

## **How General Soleimani's death has changed Iran's Regional Trajectories?**

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General Qasem Soleimani's contribution to Iran's regional dominance is beyond doubt. In his tenure, Tehran gained considerable influence over Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Iraninan 'axis of resistance' swelled from the Gulf of Oman to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The credit for this goes to his unique military strategy through which Tehran was able to get an all-out support from allies in the region. Soleimani was also hailed as a victor of war against ISIS and for sabotaging US plots in the Middle East.

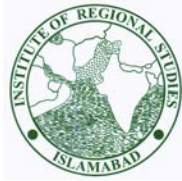
Since his appointment as Chief of the Quds Force<sup>1</sup> of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, (IRGC) between 1997 and 1998, Soleimani had been actively bolstering Iranian regional influence.<sup>2</sup> He cultivated Iran's regional policy based on the principle of 'forward defence'. To advance this policy, Soleimani built and expanded the so-called proxy networks across the region in a successive manner by exploiting the power vacuums that existed in other states. In doing so, Soleimani ensured the prevention of Iran's direct engagement in any conflict while simultaneously playing the role of a major regional actor. For instance, in Afghanistan, Iran did not enter into a direct confrontation with the Taliban, despite the killings of Iranian diplomats at Mazar-i-Sharif by the Taliban. Instead, Iran bolstered its ties with the Northern Alliance (supported by multiple states including Russia and the US) and backed multiple

factions using religious (Shi'ite Hazaras) and linguistic (Persian-speaking Tajiks) cards to hold off the Taliban. Similarly, in Iraq, Iran's influence has increased manifold since the fall of Saddam in 2003. Initially, Tehran supported Shi'ite militias like Kataib-e-Hezbollah and Mehdi Army to resist the US coalition forces. Later on, Iraninan support was extended to Sunni Jihadists during Iraq's Civil War between 2006 to 2008. In the wake of the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL)<sup>3</sup> in 2011, Iran relied on its so-called proxy groups to fightback ISIL instead of joining the US-led military coalition fighting against the ISIL in Iraq.

Iraq's top Shi'ite cleric, Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Sistani's call to take up arms against the ISIS to defend Baghdad amidst intense fighting provided the much needed support to Iran's efforts in mobilising pro-Iranian forces in the country. Soon after the call, various old and new Iranian-backed militias and volunteers started regrouping under the newly formed Popular Mobilisation Force, (PMF), i.e., *Hashd al-Shabi* in Arabic in 2014. Although PMF was established in Iraq and has its headquarter there, yet it was being facilitated and operated by Tehran as its extra-territorial military arm. Likewise in Syria, Iran galvanised the Shi'ite militias across the region (i.e., Fatimiyoan, Zainabiyoan) and utilised them against the anti-Assad rebels and militants to consolidate Assad's power in the country. In the case of Israel too, Iran manoeuvred Lebanese Shi'ite forces to its

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advantage and grouped them under the banner of Hezbollah in the 1980s to thwart Israeli aggression, while circumventing direct confrontation.

Through above-mentioned tactics, Soleimani acted his 'forward defense' policy out and was able to expand Iran's 'arc of resistance' in the region. Soleimani was serving as the centripetal force of the 'Iranian Web'. His regional security umbrella also worked out for Iran's political influence in regional countries. For instance, in the 2018 parliamentary elections in Lebanon and Iraq, the Iranian-backed Hezbollah-led group and Al-Fatah Alliance, respectively, emerged victorious. In Syria too, pro-Assad forces managed to suppress militant opposition. Victory of pro-Iranian groups in aforementioned states have thus, further consolidated Tehran's footprints in respective states.

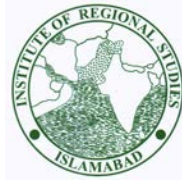
Soleimani's assassination on January 3, 2020 in a US airstrike at Baghdad Airport, however, put a serious dent in Tehran's 'forward defence' strategy. Since his demise, Iran's domestic and regional challenges have been persistently increasing. Iran's regional policy has witnessed a significant shift with the change of military leadership. The geopolitical developments in the region, on the other hand, have also altered Tehran's regional calculus.

In Lebanon, owing to the protests, political instability, and economic meltdown, the Hezbollah-led political alliance is in jeopardy. The ongoing political turmoil might end up in breaking the 'March 8 Alliance'. In February 2021, the president of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) hinted towards revisiting the alliance with Hezbollah.<sup>4</sup> In case of next Parliamentary Election (scheduled in May 2022), Hezbollah might not be able to maintain its political stronghold in the

country which would ultimately reduce Iran's political influence in Lebanon.

Situation in Iraq is no more different. Political faction of the Iranian-backed PMF—Al Fatah Alliance faced defeat in the Parliamentary Elections held in 2021. The winning seats of Al Fatah dropped to 17 as compared to 48 in the 2018 elections. The current PM of Iraq, Al Kadhimi, who was nominated after the resignation of his predecessor owing to the mass protests, is considered to be a neutral figure. But his long association with the US intelligence while chasing the ISIS in the region has turned out to be the bad news for Iran.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the emergence of the Sadrist bloc in recent elections is another blow to Iran's influence since Sadrists have shared their apprehensions over Iranian influence inside Iraq.

