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Iran: Leaders Caught Between Temptation and Desperation Following the Target-Killing of Maj.-Gen. Soleimani

Significant impact likely on world energy markets over 2020 along with escalation of attacks by Iranian-backed units against US targets

Analysis. By Gregory R. Copley and Dr Assad Homayoun, GIS/Defense & Foreign Affairs.¹ Iran's clerical leadership, under "Supreme Leader" *Ayatollah* Ali Hoseini-Khamene'i, is expected to make rapid, significant, and symbolic responses to the target killing in Baghdad on January 3, 2019, of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps *Quds* Force commander Maj.-Gen. Qasem Soleimani.²

It seems unlikely that the Iranian response would initially be to launch the military assault on Israel, which it has been planning, but, rather, something which could target the oil production and exports of the US' key allies in the region: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, in particular (but not exclusively). The event was decisive, not only in terms of the US-Iranian dynamic, but was likely to have long-term, structural effects on the supply of oil and gas.

This will particularly impact (negatively) the People's Republic of China (PRC) and, positively in the short-term, Russia, major importers and exporters of oil and gas respectively. This comes at a time when the PRC economy is already suffering severe degradation, so the net effect of a significant rise in oil prices would be to accelerate the PRC recession, which would, in turn, significantly impact the global economy as 2020 progressed.

This could, then, have an impact on the US November 2020 Presidential and Congressional elections, although the decline in the PRC economy was always going to have an impact on the US during the year in any event. The pivotal event of the killing of Soleimani seemed likely, therefore, to ensure that the US and the PRC would now work to cement a trade resolution as quickly as possible.

Certainly, in the short-term, there was likely to be a significant uptick in the ongoing Iranian-directed attacks by Shi'a militia units against US military facilities in Iraq, as well as the mobilization of terrorist and subversive actions against US bases and facilities in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere.

It is increasingly evident that the Iranian clerical leadership under the ailing *Ayatollah* Khamene'i had, until the shock of the decisive US attack which killed Soleimani and

several other key officials, completely mis-read the resolve and intent of its two major nemeses, the US and Israel, and had been preparing to act on those faulty perceptions.

Mis-readings of the situation have contributed to the belief within the Khamene'i circle that it was now possible to militarily confront and destroy Israel, as Yossef Bodansky described in a report on October 21, 2019.³ Some Iranian clerical leaders have stated that it was also possible to see the removal of the US from the Persian Gulf and wider Middle Eastern region, even as a precursor to minimizing the engagement in the region of Russia, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and current Iranian ally Turkey.

Khamene'i appeared at the beginning of 2020 to believe that he could resolve his dramatically worsening domestic problems by a major political-military *demarche* which would somehow overturn Iran's strategic fortunes. Lt.-Gen. Leopoldo Galtieri similarly sought — and failed — to reverse his Argentine military government's fortunes by invading the Falkland Islands in 1982, as an eleventh hour bid to cling to power.

As well, it has become clear that the formal Government of Iran, under Pres. *Hojjat ol-Eslam* Hasan Fereidun Rouhani, had, probably by mid-2019, become completely sidelined in terms of actual policymaking.

“Supreme Leader” Khamene'i, supported by key leadership elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC: *Pasdaran*) has, since around mid-2019, been increasingly contemplating some form of unprecedented foreign adventurism, based on a mis-reading of the regional and global strategic situation, as a means of compensating for a declining internal security situation. Perceptions of Iranian military successes in Yemen, which were, in reality, failures of the Saudi-led coalition fighting there, created in Tehran the belief that Iranian forces could sweep all before them.⁴

In basic terms, clerical Tehran seems unwilling to take the necessary measures to satisfy domestic political-economic problems — which are, admittedly, difficult — while at the same time allowing itself to believe that the doorway is open to it to successfully undertake great military successes outside of Iran's borders. It thinks the domestic challenges are too hard (and, anyway, it fears showing weakness to a domestic audience), and the foreign opportunities are too easy.

