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The US and Iran's Perpetual Almost-War is Unsustainable – and Will End Badly



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Today Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei gave his first Friday sermon in Tehran for eight years to an audience of thousands, as he tried to calm down the furious public reaction to the Revolutionary Guards mistakenly shooting down a Ukrainian plane carrying 176 passengers, then proceeding to lie about their responsibility for three days. Khamenei spoke of the “cowardly” killing of General Qassem Soleimani by the US, of President Trump using the destruction of the plane to “push a poison dagger” into the backs of the Iranian people. Rhetorical flourishes like this are not going to do him a lot of

good with critics who see the shootdown as epitomising the incompetence, duplicity and division of his government.

But the nature of the crisis differs markedly from the way it is being portrayed abroad. For more has gone wrong than a series of blunders. Obscured amid the plaudits and denunciations directed at Soleimani and Khamenei is the fact that both men's policies in the Middle East had become counterproductive.

Over the last four years, Iran has had great success in spreading its influence in countries with large Shia populations. But it has failed to consolidate the status quo it played such a large role in creating. "The Iranians are good at gathering cards, but not at playing them," is an old saying in the region.

Despite Iranian successes in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, the power structure in all three countries is rickety and prone to crises. Over the last four months, Iraq, Lebanon and Iran have been rocked by mass protest, while Syria is in the final throes of civil war.

Much depends on how the Iranian leadership responds in the next few months to the assassination of Soleimani, formerly their high-profile viceroy overseeing the Iranian zone of influence. They could continue to head towards a full scale US-Iran conflict or, just possibly, veer towards some sort of compromise deal.

Neither side wants a war, as demonstrated by America's belated revelation that 11 of its soldiers were injured by the Iranian ballistic missile strike on two of its bases in Iraq on 8 January. At the time, Trump had reassured the world that there were no American casualties, and therefore no need for him to retaliate. Meanwhile, Iranian paramilitaries in Iraq have been instructed not to attack US facilities in order to de-escalate the crisis.

In the longer term, if Iran continues with the policies pursued by Soleimani and Khamenei, it will feel compelled to resume low-intensity warfare to provide a counterbalance to US sanctions. Before this happens, Iran will have to decide if it is going to use the elimination of Soleimani to devise a new strategies to replace those that have failed.

Nobody watches the changing political winds in Tehran as closely as Iraqis, who know that their country is where the US-Iran struggle is being fought out.

"Iran is in a very critical position," says a prominent Iraqi Shia politician in Baghdad quoted in the online magazine Middle East Eye. "The policy that Khamenei previously pursued in managing the Iraq file and the region is no longer successful. The Iranian

Revolutionary Guard had contributed to creating problems in Iraq that turned into a burden for Iran and became an obstacle in the way of its negotiations with the United States.”

Discussions now taking place in Iran are about whether the Revolutionary Guards should retain the Iraq file, or be handed over to some other body, such as intelligence or the foreign ministry. Soleimani’s former deputy and nominated successor as head of the Quds Force, Esmael Ghaani, has been handling Afghanistan, and is less familiar with the Middle East.

Quite aside from US pressure for disengagement, it is very much in Iran’s interests in Iraq to take a less hands-on role, and to look to the Iraqi government and Shia political parties to drive out the US. In Syria, where Iran had orchestrated support for President Bashar al-Assad after 2011, an Iranian pullback is feasible, because Assad has largely won the war to stay in power, and since 2015, the leading role in supporting him has been taken over by Russia.

Given these developments, it should be easier than it looks for Tehran and Washington to reach agreement on reducing Iran’s regional activism. The problem is that in Middle Eastern politics, everybody tends to overplay their hand at one time or another, usually when they come to overconfidently believe that they can put their opponent permanently out of business. The US has repeatedly fallen into this trap in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria – and it is all too likely to do the same in its confrontation with Iran which, whatever the two sides’ intentions, will remain a dangerous stalemate, always at risk of tipping into outright war.

The US maximalist demands on Iran’s nuclear facilities, ballistic missiles and regional influence effectively mean that it wants regime change or capitulation. Both outcomes are possible; neither is likely. The Iranian leadership tends to come together when threatened, and is prepared to use any degree of force to stay in power. Western capitals have been looking expectantly for an end to the clerical regime in Tehran since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 – but to no avail.

President Trump withdrew from the Iranian nuclear deal in May 2018 without a coherent explanation of what was wrong with it, or what would be put in its place. Since then, both Iran and the US have carried out what could be deemed acts of war, culminating in the last few months in the Iranians attacking Saudi oil facilities, and the US assassinating

Soleimani. On each occasion, both sides avoided full-scale retaliation, but this restraint rests on a knife-edge, and cannot last forever. The basis for a deal exists, but that does not mean one will materialise.

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