

Iran After Soleimani: Another Crisis

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The year 2020 has started very tense for the Middle East and the world. After the assassination in Baghdad of Iran's charismatic general Qasem Soleimani in a drone strike by the US army on January 3, the promises of retaliation from the Iranian government and its paramilitary forces in the region, the memorial services attended by millions in Iraq and Iran with angry crowds chanting anti-American slogans, and Iran's missile strikes on US military bases in Iraq created the impression at first that the long-awaited war between the two countries was now inevitable. But the war did not happen, and attention soon shifted back to Iran's internal issues and the protests. In this article, I will comment on the situation following the murder of Soleimani.

Iran's policy of turning the Soleimani affair to its own advantage

Although, at the level of official rhetoric, Iran's reaction to the murder in a US bombing raid of the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (sometimes referred to as *Sepah* or *Pasdaran*) has been harsh and emotional, on a practical level Iran has not abandoned its pragmatism. However paradoxical it may sound, the missile attacks on US military bases in Iraq were a move not toward war, but rather toward de-escalation. The Americans were [aware](#) of the missile attacks in advance and they served more as propaganda for the Iranian government. Understanding perfectly well that there is no chance of victory in open war with the United States, the Iranian government decided to accomplish more realistic goals. Directing rising anti-Americanism in the wake of Soleimani's death against the US, it has tried to weaken the US's support in the region and, at the same time,

to bolster its own reputation, which has taken a hit in recent months.

Before January 3, 2020, this was the situation in the region: after the price of gasoline rose in Iran in November 2019, mass [protests](#) blanketed the country, escalating into riots in some places, with security forces employing firearms. According to [Reuters](#), approximately 1,500 people died. Although events slowed down, reverberations continued. In October 2019, protests erupted in Iraq and Lebanon. Although the protesters primarily targeted local political elites, in Iraq the protests were also directed [against Iran](#). Iran's influence on Iraq's internal politics has grown significantly in recent years, and in the current situation, Iran is the primary supporter of the government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi. In Lebanon, the demonstrations were not as anti-Iranian as they were in Iraq, but Hezbollah, the largest political and military group in the region, supported by Iran, opposed the protests, while the events have also raised concerns in Iran. (The Iraqi and Lebanese governments have resigned, but new governments have not been established yet.)

To turn this mood around, the Iranian government, acting in a cold-blooded and calculating fashion, did not rush to bury Soleimani. The body was taken to Shi'ite holy sites accompanied by a large procession: first to the tombs of the 7th Imam Musa al-Kadhim and the 9th Imam Muhammad al-Taqi in Kadhimiya, north of Baghdad, then by helicopter to the tomb of Imam Husayn in Karbala, and later to the tomb where Ali is believed to be buried in Najaf. The route in Iran was as follows: Ahvaz (one of the main centers of the November protests) – Mashhad (the site of Imam Reza's shrine) – Tehran (the capital) – Qom – Kerman (the deceased's birthplace). The goal of the organizers was to consolidate Shi'ites in the region and direct the protests against the US, and to this end we saw how the Shi'ite Ja'fari mourning rituals were brought to the fore.

It should be noted as significant that the ceremonies in Najaf and Karbala were attended by the son and representatives of Ayatollah Sayyid Ali al-Sistani, an influential religious leader and a Shi'ite *marja al-taqlid*. There is a rivalry between the Najaf (Iraq) and Qom (Iran) schools of Shi'ite thought, and different approaches to both religious and secular issues. Since the Islamic Revolution, the Qom school has become politicized, promoting the state-sanctioned ideology of *vilayat-e faqih*, while the Najaf school tries not to interfere in politics, to avoid sectarianism, and to promote a united Iraqi identity. As recent examples of their different approaches, one could point to the claim made by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that America stood behind the unrest in Iraq and Lebanon, while Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani rejected that view and declared domestic problems to be the cause of the protests. Another interesting fact from the recent past is that al-Sistani [refused](#) to meet Qasem Soleimani on 3 separate occasions.

Against this backdrop, Iran's first concrete success was the Iraqi Parliament's [decision](#) to work toward the withdrawal of US troops from the country. But the incident on the night of January 8 spoiled all those efforts. A few hours after the missile strikes on US military bases, there were reports that a Ukrainian passenger plane crashed during takeoff in Tehran, killing 176 people. After 3 days of denials, the Iranian government [admitted](#) that the aircraft was shot down by mistake by the country's air defense forces, sparking new protests across the country. Later that evening, students in [Tehran](#) marched through the streets with "Death to the Dictator", "We Don't Want an Islamic Republic" and other anti-regime slogans. ("The dictator" is a reference to the supreme leader.) There were protests in other cities, too. While these demonstrations were not on the same scale as those in November 2019 and December 2017, they demonstrate once again that the dissatisfaction among various social strata within Iran is strong, and that it is focused directly on the system and the

person in charge of it. The street protests in November started in the provinces due of socioeconomic problems, and the participants were mostly the poor and unemployed, but this time students, the educated and active part of the population, came out in the capital with political slogans. This is yet another alarming signal for the regime. True, it must be said that the crowds that filled the squares for Soleimani were many times greater in number than the opposition. But in undemocratic, closed regimes, especially in theocratic autocracies such as Iran, crowds are often artificial and gathered together by force by the state. When a centralized system of government weakens, there is no guarantee that those masses will rally around the ruling power.

