

Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism
On “Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and implications for US interests and regional stability”

Escalation with Iran: Outcomes and implications for US interests and regional stability

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Wilson, good morning. It's always an honor to testify before this Committee, and the topic before us is an important one.

The title of this hearing, I believe, misplaces what should be the appropriate focus on the Islamic Republic of Iran. Without overstating the case, I believe this is not a moment of "Escalation with Iran;" more likely, we are in for a short period of de-escalation in terms of direct conflict, and some escalation in the use of Iran's proxies against US and allied targets. But that in some ways is a return to status quo ante in Tehran's long shadow war against the Great Satan. And over-emphasizing that proxy war shifts focus from what is different about this moment.

Iran is in a period of flux and stress unlike many we have seen in recent years. Internally, next door in Iraq and in Lebanon, home to Iran's most important proxy Hezbollah, the regime is under enormous pressure. In conjunction with Qassem Soleimani's death and the likely transition ahead after the death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, those pressures create an opportunity for the United States. The key questions are what we do with that opportunity, what the actual policy of the United States is towards the Islamic Republic, and how the "maximum pressure" campaign will impact our aims.

On the direct question of the impact of the Soleimani strike, let's start with Iran itself and the Quds Force that the late General Soleimani led for at least the last 22 years. Those who have suggested that the IRGC and Quds Force will revert to business as usual after the passing of their leader are confused about the role Soleimani played. He was not simply the leader of Iran's expeditionary forces and coordinator of its proxies, he was a man of strategic intelligence and cunning, with great charisma that made his leadership all the more effective. His successor, Esmail Qaani is, to paraphrase an American politician, no Qassem Soleimani. He certainly lacks the star power, and likely also lacks the close relationship of trust with the Supreme Leader that Soleimani enjoyed.

What does that mean? This will be guesswork for us, but Qaani's power to control Iran's major proxies may portend increased independent action on their part. We have already seen a threat against US officials and a call for personal jihad by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. The *Hashd e Shabi* (or Popular Mobilization Units) in Iraq have also escalated attacks on US targets in Iraq. How the United States will respond is an unknown at this time.

This is all also happening at a moment of uncertainty in Iran itself, which recently suffered the worst demonstrations it has experienced since the Revolution.

Protests in Iran reemerged on a large scale in November with an unexpected gasoline price rise, and metastasized from there. Hundreds if not thousands have died at the hands of security forces, and it took weeks to crush the protests. Note that similar protests in 2009 reportedly left less than 100 dead. Two weeks in November and December left **a ten-fold toll**, which at the very least indicates some sense of fear inside the regime establishment about its hold on the public. And with elections ahead and Ayatollah Khamenei's succession due sooner rather than later, no wonder those deeply invested in the system of the Islamic Republic are worried.

Things have been similarly unstable in neighboring Iraq, where popular demonstrations that forced the resignation of Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi have been ongoing since the beginning of October. It is important to understand just how much of a slap in Iran's face these demonstrations are. Dominated by Iraqi Shi'ites, and focused on governance failures, corruption and Iranian influence, neither efforts by regular Iraqi police nor the *Hashd* were capable of stifling popular anger. The Iranian consulate in Najaf was attacked and signs denouncing Iran figured among the demonstrators. The fact that Iran instructed its proxies to suppress protests, and the

death of more than 500 people have only inflamed the problem.

Notwithstanding efforts by Iran and its proxies to harness popular anger about the Soleimani killing, last week demonstrators returned to the streets demanding a technocratic government and an end to the sectarian spoils system.

Ironically, demonstrations that began around the same time in Lebanon have focused on exactly the same sectarian/governance problems as **Iraqis'**. Those also resulted in the collapse of the government, with Prime Minister Saad Hariri stepping down. A new Hezbollah-only government has since been appointed, with the terrorist group's chosen candidate Hassan Diab at its helm. The transition from former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, a nominally independent and anti-Iran leader, rips the mask of Lebanese leadership once and for all. Now there cannot be even a pretence that Lebanon remains an independent state. It is an Iranian vassal.

During those demonstrations, Iran followed the same playbook in Lebanon as in Iraq, ordering its proxies into the streets to crush demonstrations, with similar results. And protestors have now returned to demand an end to the sectarian system that has characterized the Lebanese government for eight decades.

Circling back to Tehran and looking at its major satellites in Iraq and Lebanon, it's fair to say Ayatollah Khamenei has had a bad month. Remember, he celebrated the New Year thinking he had quelled protests at home, and that the United States was weak and disengaged. 2019 saw the disastrous Trump decision to quit northeastern Syria and betray our Kurdish allies, as well as the administration's low-key responses to the downing of an American drone, attacks on Gulf shipping and the direct attack on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais facilities.

While the US did in fact retaliate in all instances with substantial cyber strikes on Iran according to my understanding, the failure to respond overtly only served to reinforce the signal that the Syria withdrawal had sent: The United States is turning its back on the Middle East and its allies and partners there. But the Soleimani strike and the US dismissal of efforts to toss US forces out of Iraq put paid to the notion that we were ceding the region to Iran. The question that this hearing rightly raises, however, is: What next?

That is a question not only on the minds of Washington observers and policymakers. From Jerusalem to Riyadh there is uncertainty about what the US strategic posture actually is. Are we committed to staying in Iraq? To Saudi Arabia's defense? To staying in Syria? To competing with the Russians? To keeping the plus up of troops in the Gulf, or not? Is the "maximum pressure" campaign about a new JCPOA or about regime collapse?

The right course is to amp up pressure on Iran politically, militarily and diplomatically. And for the Congress, if I may, to embrace consistency on the question of Iran policy; it is incoherent to denounce the Soleimani killing and the abandonment of the Kurds in much the same breath. Either we want a robust posture in the region that deters our enemies and helps our friends, or we don't.

The right course is to begin working more seriously with Iranian dissidents and opponents of the regime with a view to a better future. To further isolate Iran's supporters within Lebanon and Iraq and empower protesters against Iranian domination. We know the regime is under pressure. We know they will seek to regain their footing, but that economic resources are stretched. We know the Iraqi people and the Lebanese people do not actually wish to be ruled from Tehran. What we do not know is what US policy actually will be going forward.

This uncertainty will be a boon to Iran as it regains its footing after the Soleimani strike and the horrifying downing of Ukraine International Airlines flight 752. Iran's message to its neighbors

has been that the United States is an unreliable partner, and that Donald Trump cannot be counted on to come to any nation's defense. Only a direct strike on Americans, they emphasize, will cause him to respond with force. Meanwhile, Iran's friends in Washington have sought to cement an alliance of left-wing non-interventionists and libertarian Republicans to pressure the administration to back further away from the region.

A reading of the political tea leaves and a sense of Iran's position and advantages suggests that Tehran will seek to exploit its proxies in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere to cause trouble for America and its allies and partners. That it will do its best to orchestrate an aggressive push to oust US troops from the region, as Hezbollah leader Nasrallah has suggested. That it will continue to test limits gingerly, seeking to once again understand the President's red lines. And that it will press the patience of our European friends as it pushes outside the bounds of the JCPOA.

Finally, we should expect that General Qaani, the new Quds Force leader, will seek to make his mark. Remember, he had a hand in the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires in 1994, and has been the coordinator of non-Arab Shi'ite forces fighting on the ground in Syria. Ultimately, however, he, like the Supreme Leader and many here in Washington, is waiting for November 2020 to decide on a definitive future course.

Thank you.