US Drone Strike Baghdad: Analysis & Recommendations
Post-Incident Report
7 January 2020
Executive Summary

- In the early hours of 3 January 2020, a US drone strike killed the commander of Iran’s Quds Force Unit, Qassem Suleimani, along with the deputy head of the Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, Public Relations Chief for the PMU, Mohammed Ridha Jabri, and several members of their entourage.

- The attack occurred near Baghdad International Airport (BIAP), forcing the temporary closure of airspace in the capital. Civil aviation traffic resumed shortly after the incident and at present, all primary airports remain operational.

- The targeted strike came after a series of incidents and suspected attacks by Iranian-backed PMU groups against US assets in Iraq, including a rocket attack against the K1 military base in Kirkuk province on 27 December. This resulted in the death of a US civilian contractor and injury of four US service members.

- The US publicly claimed responsibility for the drone strike, following which Iran and its proxies threatened retaliatory attacks. Amid heightened tensions, it is expected that the US Embassy, US bases and US commercial entities could be targeted by Iranian supporters, PMUs and other proxies.

- The US Embassy in Iraq has issued a security alert directing all US citizens to depart Iraq with immediate effect, while all diplomatic and consular services have been suspended. A number of commercial organisations have also begun to withdraw their US staff from the country. Other foreign governments have also updated their travel advisories for Iraq, including the UK, Canada and Australia. While the latter two advise against all travel to the country, the UK advises against all travel with the exception of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where all but essential travel is advised against.

The Incident

Overnight on 2-3 January 2020, the US conducted a targeted drone strike against a convoy comprised of two vehicles travelling along an access road from BIAP. Several missiles reportedly struck the vehicles, killing the commander of Iran’s Quds Force, Major General Qassem Suleimani, along with the deputy head of the PMU and founder of Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH), Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, and the Public Relations Chief for the PMU, Mohammed Ridha Jabri. Open sources have reported that Suleimani had arrived in Baghdad and was collected in the two vehicles that were struck as they left the airport. Though local media outlets initially claimed that US Apache helicopters were involved in the attack, credible sources have indicated that this is incorrect, and that the missiles were fired from an MQ-9 Reaper drone. Several other PMU commanders were reportedly killed during the strike, with ten fatalities.
registered in total. While commercial aviation traffic was temporarily suspended over Baghdad following the incident, operations are currently largely running as per usual, and all primary airports remain functional. Some airlines have however ceased operations for the time being. Bahrain’s Gulf Air, for instance, announced on 3 January that it was suspending its flights to both Baghdad and Najaf until further notice, while Royal Jordanian Airlines has suspended all flights to BIAP.

US President Donald Trump tweeted pictures of the American flag at 0600hrs local time on 3 January, shortly before the US Department of Defense issued a statement claiming responsibility for the attack. The statement confirmed that Suleimani was the target of the strike, and that it was conducted to safeguard US interests and personnel abroad. Reports were received early on 4 January that a subsequent airstrike targeted a PMU medical convoy north of Baghdad, though these reports were discredited by the US-led Coalition, Iraqi military and PMU.

**Analysis & Assessment**

Qassem Suleimani was the head of the Iranian Quds Force, a special operations branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and a US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO). Suleimani, along with Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, were instrumental in the formation and growth of militias in Iraq, which have been responsible for the killing of hundreds of US soldiers in the country between 2003 and 2011. Al-Muhandis was also the founder of Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH), an Iranian-backed militia group and FTO suspected of being behind a string of recent attacks against US assets in Iraq. In their statement, the US Department of Defense claimed the 3 January drone strike specifically targeted Suleimani due to his involvement in the planning of future attacks against US diplomatic and military facilities in Iraq, as well as his influence and direction of PMUs in the staging of past attacks against US service members. The strike was also aimed at deterring Iran from making further hostile actions against US assets, either directly or via its proxies. Though the US had not previously taken any direct action against Suleimani, his movements were reportedly being tracked by the US military for several years.

