

## How Soleimani's slaying could affect Iran-Saudi ties

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**The US killing of Iran's revered Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani could pose serious security repercussions for Saudi Arabia.**

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There is little doubt that the recent US assassination of powerful Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani in Iraq was good news to Saudi Arabia, which had kept the commander on its own terror list since October 2018.

The general, who commanded Iran's Quds Force — the special forces unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) — rarely targeted Saudi Arabia with direct harsh rhetoric. But he exercised no reservation when it came to hitting back at Saudi threats. In October 2016, Soleimani commented on internal Saudi politics, describing Mohammed bin Salman as a crown prince in hasty pursuit of his ambitions.

"He aims to push aside Mohammed bin Nayef [grandson of the founding monarch, King Abdul-Aziz] and may even resort to killing his own father [King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud] to occupy the throne," he said.

In June 2019, Soleimani's message for the United States and Saudi Arabia was more explicit and pejorative: "Whether it is the US, Saudi Arabia or any other fool, they can't do a thing to us as we are here to stand up against them."

Soleimani for years remained the brains inside Iran's situation rooms and the leading commander executing the country's regional policies on the ground. Many now wonder if his death might ultimately usher in a de-escalation in Iran-Saudi tension.

Since King Salman ascended to the throne in early 2015, Riyadh has markedly broken free from its characteristic restraint in foreign policy. And with Prince Mohammed assuming increasing powers, the kingdom has been pursuing a more aggressive approach toward its regional archenemy, Iran. Riyadh has repeatedly expressed concern over regional plans spearheaded by Soleimani.

In the immediate fallout of the Soleimani killing, Saudi officials guarded their public reactions, with King Salman urging all sides to exercise restraint and work toward easing tensions. The Saudi Foreign Ministry encouraged the international community to abide by its responsibilities to protect peace and security in the region. Saudi media, however, could not help rejoicing as they spoke of Soleimani's death heralding a milestone era in the Middle East.

The Saudi media's argument was based on the assertion that the charismatic Soleimani possessed everything needed to rally political groups and militias in the region. Therefore, with him now gone for good, Riyadh must feel closer than ever to achieving

one of its key foreign policy objectives: curbing Iran's influence and restricting it within its own walls.

Yet that doesn't appear to reveal the entire picture. Some Saudi officials have been concerned that the flames of Iran's wrath following the death of its commander might not spare Riyadh. That fear perhaps explains their initial cautious reaction. The Saudis even declared that they had no prior knowledge about the US plan to hit the Iranian commander.

Riyadh's watchful handling of the development might have to do with the immediate Iranian threat that a harsh retaliation awaited the United States. Riyadh also recognizes how Tehran's broad network of loyalist groups in the region can quickly line up behind Iran in potential crises. Those militias include not only Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq, but the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen's bitter civil war, where Saudi Arabia leads a coalition against the rebels. Houthis pose an imminent and direct threat to Saudi security.

"The US variable cannot be ignored in any analysis of Iran-Saudi tensions," said Kamran Karami, a Tehran-based Saudi affairs analyst. "In other words, with the [US administration's] maximum pressure policy [in Iran] well in place, there is no light on the horizon for a speedy de-escalation between Riyadh and Tehran," Karami told Al-Monitor.

"Following the [Houthi-claimed] strike on the Saudi Aramco oil facility and the downing of the American drone over the Persian Gulf, Riyadh began to stop raising tensions with Iran, if not fully abandoning its hostile policies. And under the current circumstances, Saudi Arabia is stepping aside to avoid falling in the range of potential Iranian attacks."

Washington's decision not to instantly retaliate for the Jan. 8 Iranian attacks on Iraq's Ain al-Asad air base, which houses American forces, could make Riyadh even more cautious in its Iran strategy. But will that alone walk the two sides to a path of de-escalation?

The Soleimani assassination Jan. 3 matched the Saudi goal of curtailing Iran's influence in the region, according to Yasser Nour-Alivand, a senior researcher with the Iranian Research Institute of Strategic Studies. "Yet there are obvious signs that Saudis are extremely worried it may ignite a regional conflict," he told Al-Monitor. "In the post-assassination era, therefore, it seems that Riyadh will move toward reducing tensions."

The foreign policy analyst argues that Saudi Arabia would prefer to see the United States maintain its policy of holding Iran back without a military conflict breaking out, one that could endanger Saudi security in the region.

In open remarks, Iran's leadership has made it clear that US forces must be ousted from the region, where Saudi Arabia serves as a key US ally. Against that backdrop, the key question is whether Iran is willing to come to terms with Saudi Arabia in the first place.

"It is not just about today; we have long been seeking de-escalation with Saudi Arabia," a senior Iranian diplomat told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. "It is Riyadh, however, which has refused to welcome the idea. If at the end of the day, Saudi officials realize that their old approach has failed, Tehran will be more than ready for dialogue."

Given the complexities of the regional situation and the shifting calculations, as well as the combusive nature of developments, the Middle East appears prone to fresh crises with higher susceptibility than ever. With that in mind, it's hard to paint a clear picture of the future of Iranian-Saudi ties. The Soleimani assassination, as an ideal development serving Saudi interests, may have brought Riyadh nothing more than a fleeting moment of ecstasy.

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