

Assessment: The death of the head of the Quds Force as a result of a US strike is likely to have significant repercussions in the Middle East, including impacts to merchant vessels operating in and around the Strait of Hormuz.

Tensions in the Middle East have escalated after a US strike killed the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force Qassem Soleimani. According to Iranian media sources Soleimani had arrived from Lebanon and was greeted by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis the Deputy Commander of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as well as Muhamed Reza al-Jaberi who was a senior figure in Iraq's Iran-backed militias; both were also killed during the strike.

A statement released from the Pentagon said "At the direction of the President, the U.S. military has taken decisive defensive action to protect U.S. personnel abroad by killing Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps- Quds Force, a U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organisation. General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region. General Soleimani and his Quds Force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more. He had orchestrated attacks



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on coalition bases in Iraq over the last several months - including the attack on December 27th - culminating in the death and wounding of additional American and Iraqi personnel.”

Western nationals have been urged to be vigilant in the Middle East region. US Embassies in Bahrain, Kuwait and Pakistan have issued security alerts, with the Embassy in Pakistan restricting travel by US government employees and the Embassy in Kuwait increasing its security posture. A security alert issued by the US Embassy Baghdad urges US citizens to depart Iraq immediately and not approach the US embassy in Iraq due to Iranian-backed militia attacks. French citizens have been warned to stay away from gatherings in Iran and to remain discreet, and the UK military has increased security and alert levels of all military bases in the Middle East.

The killing the Head of Iran’s elite Quds Force has resulted in widespread outrage in Iran, causing increased tensions throughout the whole of the Middle East. Iranian media quickly branded Soleimani’s death as martyrdom, and Iran’s Supreme Leader for the first time acted as head of a national security meeting and the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif warned that the attack was a dangerous escalation and called the strike a “US act of international terrorism”.

In 2019 multinational tankers were targeted by the Iranians in response to increasing tensions with the US as a result of US sanctions. Tehran was accused of firing upon tankers in the Gulf of Oman near the Strait of Hormuz, attacking drones and firing missiles at Saudi oil facilities in response to US sanctions pressure. With the death of Soleimani it is almost certain that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) and Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) presence in the south Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz Gulf of Oman will increase along with the probable threat to US flagged tankers, tankers containing US crew and vessels associated with American allies.

