



## The domestic spillover in Iran following the Qasem Soleimani affair

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*During the past few weeks, it seems that the killing of General Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), on January 3, 2020, should have sent Middle Eastern relations and the fragile regional equilibrium into a spiral. Nonetheless, the repercussions of the US administration's decision have not yet been observed on a larger international scale, but rather on the domestic one.*

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Despite inflammatory verbal exchanges, belligerent rhetoric and the retaliation missile strikes on two American military bases in Iraq with no reported casualties on January 7, the Islamic Republic of Iran treads carefully and prioritizes de-escalation. Yet, the effects of the General's assassination have had great impact domestically and have added to the larger discontent of the Iranian people against the regime.

Although the subsequent downing of the Ukrainian airliner, on January 8, killing 176 passengers on board was swiftly reported as an operational error by the Iranian authorities, the latter's mishandling gave additional fuel to the fire for the Iranian protestors who have been taking the streets especially during 2019, calling for the overhaul of the current government in place led by President Hassan Rouhani.

While past demands during 2018-2019 focused mainly on economic, cultural and political issues – such as income, working conditions, water and food availability, or political corruption – the January events managed to unite the scattered, all over Iran, protestors against the soft government reaction and its mismanagement of the Ukrainian airliner situation – which put into question the IRGC's strong grip and control – calling for a new government more in tune with the Iranian people's interests. In order to deal with past demonstrations and strikes, and with a priority on regime stability, the Iranian administration opted for strengthening its security forces and its response, effectively doubling down on arrests, expanding its intelligence networks domestically, temporarily cutting off internet access and cracking down on social media and communication apps, which were viewed as the main source of the unrest, with which the protestors communicated, shared their grievances and organized.<sup>1</sup>

Although the 2019 protests failed to pose a real threat to the current regime, it certainly seemed that the latter emphasized its reaction into minimizing and controlling their aftereffect in Iran rather than moving forward and taking into account the protestors' demands. Instead, cracking down on protestors and their "ringleaders" was deemed as the most urgent policy to follow. What is more, the source of the grievances of the past protests remained, and merely needed an important enough event in order to be triggered anew, especially during the years following the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution of 1979.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the IRGC's hold and influence over domestic politics, as a safe keeper of the Islamic Republic and its values, is at times highlighted during strenuous times by the demonstrators and the political opposition. As a result, and in order to reiterate its long-lasting and permanent role in Iranian affairs domestically and abroad, the IRGC feels the need to stress the presence of foreign agents and their machinations which aim to disrupt the Islamic Republic.<sup>3</sup> The objective is threefold: firstly, to strengthen its grip on the Iranian people and minimize unrest; secondly, to unite all parties against a common enemy; and, thirdly, to emphasize the Islamic Republic's survival above all else. Although this particular playbook has been tried and tested, and has worked wonders in the past, one should note that the living conditions of the Iranian people have improved compared to the late 20th century, and especially in regard to their means of communication and information access through the use of satellite dishes (which are illegal in Iran), rendering the practice of information control ineffective.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and his martyrdom provided the IRGC with the perfect opportunity to unite the Iranian people and gain solidarity against the US. And for a brief few day, this solidarity was widely perceived via protests directed at the US. Nevertheless, this national unity was short-lived due to the Ukrainian airliner incident and its handling by Iranian authorities which caused a nationwide uproar within Iran and reignited the spark for the demonstrators to take to the streets once more, demanding accountability and change.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the protestors were met by the regime's swift and harsh response which was widely disseminated via social media.<sup>6</sup>

It is of note that the growing discontent regarding the handling of the January events effectively forced Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to deliver his first sermon in eight years, in order to appease the protestors and to try to refocus the narrative on the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani and the US. The fact that Khamenei had to come out of sermon "retirement" underlined the

discomfort of the IRGC, as well as the repercussions of the mishandling of the airline affair in the eyes of the public.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most prominent protests, regarding the Ukrainian airline fiasco, was the boycott by a large number of artists of the Fajr International Film Festival – held every year on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution – which resulted in the cancellation of its opening ceremony.<sup>8</sup> The domestic turmoil in Iran could not have come at a worse for the current administration, as parliamentary elections are right around the corner, and while political hardliners – in sync with the ICRG and at odds with reformists and the prospects of a more moderate government – make their bid for electoral gain.<sup>9</sup>

At this particular juncture, it is important to mention that in the past years the ICRG has undergone a purge of reformist elements in its midst, ensuring a unified front after the rise of Donald Trump to the American Presidency. However, in the aftermath of Qasem Soleimani's assassination and the absence of a replacement with comparable clout, the void left by Soleimani cannot be easily filled. The need for a leading personality via the IRGC in the wake of Khamenei's eventual passing – which would ensure the Supreme Leader's succession and the continuation of the Islamic Republic and its values – seems imperative, as Soleimani's influence was being cultivated for this precise purpose during at least the past decade.<sup>10</sup>

In a not-very-surprising turn of events given the number and the magnitude of the protests, a major part of the population abstained from the voting process. The lackluster voter turnout, coupled with the disqualifying practice of the Guardian Council of Iran regarding eligible candidates in the 2020 elections, paved the way for a more streamlined policy direction between the IRGC and the government in power, effectively undermining current President Hassan Rouhani, and spearheading the will for a harder stance against the US. The ramifications of this development could certainly send a clear message to the US and the West that Iran will aim to reclaim its status as a regional power that is not merely reactionary. As Patrick Cockburn stated, "Iran has drawn the greater profit from the crisis so far, since Soleimani's death goes some way to re-energising the nationalist and religious credentials of the regime".<sup>11</sup> However, it should be highlighted that the overwhelming of the parliamentary assembly in favor of the more rigid policies of the IRGC could be the straw that breaks the camel's back and could very well trigger even larger demonstrations nationwide for regime change or institutional reform.<sup>12</sup>

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