The Iranian Government-orchestrated attack — using combatants of the *Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilization Forces) — on the US Embassy compound in Baghdad, Iraq, on December 31, 2019-January 1, 2020, seemed to have been an attempt by the Tehran leadership to probe the strength and willpower of the US Government in the region; or, conversely, it may have been a reflection of a growing lack of realism in Iranian strategic decisionmaking. The Iranian Government denied involvement in the attack on the US Embassy, but the clear linkage between the *Hashd al-Shaabi* leadership and Gen. Soleimani was evident in the airport strike on January 3, 2019.

Either way, the US response to the attack on its embassy was not the one Tehran was hoping to see. As well, either interpretation — a probe of US response or a lack of realism in Tehran — also highlighted a growing tendency by the clerical Administration under “Supreme Leader” Khamene'i to seek an external distraction from the growing domestic unrest in Iran.⁵ As French statesman Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord was reputed to have said (on an entirely different matter) to Napoleon I: “It was worse

than a crime; it was a blunder.” But, realistically, what options did Tehran have to break out of the strategic straight-jacket the US had placed on it?

Clearly, the Iranian domestic situation would not have become so pressing had the increasingly-isolated clerical leadership of the country undertaken more effective economic and political management, but, in the short-term, Tehran opted to “break out” where it could, and that was in the soft-target areas among US allies in the region. And, indeed, the clerical leadership had, by January 3, 2020, predictably begun to attempt to exploit the killing of Gen. Soleimani as a full US war against Iran.

The Baghdad Embassy attack did not, of course, lead to a US backdown, but rather to an increase in US force commitment to the region, albeit a response which had been as carefully as possible measured to avoid allowing the Iranian clerical leadership to lure the US into a direct confrontation with Iranian forces.

There is persuasive evidence that *Ayatollah* Khamene’i would welcome a direct US-Iranian military confrontation, given the precedent set in 1980 when Khamene’i’s predecessor, *Ayatollah* Ruhollah Khomeini, was facing overthrow by a discontented Iranian populace only a year or so after he seized power.

The September 22, 1980, Iraqi attack on the Iranian city of Khorramshahr, across the Shatt al-Arab river began the eight-year Iran-Iraq War which cost Iran as many as 500,000 dead and another 400,000 wounded, and a cost to the treasury of Tehran of some \$561-billion in direct terms (and much more in long-term damage to the Iranian economy). But, for Khomeini, it was worth the price: his clerical leadership was saved because the Iraqi attack diverted domestic attention toward the patriotic endeavor of saving Iran from outside forces.

Moreover, the Iran-Iraq war made it clear that the ultimate defeat of Iran by purely military means was a difficult objective for any power, whether Iraq or the US. It remains so. Terrain issues (size and topography), coupled with a deeply-rooted sense of Persian national pride, mean that any military adventure against Iran could only succeed as a cost-effective measure if it was aided by internal collapse or weakness.

Even the 19th Century loss of Persia’s northern lands of Daghestan, eastern Georgia, much of Azerbaijan, and northern Armenia to Russia (under the Treaty of Gulistan) was not merely the result of the Russo-Persian War of 1804 to 1813, but also because of the reality that the then-ruling Qajar dynasty in Persia was in decline. Even Russia did not contemplate a full-scale invasion and occupation of the core of Iran where geography and the tenacity of the local tribes would have made such a conquest difficult.

Persian collapse or defeat, historically, has (as with most countries) been the result of internal failure rather than military action from abroad, and, in the case of Persia or Iran only when its core strengths have been sidelined. Those core strengths are the identity given to the populace by Zoroaster (core religion or ethical values, prevailing since pre-Islamic times), Cyrus the Great (sense of martial prowess and national identity), and Ferdowsi, the poet (culture, and the creation of Persian epic greatness with *Shahnameh*, the Book of Kings).

What is significant is that the Khamene’i clique — very much including his son, Mojtaba Hosseini Khamene’i, who led the *Basij* militia to suppress Iranian voters in the 2009

election — have built their hopes on “strategic distractions” which have *not* appealed to these core Persian tenets, but, rather, have opposed them.

