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THE CURRENT: How will Iran respond to US assassination of Soleimani?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

Iran's top military commander Qassem Soleimani was killed by a U.S. drone strike Thursday night outside of Baghdad. With us to explain the significance and repercussions of this dramatic escalation in U.S.-Iranian tensions is Suzanne Maloney, a senior fellow and deputy director of Foreign Policy here at Brookings. Suzanne, thanks for being here.

MALONEY: Thank you.

PITA: Soleimani was a general of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – recently designated a terrorist organization by the Trump White House – and head of the Quds force. Who were they and why was Soleimani so important to Iran?

MALONEY: Soleimani has been a prominent commander in the Revolutionary Guard since the earliest days of the revolution. But over the course of the past 15 years in particular, he has emerged as the most prominent architect of Iran's regional expansion, and very much a symbol of an Iran that is on the march across the Levant, in the Middle East, as well as in the Gulf. He personally orchestrated Iran's campaign against the Islamic State, as well as mobilizing a transnational Shia army to help Bashar al-Assad stay in power in Syria. So for many across the broader Middle East, Qassem Soleimani is the symbol of the most vicious arm of Iranian power and his death will not be mourned in many places.

PITA: This assassination followed a series of retaliatory actions within Iraq – rocket strikes from the Kataib Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Iraqi militia, against U.S. facilities that resulted in the death of a U.S. contractor. Those were answered by a series of U.S. air strikes that killed more than 25. That then led to protestors breaching the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. Are we caught do you think in some sort of escalatory spiral? What sort of retaliation are we likely to see from Iran?

MALONEY: I think the Iranians are going to wait and watch for the time and place of their choosing. They have a lot of opportunity, a lot of options across the region in terms of their forward presence, in Syria, Iraq, their proxy militias of Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as the Houthi militias in Yemen. They're going to have many opportunities to find the best prospects for some kind of retaliation which would ideally penalize Donald Trump and the American people in the most direct and painful way possible, but also seek to improve their own diplomatic leverage with the rest of the international community, as well as really further intimidate their neighbors, which has been a concern I think for the Iranians, particularly if they appear to be on a back foot as a result of American escalation.

PITA: Iran has been stretched pretty thin, certainly economically, for a very long time, there've been a lot of protests within the country recently. What is public sentiment in Iran looking like, aside from the official response? Is this a rally-around-the-flag moment that will bury a lot of these previous internal tensions? What are we seeing so far?

MALONEY: It's still early days. The Iranians quickly confirmed Soleimani's death, and there have been much larger than usual crowds on the streets on a Friday prayers day. Iranians in many places admired Soleimani. He was often cited in the public opinion polling that's done in Iran as one of the most popular figures within the Iranian system. He was seen as someone who took the fight to Iran's adversaries rather than waiting for the fight to come to Iran. So he certainly has a constituency within the country.

But it's important to remember that we're just about two months out from some of the most severe protests that Iran has experienced in the post-revolutionary era, and what was almost certainly the most deadly retaliation by the regime's security forces against those protests, with hundreds, or perhaps as many as 1500 killed in response, the internet shut down for more than a week. There is still quite a bit of turmoil, quite a bit of concern, both at the popular level and certainly the leadership level about the fragility of the regime, about the dissatisfaction mounting among the public. There was a poll published just yesterday in a pro-Rouhani newspaper that cited vast dissatisfaction with the government and an expectation that many Tehranis, at least, will not go to the polls to vote in elections coming up next month. So I think that there is an underlying concern about where Iran can go from here, particularly as the pressure mounts from outside.

PITA: I understand there's also some expected next step in the Iran nuclear deal. They've been doing this sort of phased – they've been taking next steps, I don't know if escalation is too strong a word, but they've been advancing things further outside the deal. Do we think the calculation is that they may take a firmer next step that's maybe going to be more dramatic than they might have done originally, now with this as fuel?

MALONEY: Yes, I think it's entirely likely that when and if they make an announcement, as has been suggested on January 6, about the next steps of their own efforts to back away from their obligations under the deal in incremental fashion – again, in hopes of generating some diplomatic leverage ever since the Trump administration walked out of the deal in May 2018 and began re-imposing very severe sanctions on the country – I think that we can expect something more significant than what we've seen to date, and potentially an action such as increasing uranium enrichment to much higher levels that would create a lot of trepidation about an Iranian race to a bomb, and could produce the wholesale collapse of the remnants of the nuclear deal and create a crisis that doesn't just concern the United States and Iran, but concerns the broader international community.

PITA: Can we talk about the repercussions of this in Iraq? The Iraqi government certainly can't be happy about the U.S. assassinating a state actor on their soil. Iraq as you mentioned has had plenty of its own protests and problems for the last while. What is likely to be the reaction there?

MALONEY: This will further debilitate the Iraqi government at a time where there's been great strain as a result of protests which were in many ways prompted by concerns both about corruption and about the overbearing Iranian influence in the country. I think it's entirely likely this is going to precipitate either a drawdown or a complete departure of American forces in Iraq. We've already seen

fairly hasty calls for all Americans to leave the country on the part of the U.S. State Department. I think it's going to be very difficult to return to business as usual, either in a government-to-government bilateral relationship with Iraq or in any other way. The greater concern is that Iraq itself, the elected government collapses and we're left with a power vacuum that the Iranians will surely exploit, particularly at a time when the United States is likely to be less popular than ever in Iraq.

PITA: On the domestic side, we heard this morning from Senator Lindsey Graham, who says that he was briefed about the strike against Soleimani while visiting President Trump at his golf club earlier this week, but it sounds at least at this time like none of the rest of the Gang of Eight were forewarned, which is normally typical for a major military action like this. What have you heard in the reactions from Congress? What's the significance of a step like this being taken without congressional approval?

MALONEY: It is highly unusual to see something this dramatic play out without any input and consultation from Congress. It speaks to the overall breakdown in the policy process that we've seen since the advent of the Trump administration. I expect we're going to see real pressure from Democrats on the Hill for much greater oversight and much greater input, particularly because of the concerns that this could precipitate a bilateral military conflict between the United States and Iran.

PITA: What are some of the other reactions from the region, either from the Saudis, or Israel, and what are their potential implications for escalation, or, more hopefully, some sort of pressure to de-escalate?

MALONEY: Qassem Soleimani didn't have many friends in the Arab world outside of those places Iran has developed partner or proxy relationships, so there will be many across the Arab world and certainly in Israel who take some comfort that he has passed from this earth. But I think there's also some recognition that this is now moving in a direction that neither the Trump administration nor Iran may be able to control fully. I think there is little inclination for war either from President Trump himself, who appreciates the American electorate isn't in the mood for another costly protracted military intervention in the Middle East, nor are the Iranians really looking to take on a superpower at a time where their economy is in tatters and their domestic legitimacy is under siege. But the more that we see this kind of tit-for-tat, I think it's entirely possible we could put ourselves in a situation in which escalation simply takes over, and all of our allies in the region have to be concerned about that.

PITA: All right. Suzanne, thanks for being here and explaining this.

MALONEY: Thank you so much.