The 3 January drone strike also came amidst a background of deteriorating relations between Washington and Tehran. With US economic sanctions on Iran, the latter has sought to disrupt global markets via its activity against energy and maritime targets in and around the Persian Gulf, and to retaliate against the US by staging attacks against its embassy and military bases in Iraq via its proxies. This has included an increasing frequency of rocket attacks, with the US Embassy in Baghdad targeted at least ten times since the end of October 2019. Over early December, the US also accused Iran of being behind Indirect Fire (IDF) attacks against Balad Airbase in Salah ad-Din (5 December) and Al Asad Airbase in Anbar (3 December). Further to this, the military complex at BIAP was
targeted by rocket fire on two separate occasions (9 and 11 December); while an attempted explosive attack was registered against Camp Taji in the north of Baghdad province, on 3 December. All targeted areas are known to house US personnel, prompting US Central Command to issue a statement to the effect that all recent attacks were being investigated. Following this, several PMU groups warned the US against targeting militia sites, with PMU leaders publicly escalating anti-western rhetoric – prompting anti-US protests by Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) members in Baghdad and Khalis in Diyala.

Attacks by suspected PMUs and the US since December 2019.

Tensions continued to culminate toward the end of the month, when suspected KH militants staged a rocket attack against the K1 military base in Kirkuk province, on 27 December. A US civilian contractor was killed during the attack, while four US service members and two members of the Iraqi security forces were wounded. On 29 December, the US announced that it had conducted retaliatory ‘defensive strikes’ against KH in western Iraq and Syria. The airstrikes reportedly targeted weapons storage facilities as well as the command and control locations belonging to the PMU group, killing 25 militiamen and wounding a further 55. Both the Iraqi and Iranian governments heavily condemned the airstrikes, calling them a breach of Iraq’s sovereignty. Public outrage against the incident was also voiced on 30 December, with protests against the airstrikes recorded in Diwaniyah, Basra, and Samawah. Later, hundreds of suspected PMU protestors attempted to storm the US Embassy in Baghdad over 31 December and 1 January in response to the airstrikes. Dozens of protestors were wounded while attempting to breach the complex, though were repelled by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and US security personnel, who deployed tear gas and reinforced entry positions. US Embassy staff and the US Ambassador were placed on lockdown, while the US Embassy also issued a warning to US citizens to avoid the area around the embassy. On the evening of 1 January, the Joint Operations Command announced the complete withdrawal of PMU protestors from the gates of the embassy. However, consular services remain suspended at the time of writing. The US accused KH militants of running the protests and, in their statement following the killing of Qassem Suleimani, claimed that he had ‘approved’ the attacks against the Embassy, which were reportedly planned by KH founder Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis.
Impact for Iraqi, Regional and Global Security Environment

The US drone strike that resulted in the death of Quds Force Commander Qassem Suleimani and other PMU officials is deemed a significant escalation from the ongoing sanctions and military buildup in the Gulf. The incident was condemned by the Iraqi government, while Iran has threatened heavy-handed retaliation. A provincial commander of the IRGC, on the evening of 3 January, also proclaimed that Iran will punish Americans wherever they are within ‘reach’, with 35 US regional targets having been identified as potential points of interest. Various PMU groups have also vowed to take revenge for Suleimani’s death, including KH and AAH. Nationalist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr meanwhile has reactivated two of his militia groups, the Mahdi Army and the Promised Day Brigade, calling on them to ‘protect Iraq’. Of additional concern, subsequent to Suleimani’s death, Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani, who served as Suleimani’s Deputy Commander since 1997, was announced as the new Quds Force Commander. Should Ghaani not be able to exert the same level of influence and leadership over the PMUs as his predecessor, there is an increased risk of militias taking more unilateral action in Iraq, with anti-western groups potentially seeking to intensify activity against perceived targets.

