines were making waves. Some members of parliament announced that the government was expected to provide official statistics of the November 2019 protest casualties, which security officials had told them [amounted to 170 deaths](#). More importantly, [fifty intellectual figures who were known to be regime supporters had signed and published a letter gravely warning the supreme leader of an unbridgeable gap between the leadership and the people](#). Both headlines, in addition to reports on the dire conditions of those arrested as well as new arrests, were buried by the news of Soleimani's death. The collective arrest of family members mourning Pouya Bakhtiari, a protester who rose to symbolic importance because of the videos he uploaded of his participation in the protests before he was killed, was among such news. Iran's retaliatory attack on Ayn al-Asad, the largest airbase in Iraq housing U.S. troops, heightened the fear of an imminent war and made all other concerns vanish temporarily—not just from news outlets, but also from most Iranians' minds.

Soleimani's killing by the U.S. gave the Iranian government a chance to redeem some of its lost legitimacy, albeit for a short time. Soleimani was indeed a figure around whom Iranians of all walks of life could be mobilized, and his multiple massively-attended funerals attest to this fact. He came to the average Iranian's attention as a nationalist hero when Iran entered the fight against ISIS. The tangible threat of ISIS close to Iran's borders and fears of experiencing the same violence and unrest devastating Syria and Iraq led Iranians who commonly were critical of the IRGC at large to appreciate Soleimani and the Quds Force's extra-territorial campaign. The anti-terror, border-protecting, and hence nationalist military campaign provided the government the chance to connect with an ideologically distant section of the population. Media campaigns helped guide and attenuate the moral panic around ISIS by portraying Soleimani as a national hero.

On January 8, two IRGC missiles shot down a Ukraine International Airlines passenger jet that had just taken off from Tehran's international airport, killing all 176 people on board. Iranian officials were in denial for two days before [admitting to the "disastrous mistake."](#) The incident and the delay in the government's acceptance of responsibility caused a new crisis of trust and legitimacy. Even without this drastic turn of events, however, the unifying effect of Soleimani's death would have been much less than [what initial assessments suggested](#). To better understand the apparent unity of many Iranians in commemorating Soleimani, it is necessary to break down the qualities that made him loved by some and respected by many other Iranians. In other words, it is important to remember that it was some perceived *personal* characteristics of Soleimani that enabled his exalted status among those who are not pro-government in the first place—characteristics that indeed placed him *against* a typical IRGC leader or Islamic Republic official in the public's mind. The population perceived him as a capable, professional, and internationally recognized military leader who was detached from the IRGC's notoriously corrupt economic and political empire and did not frequently participate in the IRGC's loud and omnipotent Shi'a-revolutionary propaganda. It was perhaps not his Shi'a-metaphorical reputation as [sarbaz-sefr-e velayat](#) (the religious leader's dedicated foot soldier) or [shahid-e zendeh](#)

(“living martyr”) that attracted non-IRGC-supporters to him but his rather fame (and infamy, at the same time) as the mysterious and skillful “[shadow commander](#).”

KS: The real question in the wake of Soleimani’s targeted killing is whether his death will have any effect on Lebanon at all. The U.S. attack was immediately condemned by Hizbullah. [Its leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, threatened retaliation against the American military presence in the region, being careful to note that American citizens would not be targeted. Large posters of both Soleimani and Muhandis have been installed along Airport Road](#), a common homage to martyrs. Even members of Harakat Amal, who are typically followers of Iraq’s Grand Ayatollah Sistani and do not have allegiances to Iran, have offered condolences, celebrated Soleimani as a martyr of Islam, and offered to join the fight against America.

But Hizbullah was less directly dependent upon the individual personality of Soleimani than its peers in Iraq. Hizbullah and the IRGC have had a strong institutional relationship stretching back to the former’s founding in the 1980s. Soleimani undoubtedly had a personal hand in reshaping Hizbullah after the change of command from Subhi Tufayli to Hassan Nasrallah in the early 1990s, but the institutional connection between the two organizations is likely to persist regardless of the personalities of the top. This is not to discredit the deep relationship that Soleimani and Nasrallah built, but Soleimani’s death is unlikely to fundamentally change the Iran-Hizbullah relationship. Furthermore, it is likely that Hizbullah will take limited action, if any, against the U.S. in Lebanon. The party must balance its desire for revenge with the unwanted international scrutiny such an attack might attract—both towards its role in the Lebanese government and as a private organization. Maintaining a low profile is essential, given the two major crises the Lebanese state is currently facing.