So what was evident by late 2019 and the beginning of 2020 was pressure by the Iranian clerical leadership (and therefore also the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps: *Pasdaran*) to actually *seek* military confrontation with the US and/or Israel on terms which could be portrayed to the Iranian population as an external aggression on the Iranian motherland. Equally, US Pres. Donald Trump is at pains to deny the clerics this opportunity. And the Israeli national security community is equally at pains to avoid a strategic first strike to avert the prospect of an Iranian strategic strike.

The attack on the Baghdad US embassy compound by militia groups associated with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) appeared to be aimed at accelerating a US withdrawal from Iraq and the Persian Gulf, and was clearly modeled on the November 4, 1979, attack by Iranian “students” on the US Embassy in Tehran. How then-US Pres. Jimmy Carter responded — or failed to decisively respond — to that event gave the Khomeini Administration its license to proceed further against its domestic opponents.

The Baghdad Embassy event was well-orchestrated but was clearly not generating the response which the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad was seeking. The Iranian Ambassador to Iraq is the former Deputy Commander of the *Quds* Brigade of the IRGC, Brig.-Gen. Iraj Masjedi, who continued to work closely with *Quds* Brigade Commander Maj.-Gen. Qasem Soleimani. Maj.-Gen. Soleimani was known to be close with *Ayatollah* Khamene‘i, so the Baghdad Embassy operation was clearly orchestrated from the top of the clerical administration.

There is, then, little ambiguity in the Iranian ruling clerics’ position. Khamene‘i pointedly stood down Pres. Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif on May 14, 2019, from any negotiations with the US, a week after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had visited Baghdad and reportedly met with “a senior Iranian official”.⁶

The only question is whether Khamene‘i will “pull the trigger” on a major confrontation, possibly with Israel, before domestic Iranian security concerns deteriorate to the point of no return. What is significant is that, as with the Argentine gamble to invade the Falkland Islands in 1982, little thought has been given to the second- and third-tier effects of launching a major conflict against Israel.

There is no question that the IRGC, and possibly the Iranian Armed Forces, are basing their hope of “destroying Israel” on their ability to saturate the Israeli Rafael/Israel Aircraft Industries *Iron Dome* national air defense system. And, indeed, Iran has done much to upgrade its available technology toward this end. Firstly, it has dramatically increased the numbers of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles based in Lebanon’s Beqa’a Valley and in Iraq hard up against the Syrian border.

Secondly, it has increased the quality and lethality of those missiles. As Yossef Bodansky has described in reports by this Service (see, particularly, the report of October 21, 2019), precision guidance modification kits have been provided to many of the ballistic missiles and rockets being used by Iranian-controlled *HizbAllah* forces in Lebanon and HAMAS forces in Gaza.

HAMAS forces fired some 450 rockets from Gaza into Israel during November 2019, and *Iron Dome* intercepted some 86 percent of them. Clearly, as the HAMAS and *HizbAllah* forces add precision guidance to their systems, an 86 percent kill rate — assuming that could be sustained through a protracted saturation strategy — would be insufficient to protect Israel. The Israeli Defense Forces are aware of that. Moreover, the reality is that Iran is now ready for another attempt at overwhelming *Iron Dome*. The system became operational on March 27, 2011, and by late October 2014 had intercepted more than 1,200 rockets.

The new approach by Iran would depend on more than just ballistic missiles and rockets, and would certainly include the unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) which Iran successfully employed against Saudi air defenses, particularly in the September 14, 2019, strike against the oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in eastern Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the movement of heavier Iranian ballistic systems onto the Iraq-Syria border holds the implication that Iran is considering deployment — or has already deployed — strategic (nuclear) warheads, with the option that a saturation of *Iron Dome* could provide an opening for the use of counter-city weapons against Israel.

What this thinking ignores is that any use of strategic weapons by Iran or Iranian proxies against Israel would be countered by an Israeli second-strike capability, quite apart from Israel's own first strike weapons. Iran does not have a material second-strike capability and would suffer significantly if it escalated to nuclear exchange. So the only option being considered by Iran is that an Iranian first strike against Israel would be sufficient to destroy all Israeli combat capabilities.