The day following the US drone strike, reports were received of IDF targeting the US Embassy in Baghdad’s International Zone (IZ), Balad Airbase in Salah ad-Din governorate, and various other targets further north in Mosul. According to these reports, on the evening of 4 January, several rockets impacted in the IZ, near the US Embassy complex and al-Jadriyah district, near the Presidential complex. The attack prompted security forces to close the road leading to the embassy. Meanwhile, further rockets impacted within the perimeter of Balad Airbase, approximately 64km north of Baghdad. At least five people were reportedly injured in al-Jadriyah and three others at Balad Airbase. On the same evening, a number of projectiles impacted near the Presidential palace complex in Mosul, while additional information indicated further IDF near the Nineveh operations command center in east Mosul. Along with Balad Airbase, these installations in Mosul are also known to house US military personnel. No information is currently available on casualties. Following the aforementioned attacks, which so far remain unclaimed, KH issued a statement advising all Iraqi security personnel to remain at least 1km away from all military facilities where US service members are stationed, beginning 5 January. The message was also carried by other PMUs, such as AAH. At the time of writing, subsequent IDF around Baghdad’s IZ has been reported on the evening of 5 January, with a number of resultant casualties. Again, no groups have claimed responsibility.

Recurrent IDF attacks are assessed as highly likely in the short-term, as Iranian-backed groups seek to retaliate for the killing of Qassem Suleimani. Improvised Explosive Device (IED) and small arms attacks may also be utilised. Where previous activity against US facilities was likely symbolic, there is an increased threat of subsequent attacks seeking to cause casualties. Likely targets for such attacks include the US Embassy, Camp Taji, Balad Airbase, Al Asad Airbase, K1 Base, Qayyarah Airbase and the military complex at BIAP. However, targets may not just be limited to military or diplomatic facilities. Commercial interests, such as oil fields, are also assessed to be at increased risk. In a past example of this, suspected hardline groups previously staged IDF attacks against international oil assets in June, and IED attacks targeting the vehicles of foreign contractors in July and August, in Basra province. There is also a currently elevated threat of anti-western protests against US interests across the country. These may escalate violently and result in road closures. On 4 January, for example, tens of thousands of people gathered in Baghdad for the funeral procession of Qassem Suleimani, while additional protests were reported in Rumaythah, Shamiyah and Samawah. Further representative of anti-US sentiments, Iraq’s Parliament voted on 5 January to end the 2014 US military aid request. While the resolution is non-binding, it does however pave the way for the Government of Iraq (GoI) to begin pushing for the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country.
US citizens and those linked to US interests are also at a heightened risk of kidnapping in Iraq and other countries with a strong Iranian influence or presence of Iranian proxies. While such incidents have not yet been registered in the aftermath of Suleimani’s death, there is a possibility that Iran-linked groups may use abduction as retaliatory action. Particularly, AAH and KH have been blamed in the past for the kidnapping of foreigners in Iraq, including US nationals. Of note, on 29 December, following the US airstrikes carried out in Iraq and Syria targeting facilities tied to KH, there were unconfirmed reports of the kidnapping of an American journalist in Baghdad. While still uncorroborated, this would illustrate the potential for these events to take place in the current setting. Moreover, it is possible that Iran or its allies may take punitive actions against US nationals already in their captivity. Both threats may extend to citizens of US-allied nations and those linked to US interests. This threat was most recently exemplified on 1 January, when according to local sources, suspected KH militias abducted two French journalists covering the attack on the US embassy. The hostages were allegedly released the next morning after mediation from caretaker Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi and Falih al-Fayyadh, National Security Advisor and chief of the PMUs. While the French government has refused to comment on the incident, Abdul-Mahdi’s office confirmed the abduction and release of the French nationals.

Due to the currently heightened threat, the US Embassy in Baghdad issued a security alert on 3 January, urging US citizens to depart Iraq with immediate effect. To respond to any PMU threats, counter-terrorism forces have been deployed to the IZ to tighten security at entrance points, while the US announced it would send at least 750 additional soldiers to the region. Other international governments, including the UK, French, Canadian and Dutch, have also updated their official advice regarding travel to Iraq, including advising their citizens to evacuate the country where safe to do so, while NATO has suspended its training missions in Iraq. At the time of writing, reports have been received of US nationals working for a number of foreign oil companies being evacuated.

