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A Post- Soleimani Opportunity: Removing Iran from Syria

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It was Qasem Soleimani, Commander of the Iranian Quds Force, who identified and pursued Iran’s opportunity to intensify its hold in Syria. He planned Iran’s military and civilian entrenchment there, and strove to create a Shiite land bridge from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. From this aspect his death leaves a vacuum, at least temporary. In the Israeli view, the targeted killing of Soleimani has created a rare opportunity to exploit the loss of a strategic ally and patron of Bashar al-Assad in order to dismantle Iranian military strongholds in Syria. For that purpose, Israel must conduct an integrated campaign, coordinated with the United States and with other regional actors, to synchronize a number of parallel efforts: recognize Russian dominance in Syria; drive a wedge between Damascus from Tehran by means of economic and political incentives for the Assad regime; mark Syria as the weak link in the Shiite chain and therefore focus on it; break up the chain and prevent Iran from taking control of the Iraq-Syria border area; establish Russian-American coordination to jumpstart the process of Syria’s political and economic reconstruction; spark public awareness in Syria and Iran of the heavy price to pay for Iranian involvement in Syria.

The targeted killing by the United States in early 2020 of Qasem Soleimani, Commander of the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, was a severe blow to Iran’s ability to score further achievements in its campaign to export the Islamic Revolution and expand its influence throughout the Middle East. Soleimani saw himself as the defender of the Revolution’s values and the rule of the ayatollahs, worked in their name while not hesitating to make independent decisions, and formed close personal ties with leaders, commanders, and other influential figures in the region. Soleimani was able to understand the weaknesses of the regional system, and developed his own creative approach to utilize Iran’s strengths and expand its regional influence, mainly by means of proxy forces. For two decades he was the strategic architect of Iran’s expansion in the Middle East, and his loss leaves Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who had groomed Soleimani, without a replacement of similar stature.

Soleimani identified and implemented Iran’s opportunity to deepen its hold on Syria. It was he who planned Iran’s military and civilian entrenchment there and served as the “contractor” to build a Shiite land bridge from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.

He also conducted the campaign to save the Assad regime and defeat the rebels, with methods that included attacking civilian populations and driving them from their homes to other areas inside and outside Syria, on the basis of demographic and geopolitical considerations deemed essential for the survival and stability of the Assad regime and for establishment of Iranian influence in the country. Soleimani personally commanded the battle for Aleppo in December 2015, and in the summer before, travelled to Moscow in order to recruit Russia to intervene militarily in the war against the rebels. Later, Soleimani coordinated the Russian aerial support and the ground war under Iranian command. This was the turning point in the Syrian civil war, which in effect restored the reins of control of the Syrian “spine” to the Assad regime. He continued to plan how Iran could entwine itself further in Syria, and in this sense too, his death leaves a vacuum.

Under Soleimani’s leadership, Iranian entrenchment in Syria included penetration of the military and security systems; establishment and operation of local and national militias; establishment of deployment bases for the Shiite militias operating under Iranian command; construction of an Iranian “war machine” based on surface to surface missile systems and unmanned aircraft, intended for attacking Israel; establishment of an infrastructure to produce and assemble missiles and improve the precision of their warheads; construction of transport and infrastructure systems to store weapons and transfer them to Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon; and penetration of Syrian national systems – education, culture, religion, housing, media, and economic projects.

The Assad regime is entirely dependent on a host of external elements that help it retain its grip on the reins of power, mainly Russia and Iran. This need joins its dependence on internal elements – security apparatuses, militias (under Iranian influence), and criminal elements. The regime is obliged to navigate between pro-Iranian and pro-Russian approaches; the pro-Iranian arm was led by Soleimani, helped by his considerable personal influence on Assad himself and on the command backbone of the Syrian army. It is too early to predict the actions of his successor – the new commander of the Quds Force, General Esmail Ghaani – or the extent of his influence on Assad, and whether he will be able to maintain the achievements of his predecessor in Syria.

It is also too early to assess the full impact of Soleimani’s killing, which could quickly be followed by several developments. The Iraqi government and parliament could decide to remove American forces from the country, leading to a corresponding withdrawal of American forces from eastern Syria. At present, the Syrian side of the border is controlled by the Kurdish forces (SDF) with US assistance, while the Iraqi side is controlled by the Popular Mobilization Forces run by Iran. If the United States withdraws its forces from Iraq and Syria in the coming months, who will fill the vacuum around the border between these countries? Will Russia be prepared to send forces?

The Israeli Angle

Israel, which chose a policy of non-intervention in the civil war in Syria, in effect enabled Iran, led by Soleimani, to move forward with its plan of entrenchment and multi-dimensional integration in Syria. Once Israel understood the implications of non-intervention, it tried to delay and disrupt the process of Iranian consolidation and obstruct the construction of its “war machine” and military infrastructure in Syria. Israel’s efforts focused on three channels. First – attacks on Iranian strongholds and interceptions of weapons transfers, particularly advanced weapons, to Hezbollah. Second – pressure on Russia to restrain Iran and limit its influence in Syria, and prompt the pullback of Iranian forces under Russian control from the Israeli border. Third – pressure on the United States to postpone the full withdrawal of its forces from eastern Syria and the al-Tanf region, in order to sever the Shiite-Iranian link between Iraq and Syria, and prevent Iran from taking over the Iraq-Syria border area.