The first crisis is the international incident of [Carlos Ghosn’s escape from Japan](#), allegedly with the assistance of the Lebanese embassy and via hiding in a crate meant for musical instruments. The former CEO of Nissan was arrested and charged with understating his income and misappropriating the Japanese company’s funds. This developing diplomatic dispute is significant for the potential effect it may have on Japanese foreign aid. [The Japanese government provided Lebanon with \\$56,761,157 in total foreign assistance between 2012 and 2014 alone, including funding through UN programs and international organizations.](#) It has given [over \\$21.5 million in direct aid since 1997](#) for grassroots security projects, ranging from clearing cluster munitions to providing medical equipment. Lebanon has so far refused an extradition request. Any military action by Hizbullah could further enflame the image of Lebanon as a rogue country that protects criminals and could incentivize Japan to cut off funding.

Any Hizbullah response could also exacerbate the most pressing issue: the economic crisis. In reality, [Lebanon is facing three separate economic issues](#). First, Lebanon is infamously one of the most indebted countries in the world, with government debt totaling more than 150% of GDP. The budget deficit for 2019 was 10% of GDP, with 2020 estimates looking even more ominous. Second, Lebanon is now facing an estimated \$8 billion balance of payments deficit (the Lebanese Lira has been “pegged” at 1507.5LL to 1 USD since late 1997). The final issue is a banking crisis. Lebanese banks, including the national Banque du Liban, are insolvent due to their heavy investment (approximately 50% of their assets) in Lebanese sovereign debt. [According to former](#)

[Minister of Economy and Trade Nasser Saidi, Lebanon will need between \\$20-25 billion dollars in bailout, including aid from the IMF, to ensure repayments on public debt.](#)

On a human level, citizens are growing increasingly concerned over their capacity to pay rent, buy food, and afford medical care. U.S. dollars are no longer available in ATMs, and banks have opted to limit withdrawals of dollars to a few hundred per week. [Numerous videos have circulated of long lines queuing out bank doors](#) and of [brawls at banks](#) as desperate customers demand their money. Some banks in north Lebanon even opted to temporarily close after [a standoff between citizens and a bank ended in police firing teargas into the building](#). Various organizations, including the social media account LiveLoveBeirut, are organizing donations from the large diaspora community to distribute aid to those in need.

What are its medium-term effects?

KS: It is unlikely that Soleimani's targeted killing will have any significant medium-term effects on Lebanon. First, his targeted killing has little ramification for the ongoing Lebanese protests as the criticism of government corruption is targeted at all political parties. Killing Soleimani may have had an immediate rally-around-the-flag effect among the supporters of Hezbollah's allies, but that is unlikely to persist. Furthermore, the political elite rallying to Hezbollah's side are the same allies—Harakat Amal and the FPM—that had already collectively dug in their heels and refused step down from government.

The second reason that his targeted killing is likely to have little medium-term effect is the profound and expansive nature of the economic crisis. Ensuring the government's solvency is even more paramount for Hezbollah as Iran's own economic struggles have had trickle down effects to the party's service provision and payroll. Rumors abound that the militia is no longer paying for temporary consultative volunteers and have cut bonuses for its full-time members, such as large monetary gifts for weddings or gas subsidies for work trips. As its external patronage from Iran shrinks, Hezbollah will become more dependent upon government resources to bolster its organizational needs. Any escalation by Hezbollah in response to Soleimani's assassination could risk cutting off crucial foreign aid to the Lebanese state at a moment when the party has become more dependent upon it.

DP: Perhaps the most important question in the medium-term is how unified the Iranian-affiliated PMF militias will be in the absence of Soleimani and Muhandis. [Some reports indicate that the Iranian-backed militias are "lost" and "almost paralyzed" without their leadership.](#) Although he no longer held any formal governmental role in the PMF after the abolishment of the deputy head position in September 2019, Muhandis continued to control most of the umbrella organization's administrative and financial power – including its \$2 billion annual budget – and he did so in a highly personalized way. His policies likely left a legacy of mistrust between leaders of PMF factions. No other leader currently has the personality or standing to replace him or serve as an arbitrator. Factions might be less able or willing to work together: The Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and others compete for state-supported contracts, PMF jobs, and equipment. Also, the door is now open for PMF forces more closely aligned with Grand Ayatollah Sistani to exert greater control over the state-sponsored umbrella

organization and its resources. The parliamentary Bina Bloc might even fracture; the MPs of ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, for example, are more Iraqi nationalist than other components and may become independent or align with Moqtada al-Sadr’s faction in the leadup to the next election.