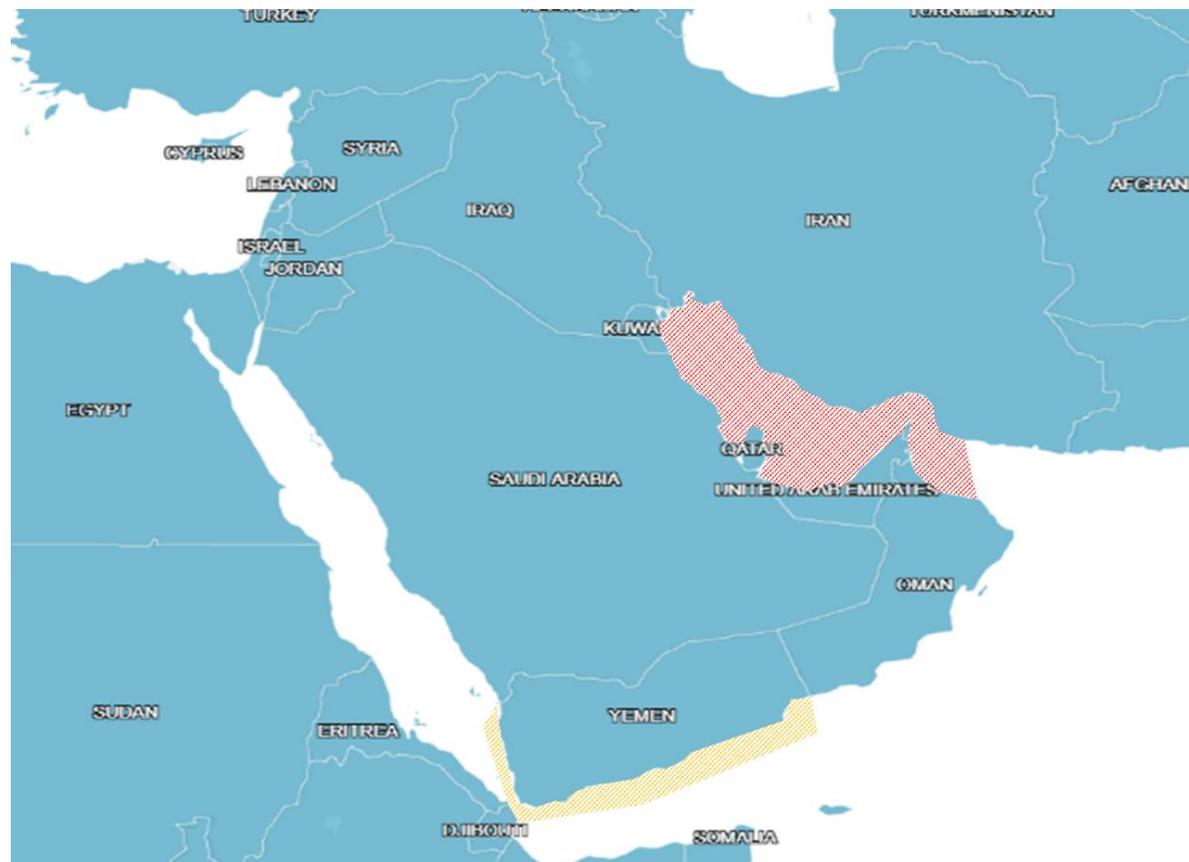
With Iran’s signature asymmetrical warfare tactics, it is likely retaliations will not only directly originate from Iran but also from pro-Iranian groups. Military proxies are said to be active in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Gaza and Bahrain and due care should be taken within these areas. Proclamations condemning the action

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include the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon issuing calls to “resistance fighters” around the world to punish those responsible, as well as Iraqi militia commander Qais al-Khazali ordering fighters to be on high alert for an upcoming battle. Statements such as these are likely to increase security risks to maritime vessels in other countries coastal regions.

There is potential for unrest manifesting in areas such as the Iraq / Kuwait coastal area and the Bab al-Mandab Strait which has previously been threatened to be blocked by Yemen’s armed Houthi movement. Vessels are advised to remain vigilant in strategic chokepoint areas, the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Aden, Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea.

IRGCN and IRIN have the capabilities to use naval and air tactics, as well as use of proxies to attack vessels anywhere in the Persian Gulf and has long threatened to “close the Gulf” at the Strait of Hormuz. However, its military exercises have mainly involved dispersal of the IRIN and IRGCN broadly in the Gulf and close surroundings. The closure of the Strait of Hormuz is unlikely to occur as this would cause frictions with China who are the region’s biggest client and would hinder the Iran supply line to Syria. It should also be noted that low-level attacks to tankers are at an increased possibility, these do not necessarily provoke major US reaction but through disruption raise the price of oil through a war of attrition. These methods of hybrid attacks could be carried out by individual ships and dhows operated instead by proxies that are unrelated to Iranian armed forces.



Legend

-  **Probable Increased Threat to US Flagged Tankers and US Allied Vessels**
-  **Possible Increased Threat from Pro-Iran Groups**

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Geollect Comment: The death of the head of the Quds Force as a result of a US strike is likely to have significant repercussions in the Middle East and the potential for further escalation within the area is significant. This includes impacts to merchant vessels operating in and around the Strait of Hormuz. Targeted attacks on the US (and other western interests) in the Middle East are also likely. Vessels are urged to remain vigilant especially within the Persian Gulf and Straits of Hormuz. Masters, Ship Security Officers and Company Security Officers are urged to carry out detailed Risk Assessments for each voyage to the region and remain up to date with the local situation through media and news outlets.

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