Finally in Syria, two major developments in the post-Soleimani era have challenged Iran's sway in the country. One, Israeli airstrikes around Damascus have increased which indicates Israel's renewed offensive strategy wherein Israel has begun targeting deep inside the country which were restricted to only bordering areas during Soleimani's time.<sup>6</sup> Two, in line with Israel's aggressive moves, the US conducted airstrikes inside Syria against Iran-backed militants.<sup>7</sup> The Israel-US duo in Syria has multiplied Iran's worries in the country. In sum, Iran's political influence in the aforementioned states has considerably gone down. Additionally, the US sanctions and the pandemic together factored in shrinking Iran's space in the Middle East. These factors altogether have changed Iran's regional trajectories from a forward mode to adjusting with the changing realities and looking for regional consensus to re-establish its position in the region.



For that matter, Iran's influence on Houthis in Yemen has already worked for Tehran which seemingly brought Saudi Arabia and Iran closer to each other (referring towards secret peace talks held in Iraq in April 2021). The reproachment with Saudi Arabia would provide a much-needed boost to Iran's Middle Eastern policy. The diffusion of tensions with Saudi Arabia could help Iran in multiple ways as Iranian position in Yemen would be strengthened. It can also pave the way of restoring Saudi Arabia's funds for Lebanese banks that are currently being held by the former primarily because of dominant Iranian political influence in the country. The rapprochement can also lead to the convergence of both states' interests in Lebanon. Similarly in Afghanistan, a security vacuum after the US withdrawal has provided an opportunity for Iran to excel its influence. Since the fall of Kabul to Taliban, Tehran has been actively engaging with them. Iran is also coordinating with Pakistan, Russia and China to visualise the post-US security and political situation of the country. With Turkey, Iran has been eyeing to strengthen ties under the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) framework.

In Iraq, although the defeat of the PMF is a major setback for Iran, yet the emergence of Nouri Al Maliki as the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest winner of Iraqi elections has raised Tehran's hope for maintaining its footprints in the country.<sup>8</sup> Maliki is known as the most trusted ally of Iran. He was able to secure more seats than in previous elections. In 2018, he secured 25 seats, however, in the recent elections, the number of winning seats has risen to 33, providing Tehran a renewed opportunity to excel in the political domain. It is speculated that a

political compromise and power-sharing setup will take place on the lines of what happened in 2018. Despite an overarching edge in the previous election, domestic resistance forced Iran to change its policy. However, this time around when Iran's political leverage is seemingly more fragile, regional support is the only option to prevent backlash from within Iraq.

Another area in which Iran can work out is 'building consensus between Turkey and Iraq' to overcome the water row between the two countries. Secondly, utilisation of Chinese funding in building Iraq's infrastructure is also crucial for Iran owing to its leverage over the political and economic apparatus of the country. Tehran can also exploit its influence over its so-called proxy network to persuade them to cooperate with the state.

Conclusively, Iran can devise a three-pronged strategy—cooperation with Russia to manage Israel's assertion inside Syria; enhance collaboration with China to mitigate the negative impact of the US sanctions on its economy and streamline the BRI that could interconnect the region and open the prospects for reconciliation between the regional states and finally, institutionalise its relationship with the neighbouring states like Pakistan, Turkey, Afghanistan and Central Asian States (through ECO and SCO) to counter anti-Iranian elements in the region. Nevertheless, Tehran can also consider forming an alliance on the lines of US-led Middle Eastern Quad (US, Israel, UAE, and India) to capitalise its interests in the region. Establishing such an alliance is crucial at the time when Washington's influence in the region is receding.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Quds Forces is responsible for Iran's external operations
- <sup>2</sup> Ali Alfoneh, "Brigadier General Qassem Suleimani: A Biography," *Middle Eastern Outlook*, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, no. 1, (2011):1, <http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/suleimani.pdf>.
- <sup>3</sup> Later renamed as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the ISIS in 2013.
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- <sup>5</sup> Munqith Dagher, "Is Mustafa Al-Kadhimi Good News for Iran?," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 21 April 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/mustafa-al-kadhimi-good-news-iran>.
- <sup>6</sup> "Syria says Israel Attacked areas around Southern Damascus," *Al Jazeera*, 1 March 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/1/syria-says-israel-attacks-areas-around-southern-damascus>.
- <sup>7</sup> Magnus Seland Andersson and Hilde Henriksen Waage, "The Geopolitics of Syria's Reconstruction," *PRIO Paper*, 2021, <file:///C:/Users/hls%20pc/Downloads/Andersson%20%20Waage%20%20The%20Geopolitics%20of%20Syria%E2%80%99s%20Reconstruction,%20PRIO%20Paper%202021.pdf>.
- <sup>8</sup> Andrew Parasiliti and et.al, "The Take Away: Iraq's Elections: What Comes Next?," *Al-Monitor*, 5 January 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/takeaway-iraqs-elections-what-comes-next>.