A weaker or more divided PMF/Bina Bloc has several implications. America’s allies in Iraq would be emboldened, perhaps enough to push back against Iranian influence in other spheres. The protesters and other reformists, including Sadr, would have a stronger hand to play in government formation. Fa’iq al-Sheikh Ali, an outspoken liberal member of parliament who put his name forward for the premiership, rose in prominence during this crisis through his [numerous poetic and outspoken tweets](#), especially those critical of the militias. He is widely believed to be one of three PM candidates Sadr supports, and many protesters admire him. The possibility of him heading Iraq’s government might lead Bina to accept an alternative candidate whom Sadr and the protesters jointly put forward, such as Judge Rahim al-Aqili, former head of Iraq’s anti-corruption Integrity Commission. The killing of Soleimani and Muhandis, therefore, might indirectly end up furthering the cause of the protest movement.

The U.S. military presence is unlikely to end in 2020. The agreements that currently govern the U.S. presence do not spell out a timetable for withdrawal, which would have to be negotiated and could be slow-walked until after a post-election government is formed. More likely, however, is that Abd al-Mahdi’s caretaker government – pressured by Kurds and Sunni Arabs – will acknowledge that the parliamentary decision was not reached [“on the basis of national consensus”](#) and send a draft bill calling for withdrawal to parliament for debate, where it could languish. The void left by Soleimani and Muhandis might create incentives for some militias to unilaterally attack U.S. forces, even if Iran orders restraint. If such an attack kills an American service member or contractor, the question is how will the Trump administration respond: Will it blame Iran, or will it only target the responsible militia? If the U.S. retaliation is limited to Iraqi militias and Iran remains uninvolved and does not authorize its proxies and allies to respond, the PMF may fracture further as some militias are pressured by their Iraqi base to act.

MA: The “rally around the flag” effect of Soleimani’s death as seen in the sea of people who came out to mourn him should not be interpreted as restoring the legitimacy that the Iranian government lost after the deadly repression of the recent protests. As explained earlier, even though Soleimani was a figure strongly and visibly exalted by the government, his supporters across different strata respected him for *not* resembling other statesmen. Soleimani’s killing and the facts surrounding it—his unique status within Iran and the wider Middle East, the American acknowledgement of responsibility and the Trump administration’s boasting about it, and the controversial extrajudicial status of the act—benefited the Iranian government, but not through reuniting Iranian protesters with their rulers. Rather, Soleimani’s death can have the following two longer-term effects.

First, Soleimani’s “martyrdom” will be a long-lasting source of emotional and symbolic power for ideologically dedicated members of the IRGC and the Basij. Iran-Iraq War veterans as well as the second and third generations of Revolutionary Guards and Basijis not only mobilized actively for Soleimani’s funeral, but they also found new purpose to come together more strongly as a community. IRGC and Basij soldiers expressed a willingness to fight in his name, although an infantry-based operation was far from happening. Soleimani’s cherished character

coupled with the highest possible honor of martyrdom and its occurrence at the hands of “the Great Satan” act to strengthen ideologically-committed communities and provide them with a strong and urgent platform for further mobilization and recruitment.

Secondly, it provides the government with stronger justification to repress internal dissent in the name of being under international threat. There is some evidence that the security apparatus is quietly loosening its grip to some extent for now, perhaps to reinforce the reemerging bits of legitimacy. For instance, some of the arrested protestors from 2019, including Pouya Bakhtiari’s family members, were released, and controversial espionage charges against a detained French-Iranian scholar were dropped. In the medium- and long-terms, however, Soleimani’s killing by the U.S. will likely become a strong advantage for the hardliners to justify their oppression of both moderate and oppositional voices. The aura of sacredness around Soleimani’s figure becomes yet another red line, the crossing of which would mean siding with his killers. An example of the sensitivity around Soleimani’s case appeared within a few hours: a news outlet editor was prosecuted for using the words “killed” as opposed to “martyred” in his coverage of the general’s death. This cannot be good news for the ordinary people and their very much alive grievances, who already are dubbed foreign agents or described as deceived by the Islamic Republic’s enemies whenever they take to the street in protest. With as sharp an act of hostility as the elimination of a revered major general fresh in everyone’s memory, it is now even easier for the government to dismiss and eradicate protesters as siding with the “regime’s enemies,” even if they were among the crowds that mourned General Soleimani on the streets.

Recommended Readings

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