This would be a true gamble for Tehran, and, as tensions built, it would be likely that the US would bolster Israeli air defense capabilities through the deployment of offshore-based *Aegis* assets and associated anti-ballistic missile capabilities. Iran has probably already attempted to deploy some of its Russian-built S-300 air defense missile systems to protect Iran's forward-deployed offensive ballistic systems against pre-emptive Israeli strikes. [Israel launched targeted missile strikes on December 22, 2019, against Iranian targets in Syria, allegedly killing the Commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Force, Amir-Ali Hajizadeh. Iranian reports said that Syrian air defense batteries intercepted Israeli missiles, but clearly not all.]

What is known is that Iran had, by late 2019, deployed its *Bavar-373* to T-4 (Tiyas Military Air Base; The Syrian Arab Air Force's largest base) in Homs Governorate, in Central/Western Syria, to protect its forward deployment. Some key components of the batteries are positioned far too close to Russian facilities for Israel to attempt to destroy them. The Russians are not happy. The *Bavar-373*, tested initially in August 2016, is claimed by Iran to be comparable to the Russian S-300 air defense system. It was only formally unveiled on August 22, 2019.

So a big question mark is held over the question of where Russia would stand in all of this. Or the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Almost certainly, Moscow would not support such Iranian adventurism, and is already aware that Iran is escalating regional tensions to a degree unacceptable to Russia. The bottom line is that Russia cannot afford to lose any of its "allies" in the region: Iran, Turkey, or Syria. Neither, however, can Moscow realistically control Iran; it has in some re-

spects more leverage over Turkey and Syria, although Turkey is anything but an easy management task.

Turkish Pres. Reçep Tayyip Erdoğan keeps ignoring Russian Pres. Vladimir Putin's "advice" mainly on the matter of Libya, Syria, Central Asia/Xinjiang/Afghanistan, and the Caucasus/Crimea. And while Russia has some means of pressuring Erdoğan, the reality is that the economically-embattled Pres. Erdoğan knows that Moscow cannot afford to break with Ankara at this time. Similarly, the matter of "who needs who the most" impacts Russian relations with Iran, as well as Beijing's relations with both Iran and Turkey.

But a severe degradation of Israel would be as detrimental for Russia as for the US, giving dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean to Turkey and Iran. Russia has already expressed its concern over Turkish plans expressed by the Turkish-Libyan maritime agreements concluded on November 27, 2019, with the rump pseudo-government — the "Government of National Accord" — of Libya under Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj. Russia supports (as does Egypt) the essentially anti-Turkish and far more nationally-representative Administration of Tobruk-based Gen. Khalifa Haftar.

Another scenario is possible: Iran's slide into domestic chaos may preclude an opportunity for the Khamene'i team to launch a diversionary conflict with Israel. It could call for all forces to focus on the maintenance of domestic stability, possibly invoking a martial law edict. This, as we have noted before, could possibly have seen the rise of *Quds* Force Commander, Maj.-Gen. Qasem Soleimani, entering Iran — crossing the Rubicon, in a sense — to act as martial law administrator.

That, in itself, could start to see the end of the clerical era in Iranian governance. Soleimani is now gone.⁷ Is there another military leader who could emerge to galvanize a transition from the clerics?

GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs* Senior Editor Yossef Bodansky noted in the hours just before the target-killing of Maj.-Gen. Soleimani:

"The key recent decision in Tehran was regarding the latest attacks against the US air bases in Iraq, and these few attacks were driven by domestic developments in the Shi'ite community of Iraq."

"Oversimplified: There is a growing schism among the Shi'ites over their identity as part of the Iran-led Shiite World (the *Fatah* movement, the *Hashd al-Shaabi*, etc.) or a distinct leading part of the Shi'ite World on the basis of the erstwhile glory of Najaf and Karbala (Muqtada Sadr leads this trend)."

"The imminent death of Iraqi Shi'a leader *Ayatollah* Ali Hussein Sistani, 89, escalates the struggle between these factions over who will succeed him. In September 2019, Soleimani brought Sadr to Khomeini in Tehran to discuss a 'deal' whereupon Tehran would accept the ascent of Shi'ite Arabism in return for greater control over Iraq's strategic/energy. Sadr accepted but then sent his minions to riot in the streets in order to gain more concessions from Tehran, but lost control over them. Hence, Tehran ordered the provoking of a crisis with the US in order to mobilize and unify

the Shi'ite community against the 'Great Satan' (starting with siege on the US Embassy over the December 31, 2019-January 1, 2020 timeframe)."