In Iran, the amount of criticism coming from within the system itself – from the reformist wing – is on the rise. In this regard, the [letter](#) by the former chairman of Iran's parliament, former member of the Ulema Assembly which elects the Supreme Leader, former Khamenei adviser, and four-time presidential candidate, *hujjat al-islam* Mehdi Karrubi, which he addressed to the leader, is worthy of attention. In his letter regarding the shooting down of a passenger plane, Karrubi blamed the incident directly on the Supreme Leader and said it was not the first scandal to occur during his rule. Accusing Khamenei of "serial murders, electoral fraud, and bloody repressions against demonstrators" (a direct quote from the letter), he put Khamenei's legitimacy in doubt. 82-year-old Karrubi, who was one of the organizers of the mass protests in 2009 known as the Green Movement, led by presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, has been under house arrest since February 2011. In a [letter](#) to the head of state after mass protests across the country at the end of 2017, Karrubi demanded that *Sepah* and its volunteer militia, *Basij*, be stripped of their influence over the country's politics and economy. Although reformist lawmakers have repeatedly demanded that Khamenei release Mousavi and Karrubi from house arrest, their demands have been ignored.

New sanctions and an election year

The economic crisis in Iran continues and the situation has only worsened since US sanctions were reinstated in August and November 2018. I have already written an [article](#) on this topic for Baku Research Institute. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2019, Iran's economy [shrank](#) by 9.5%. This is a big figure. Inflation is about 40%, and one in four young people are unemployed. In these conditions, the US government announced its next [sanctions](#) package on January 10 this year. This time the sanctions target Iran's metallurgy (steel, aluminum, iron, copper), construction, mining and textile industries. 17 Iranian companies operating in these areas have been subjected to bans. Given that the Iranian metallurgical industry's exports are worth about \$10 billion a year, the impact these sanctions will have is not hard to imagine. The Trump administration's goal is to persuade Iran to reopen negotiations on its nuclear and missile programs. But Iran categorically rejects negotiations, and it seems that at least until the US presidential election, it will not sit down with the Trump administration. The Iranian government hopes that the Democratic nominee will win the election and return to the agreement signed by the Obama administration in 2015. Presumably, a second term for Trump will increase tensions on the Iranian issue and the likelihood of war will increase if Iran does not take a step back.

This year is also an election year in Iran: in February, elections will be held for parliament – the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Compared to parliaments in secular-democratic countries, the weight and role of the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran in the system of government is not very significant. The electoral process in Iran is under the strict control of a constitutional body called the Constitutional Supervisory Board (Shurai Negahban). Candidates are investigated by this agency and either allowed to participate in the election or disqualified after this filtration process. The Council has 12 members: 6 of them are

jurists (ayatollahs), appointed by the Supreme Leader, and 6 are lawyers appointed by parliament on behalf of the head of the judicial system. However, as the head of the judiciary has also been appointed as the Supreme Leader, it can be said that the Constitutional Oversight Council does not deviate from Khamenei's will. In the previous elections, the Council rejected 60% of applications for nomination. Appeals from 90 of the current 290 MPs also faced the same fate. The absolute majority of these individuals are members of the reform wing. In short, the people who will be elected to parliament – both conservatives and reformers – are determined first by this agency, then by the people.

According to the election law, to be both a believing and a practicing Muslim, as well as loyalty to the Islamic Republic and the *vilayat-e faqih* system, are among the main conditions for becoming an MP. In addition, minorities are given 5 seats, 2 of which are for Armenians. In other words, the electoral system in Iran is not democratic, even though on election day the votes are usually counted honestly. The upcoming elections are important because they are being held a few months after the bloody events of November, the assassination of Soleimani, the destruction of the passenger plane, and the subsequent protests. It will be interesting to see how all these events affect the mood and political position of the people. It is also important whether or not citizens take an active part in the elections. The protest electorate still usually votes for reformist candidates, but in recent years, the dissatisfied strata have seen that their support for reformers has not changed their situation dramatically, and they think of the reformers as a part of the current system as well. For this reason, voter turnout could decrease in the February elections, which could create a legitimacy problem and soon lead to a new wave of protests. It seems that 2020 is going to be another difficult and tense year for Iran.