Regarding regional developments, as a result of the US drone strike against Qassem Suleimani, oil prices have surged out of fear of Iranian retaliation. An area susceptible to Iranian attack is the Strait of Hormuz, being of significant strategic importance considering it is the only channel whereby oil from the Persian Gulf can reach global markets by sea. Iran has previously threatened to close the Strait in response to US sanctions, and may now seek to resume harassment of international shipping to further impact the oil sector and exert its dominance in the region. Elsewhere, Saudi Arabia has already been targeted recurrently by the Iranian-backed Houthis, who may seek to increase cross-border rocket attacks from Yemen in the aftermath of Suleimani’s death. Iran is also suspected of being behind the larger-scale attacks against Aramco facilities in Saudi Arabia in September 2019, further evidencing its attempts to disrupt the oil market. Increased activity by other groups with close ties to Iran, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, are also expected to increase against the US and its allies. In this context, reports have emerged of some private operators temporarily relocating their staff from Lebanon to Cyprus. Israel, which has itself targeted Iranian-backed groups in the region, is considered at particular risk. Retaliatory attacks are also possible outside the Middle East region. In Afghanistan, Iran is an ally of convenience for the Taliban, and reprisals directed against US interests there are a real possibility. There is also concern over a possible increase in violence as Afghanistan could be caught in the crossfire between its neighbour and its close ally, with the potential for sectarian conflict.

While less visible, organisations, government departments and critical infrastructure of the US and allied states will be under increased threat of cyber-attacks emanating from Iran and pro-Iran groups. Iran possesses one of the world’s most active state-sponsored cyberwarfare programmes, and such an attack would be certainly a viable tactic, allowing it to inflict considerable damage if successful, while at the same time allowing deniability.

As expected, soon after Suleimani’s death, Iran declared it will no longer abide by the restrictions imposed by the
2015 nuclear deal, particularly those regarding the numbers and type of centrifuges that can be operated, and the level of enrichment of uranium that it can pursue. However, it is not expected that this will have an immediate effect beyond exerting pressure on the signatories of the deal. Supporting this is the fact that Iran expressed its decision can be reversible, upon effective implementation of reciprocal obligations by the other parties and the lifting of economic sanctions. Moreover, Iran asserted it would continue to fully cooperate with international nuclear agencies.

In summary:

- As Iran has proclaimed that it will punish Americans following the killing of Qassem Suleimani by the American military, US nationals and interests will remain at particular risk of targeting by pro-Iranian hostile groups. Other Western expats could potentially also be a target of these threat groups.
- IDF and IEDs are anticipated in the near future. While US military and diplomatic installations are most likely to be targeted, commercial facilities can also be impacted. US and other Western nationals may also be at an increased threat of kidnapping.
- An important concern for commercial operations in the region will be the instability brought about by Suleimani’s demise. This may additionally be translated into civil unrest stirred by anti-US/Western sentiments and potential sectarian conflict.
- Due to the currently heightened threat, US citizens have been urged to depart Iraq immediately. A number of Western countries have also advised their citizens to evacuate the country and to remain vigilant elsewhere in the region.
- While at present the threat is more acute in Iraq, this may extend further in the Middle East region, particularly in countries with extensive Iranian influence. However, retaliatory attacks further afield cannot be discounted. Consistent with previous Iranian modus operandi, this could take the form of cyberattacks. Disruption of commercial operation in the Strait of Hormuz due to Iranian hostile action is also possible.
- Despite increasing perceived global instability, it is assessed that Iran’s renunciation of the obligations imposed by the 2015 nuclear deal is more likely aimed at conferring pressure on remaining signatory parties to lift economic sanctions on the country.

**Recommendations**

- Constellis advises against all travel to Iraq, except for the Kurdistan Region where all but essential travel is advised against. For those based in Iraq, Constellis advises against all non-essential movement while tensions remain heightened.
- Organisations are advised to consider the temporary withdrawal of American staff from Iraq and reassess the presence of other Western personnel during the current period of instability.
- Ensure that emergency response and evacuation plans are up to date. Be aware that airline providers and flight itineraries may change with little warning according to security or political developments.
- Confirm that in-country staff have up-to-date travel documents and valid visas for countries identified within emergency evacuation plans.
Constellis’ intelligence analysts and security consultants produce bespoke political and security reports, threat assessments and security risk assessments to inform decisions and to protect people and assets across Africa, Europe and the Middle East.

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