"While Tehran did not expect, and does not relish, the extent of the US response, and while both Beijing and Moscow criticize the anti-US crisis while they improve strategic cooperation with Iran (such as the four-day naval exercise held between Russia, the PRC, and Iran, beginning on December 27, 2019, in the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Oman), Tehran cannot project weakness and cannot lose dominance over Shi'ite Iraq."

"Hence, the anti-US/anti-Israel incidents will keep coming and escalating. How far? Who knows ..."

Clearly, Iran can be expected to lash out significantly and relatively quickly. Tehran needs to sustain the momentum of the perception that the US represents an existential threat to the Iranian state, and not just to the clerical Administration. And what the clerics fear most is that the West may well turn to appealing to the "tribal" interests of various Iranian populations, who persist in seeing the clerics as their main adversary.

Footnotes:

1. GIS/*Defense & Foreign Affairs* Senior Editor Yossef Bodansky was also consulted in the preparation of this report.
2. The air strike, against on a convoy belonging to *Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilization Forces) coming into Baghdad International Airport, also killed Popular Mobilization Committee deputy commander (but effective leader) Jamal Jafaar Mohammed Ali Ebrahimi (who used the *kunya* of his eldest child as his *nom de guerre*: Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis). It was unclear whether the US strike had originally been intended to kill Gen. Soleimani, given that he rarely used the airport, preferring to enter Baghdad via vehicle convoys. It is conceivable that the strike had initially been targeting *Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilization Forces) deputy leader Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis and other *Hashd al-Shaabi* officials. Abu Mahdi, 56, had been present at the attacks on the US Embassy in Baghdad two days earlier. The US Defense Dept., in a statement immediately following the strike, noted: "Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack US diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region. General Soleimani and his *Quds* Force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of US and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more." The planned escalation of attacks on US assets in the region was, in fact, well-known and had been publicly stated by Iranian officials.
3. See, particularly, Bodansky, Yossef: "Iran Now Feels It Has Crossed the Threshold to Secure Regional Power", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [September 20, 2019](#); and "Iran Now Considers War Against Israel to be Feasible and Winnable ... And Israel Responds" in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [October 21, 2019](#).
4. See, Copley, Gregory R.: "Yemen Starts to Fracture, But is the Biggest Strategic Loss to the US?", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [September 2, 2019](#); and Bodansky, Yossef: "Iran's Strategic Escalation Shows That it Has Now Moved Into a Fully Offensive Mode", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [September 25, 2019](#).
5. Unrest over economic and social conditions has been mounting over recent years, but in mid-November 2019 street protests — which began over a 50 percent increase in gasoline prices announced on November 15, 2019 — escalated within 72 hours in most Iranian cities. Security forces opened fire on protestors, mostly young men, killing at least 180 people, and possibly several hundred more. One estimate put the death toll at up to 450, with some 2,000 wounded, and the number of detained at around 7,000. In Mahshahr (pop. 120,000), in the south-west of Iran, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps troops shot and killed between 40 and 100 demonstrators after they had been forced into an area of marshland which became a killing zone. Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli in late

November 2019 admitted that protests had occurred in 29 of Iran's 31 provinces, and that attacks had taken place against 50 military bases. He said that property damage occurred against 731 banks, 140 public spaces, nine religious centers, 70 petrol stations, 307 civilian vehicles, 193 police cars, 1,076 motorcycles, and 34 ambulances.

6. See, Bodansky, Yossef: "Khamene'i Decides: Iran Will Confront the US and its Allies", in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, [May 16, 2019](#).
 7. *Ayatollah* Khamene'i said, immediately after the strike: "I name Brigadier-General Esmail Qaani (Ghaani) as the commander of the *Quds* Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps." Brig.-Gen. Ghaani had been a deputy to Maj.-Gen. Soleimani since 1997.
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