

Red Line Rumble: Iran Tested the Boundaries of the Trump Administration and Got Burned

The Trump administration's long-standing red line over the killing of U.S. personnel was bound to be tested. For every occasion that it suffered no kinetic response, Iran grew increasingly brazen.

by [Ari Heistein](#) [Eldad Shavit](#) / Jan. 22, 2020

Iran's Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani was often depicted as one of the most powerful figures in Iran. So, when the Trump administration decided to assassinate him via drone strike on January 3, the act was characterized by some as a “defining moment in the Middle East.” But the strategic reality—in which national interests and bureaucratic machinery are more powerful than any one individual—tells a starkly different story. Although the strike on Suleimani may have demonstrated greater willingness by the Trump administration to use military force than was previously anticipated, the three key challenges posed by Iran remain unresolved.

The first challenge from Tehran is its calibrated conventional escalation to counter Washington's “maximum pressure” campaign. The regime conducts this effort in a manner that aims to avoid war with the United States but inflicts enough damage to buoy its economy in two possible ways: 1) raise oil prices, to compensate for the reduced quantity of Iranian energy exports, by fomenting geopolitical uncertainty and targeting international supply, 2) stir up a crisis that could be resolved through mutual concessions including compensation from Europe or the loosening of sanctions. By exacting a price for the “maximum pressure” campaign, Iran also aims to deter further steps against it until 2021, which is when America could have a new president.

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