



# The Real Start Of “Maximum Pressure” Against Iran

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The U.S. airstrike that killed Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad overnight is a major milestone in the “war on terror,” at least on a par with the Obama administration’s 2011 killing of al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden or the Trump administration’s elimination of the Islamic State’s self-declared *emir*, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, this past October.

Until his death, Soleimani had been in charge of the Qods Force, the paramilitary arm of Iran’s feared clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In that capacity, he had served as a true terror master, operating as the Iranian regime’s principal liaison with a bevy of radical groups throughout the region, from Hezbollah in Lebanon to Yemen’s Houthi rebels to the extensive cadre of Shi’a fighters that Iran has deployed in Syria over the past half-decade.

The pervasiveness of Soleimani’s power was put on display a dozen years ago, when he sent a letter to the then-commander of U.S. forces in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, putting him on notice that he, Soleimani, was in control of “Iran’s policy for Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan.” In the intervening years, Soleimani’s stature as a truly global terrorist leader had only risen. By removing him from the board, the Trump administration has struck a major blow to the integrity of the extensive network of affiliated militants and proxies that Iran has erected throughout the Middle East and beyond.

But more significant still is what Soleimani’s killing tells us about the changing nature of American policy toward Iran.

Since withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal in May of 2018, the Trump administration has waged a widening campaign of economic sanctions aimed at fundamentally altering Iranian regime behavior. Over the past year-and-a-half, that effort – dubbed “maximum pressure” – has managed to successfully impose heavy economic costs on the Islamic Republic. Yet throughout that time, little progress had been made by the United States and its allies in actually diminishing Iran’s regional presence or curtailing its destabilizing influence in the Middle East.

That *laissez-faire* attitude was, at least in part, a consequence of Obama-era policy toward Iran, which defined down the broad challenge to American interests posed by the Islamic Republic to just the regime’s persistent nuclear ambitions, and sought to temporarily delay those through a deal that conferred enormous economic and strategic dividends to Tehran. The lingering effects of this inertia extended into the Trump era, with the White House repeatedly forgoing opportunities to hit back at Iran for its downing of an American drone (June 2019), its rocket strikes against Saudi oil facilities (September 2019), and assorted other provocations.

No longer. The targeting of Soleimani – which followed on the heels of U.S. military strikes on multiple facilities in Iraq operated by Kataib Hezbollah, a key Iranian regional proxy – has ushered in a qualitatively new phase in the Trump administration’s confrontation with Iran.

Chances are, it will be one punctuated by heightened hostilities. After all, Iran can hardly let the killing of its top military commander pass without some sort of response. Doing so would cause a severe – perhaps fatal – blow to the credibility of the regime and its core revolutionary *bona fides*.

Yet, in assessing their options, officials in Tehran are also keenly aware that the United States has the military capabilities to exact catastrophic consequences on their regime in the event of an all-out confrontation. Through its targeting of Soleimani, the Trump administration has now demonstrated something that had heretofore been missing: that the United States also possesses the political will to do so. That, in a nutshell, is what real maximum pressure should look like.

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