It is possible that Soleimani’s departure from the scene has now created a rare opportunity for Israel to formulate an effective policy, by arrangement and even cooperation with the US administration, in order to dismantle the Iranian military strongholds in Syria. Israel, with American backing, can exploit the moment in which the Assad regime lost its strategic ally and patron, but the window of opportunity created by Soleimani’s killing could prove to be limited in time. Therefore, there should be an immediate coordinated campaign by Israel, the United States, and Russia, involving other regional players. This campaign should synchronize a number of efforts:

- a. *Recognize Russian dominance in Syria:* Israel chose to maintain close coordination with Russia in the struggle against Iranian entrenchment in Syria. Its hope was that Russia would squeeze Iranian military capabilities out of Syria and limit Tehran’s ability to shape the country’s future. Russia and Iran compete for influence on the political order in Syria and control of the reconstruction process with its potential economic dividends. So far, Russia has decided to avoid open confrontation with Iran. However, immediate moves by Moscow, including a visit by President Vladimir Putin to Damascus in the week following Soleimani’s death, signaled that Russia is trying to exploit the opportunity, take the lead, and limit Iranian influence in Syria – in fact, to force the Assad regime to decide in favor of the pro-Russian arm over the pro-Iranian prong. Israel must try to recruit the United States, which can wave carrots in front of Russia, such as reduction of Western sanctions against it, in return for securing Israeli interests and pushing Iran out of Syria.

- b. *Drive a wedge between Damascus and Tehran:* Israel has in fact come to terms with Assad's continued rule in Syria, although it has not stated this publicly. The United States also accepts the existing regime for the time being, although it still demands the removal of Assad for crimes against his people, which led to the killing of some half a million Syrians, as well as political reforms in the country. In order to exploit this opportunity to remove Iran from Syria, it is necessary to find whether and at what price Assad is prepared to break free of Iranian bonds: in return for Western and Arab acceptance of his continued rule and the lifting of the boycott on him, will he bring about the withdrawal from Syria of Iranian forces and other proxies operated by the Quds Force? If Assad refuses to cooperate, the Trump administration could level new and even stricter sanctions on Assad, Russia, and Iran. Israel in turn can resort to the threat of direct physical attack on the Assad regime, if it continues to give Iran a free hand to operate in Syria.
- c. *Sever the Shiite access route:* The strategic coordination with the United States is necessary not only to encourage Moscow to take responsibility, but also to cut off the Shiite access from Iran to Lebanon. For that purpose, it is essential to deploy US forces in northeast Syria. It is important to persuade President Trump to deliver a clear message about American commitment on this matter. (About 600 US soldiers are currently stationed near the oil fields in Deir ez-Zor, with approximately another hundred in the Tanf base near the Iraqi border – regions where Soleimani managed weapons supply routes and introduced Iranian fighters into Syria and Lebanon, and sought to take control.) However, Israel must prepare for the possibility that President Trump will decide or be obliged to withdraw American forces from Iraq, and consequently also from eastern Syria. In this scenario, Israel and the US must build capabilities and invest in efforts to prevent Iran imposing itself on the whole region by means of its proxies.
- d. *Moving the center of gravity for neutralizing Iranian regional influence to Syria:* There should be an understanding between Washington and Jerusalem based on an assessment that Syria is the weak link in the Shiite chain, and therefore the most vulnerable. For that reason, all efforts to break the Shiite chain must focus on Syria. The pressure to remove Iranian strongholds from the country fits well with the “maximum pressure” policy of the United States against Iran.
- e. *Cognitive efforts* directed toward the Syrian population (for example, in southern Syria, where there is growing public discontent with the regime and Iran, and thus the area could serve as a test case for cognitive pressure), encouraging them to object to the continuation of Iranian control that is dragging them into conflict with Israel. The prominent message should be that Iran is blocking all initiatives

for political reform in Syria, fearing to lose its hold over the regime of its ally Assad. At the same time, there must be an effort to raise public awareness in Iran, showing details of Iranian investments in entrenchment in Syria and construction of the Shiite route, necessarily at the expense of investment in the Iranian economy and its citizens.

- f. *Jumpstarting the political process in Syria, under Arab-Western leadership:* It is imperative to formulate a plan to reconstruct Syria, involving Western and Sunni Arab countries, including their willingness to allocate resources for this purpose, but making any aid conditional on the withdrawal of Iran from Syria.

In conclusion, using the opportunity created by the killing of Soleimani to take steps to remove Iran from Syria, combined with economic pressure on Iran, could damage Iran's ability to continue its project of entrenchment in Syria. It is possible that the period immediately following Soleimani's departure offers a chance to establish Russian-American coordination in order to promote a political solution in Syria, stop the ongoing killing, remove Iranian influence, enforce government reforms, and draw up a framework for international aid for Syrian reconstruction. Promoting these objectives will serve the security interests of the State of Israel very well.