

On 3 January 2020, [reports](#) about the US missile attack outside Baghdad international airport to have killed Iranian the Quds Force Commander, Qassim Suleimani reverberated like thunder across the region. In the same strike, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy leader of Popular Mobilization Committee (PMU) which oversees Iraq's myriad armed force, was also killed. He was also the leader of the most influential militia, Kata'ib Hezbollah formed in 2003. The organisation became known for resistance to the US occupation in post-war Iraq. His assassination will lead to a huge escalation in Iraq's worsening political crisis.

For some, Iraq was caught in the chaos. Political instability, lack of governance and inflation had made the patience of the Iraqis run thin. They were on the roads [since](#) 1 October 2019, demanding political and electoral reforms, action against corruption, mismanagement, government ineffectiveness, and foreign influence. The government responded to protests and in [retaliation](#) killed 319 civilian and at least 15,000 were injured. The growing unrest in the country forced Prime Minister Abdel Abdul-Mahdi to resign. But, he continues to be a [caretaker](#). The Iraqi parliament is unable to agree on a mutual replacement. If this situation continues, a fresh election would seem to be inevitable. However, any election held under the current electoral law or political norms will probably be viewed as illegitimate by the protestors.

With the failure of politics, Iraq also experienced an escalation of violence in parts of its territory. The [US](#) aligned with [Israel](#) and launched sporadic rocket attacks on Iran-influenced Iraqi military bases and weapon caches. The Fattah Alliance, which is the second-largest bloc in the Iraqi politics and is the political arm of the PMU, [called](#) for the removal of the US personnel from the country subsequently. They are holding Washington responsible for what it calls "a declaration of war on Iraq and its people." Iran emerged as a major power broker in Iraq after the American invasion in 2003, supporting Shiite Islamist parties and militias that have dominated the country ever since.



United States withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action 18 May 2018

However, the roots of this on-going crisis date back to 8 May 2019, when President Donald Trump [scrapped](#) the international nuclear agreement - Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and re-imposed economic sanctions of Iran. The US administration has implemented a series of restrictions and [sanctions](#) on Iranian officials and firms, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. They have also branded Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation. In the subsequent evolving security situation, Trump administration [deployed](#) additional 14,000 troops and unabated military assets in the region on the pretext of protecting commercial shipping and its troops from Iranian proxies.

Several confrontations in and around the Persian Gulf have led to potential US-Iran war rhetoric. While it would be impossible to recap all the events chronologically, one of the recent [events](#) which may have triggered the killing of Suleimani and Muhandis took place on 27 December 2019: A rocket hit an Iraqi military base in Kirkuk, killing one US contractor while injuring some of its personnel. The White House blamed Kata'ib Hezbollah for the attack and [retaliated](#) by striking five of its location in Iraq-Syria, killing at least 24 fighters. Muhandis vowed to respond.

In an armed conflict threatening an enemy makes an eventual attack less effective, rather

provokes them to strike harder. Kata'ib Hezbollah stormed the Washington embassy in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone but was prevented by the security officials. The US accused the Iraqi government's ineffectiveness to protect its personnel's, and intensifying its air-raids.

For Iraq, it is inconceivable to not respond to these strikes that killed a high-ranking Iraqi and Iranian official whose security was the responsibility of the state. Baghdad [called](#) the strike a clear "violation of its sovereignty." The populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr announced the immediate closure of the embassies, bases, criminalization of any communication with the US government and boycott of American products. He [criticized](#) the Council of Representatives for delaying a non-binding resolution to cancel the request for military aid from the government of Iraq to the US anti-ISIS coalition. He also [called](#) for a new "resistance group" and is also willing to work with [PMU](#) in order to eradicate the US presence in the country.

It is too early to know what the consequences of these developments would be. One thing is clear that the US has played a gamble. If the Iraqi government decides to boycott America, it will require Iranian political and financial support. If one or both sides try to force it to choose, as they surely will, then violent on an unpredictable scale is a foregone conclusion. There are videos showing some Sunni Iraqi and young demonstrators rejoicing on the streets the death of Suleimani and Muhandis. However, they seem very less. There are an increase in anti-American and anti-Israel slogans in West Asia, like never before. Suleimani and Muhandis' killings have united various resistance groups across the region. They are keen to undertake retaliatory attacks against the interest of the US and its allies inside and outside the region.

Although Iran's strongest ally- Hezbollah is having a difficult time tackling their domestic turmoil, other proxy groups like Hamas and Houthis are likely to emerge as a resilient force. Here, Iraqi PMU will become the centre point of the latest unfolding US-Iran consternation. Pro-Iranian PMU is an autonomous force and controls large parts of Iraq and neighbouring Syria, where they are allied with President Bashar al-Assad and the Lebanese Hezbollah. It is likely that they will co-ordinate overtly and covertly with its allies to avenge the assassination of their top leaders.



US President Donald Trump

It also needs to be stressed that whatever comes next, it is uncertain and difficult for President Trump. Trump, who claims to be anti-war, enunciates Iraq war as vindictive, by ordering the killing of Suleimani and Muhandis has provoked a much worse cataclysmic struggle for Baghdad. He is playing with fire and is seriously underestimating Iraq's competency with Iran's influence. Guerrilla warfare has been difficult to win, historically. The US could not defeat Vietnam for years and finally had to accept defeat. In Afghanistan, it is facing a similar fate. Worse, instead of defusing the crisis, Trump also went onboard [threatening](#) Iraq of heavy sanctions if they try to expel its troops in retaliation its strikes in Bagdad.

At this moment, Trump administration is claiming victory for the American military might in Baghdad. But, it is noteworthy that Suleimani and Muhandis were not hiding like Osama Bin Laden or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. They were top-most influential military leaders in the region, who fought to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq-Syria while becoming the forerunners of anti-US movement in the region. By striking them down, the US has certainly pushed the region into the vicious cycle of violence and disharmony.

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