



## Lawmakers, Experts Fear Retaliation Following US Strike on Top Iran Commander

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Some U.S. lawmakers, former leaders and experts fear unpredictable retaliation from Iran while others are claiming victory following President Donald Trump's sanctioned airstrike on that country's top military commander, Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani.

But many argued Friday that it may be too soon to understand the implications and the steps needed to avoid escalated conflict between the U.S. and Iran.

The head of the Quds Force within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) -- which was recently designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. State Department -- was killed at Baghdad's International Airport on Thursday night in what U.S. officials called a "decisive defensive action" to protect American personnel and diplomats in the region.

"It is impossible to overstate the significance of this action," said retired Army Gen. David Petraeus, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

"Soleimani was, in US terms, a combination of CIA Director, [Joint Special Operations Command] Commander, and Special Presidential Envoy for the Mideast," he said on his LinkedIn page, which he pointed to upon Military.com's request for comment.

"He was the second most important person in Iran and ... he had the blood of hundreds of American and coalition soldiers on his hands and that of countless of our Iraqi and partner elements in the region," said Petraeus, the former head of United States Central Command.

"There will inevitably be responses by Iranian and proxy forces; the question is whether they force the US to respond with direct attacks on Iranian forces and infrastructure, at a time when the Iranian economy is already seriously damaged by sanctions and when the Iranian people have already been demonstrating against the regime in very considerable numbers."

While the response on Capitol Hill to Soleimani's death and its implications for the U.S. presence in the Middle East broke down along predictable lines -- depending on whether the lawmaker was a Trump supporter or critic -- like Petraeus, many lawmakers questioned what ultimately comes next.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-South Carolina, one of Trump's closest allies, said he had been briefed by officials earlier this week that Soleimani was being targeted to thwart his plans to attack U.S. troops.

He said via Twitter: "To the Iranian government: if you want more, you will get more. Thank you, Mr. President, for standing up for America."

Other House and Senate Republicans rallied behind Trump, while Democrats warned of a wider war in the Middle East and the threat to U.S. and allied interests.

"President Trump has failed to effectively engage or counter Iran and has forced the United States into an endless cycle of escalation that risks wider war, endangers American lives, and has made both the region and the world less safe," Rep. Anthony Brown, D-Maryland, an Iraq veteran who served 30 years in the Army and retired as a colonel, said in a statement.

Rep. Elissa Slotkin, a Michigan Democrat who served multiple tours as an adviser in Iraq and worked at the White House under Presidents George Bush and Barack Obama, painted Soleimani as a significant destabilizing mastermind whose actions resulted in the deaths of hundreds of troops and allies.

"I watched friends and colleagues get hurt or killed by Iranian rockets, mortars and explosive devices that were provided to Iraqi proxies and used against U.S. forces under Soleimani's guidance," she said on Twitter. "We watched as his power increased and he brought strength and capability to groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, and to smaller cells around the Middle East and the world, with devastating consequences."

But Slotkin called for a cohesive strategy going forward to protect diplomats and troops already risking their lives.

"The two administrations I worked for both determined that the ultimate ends didn't justify the means" to kill Soleimani, she said. "The Trump administration has made a different calculation."

Slotkin was not alone in this determination.

"[Iran] thought it had Trump figured out. I think it's clear that they no longer do," said Suzanne Maloney, deputy director of the foreign policy program and senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution.

Maloney and her colleagues Daniel Byman, senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy, and Scott Anderson, a David M. Rubenstein fellow in the Governance Studies program and a senior editor at Lawfare, told reporters in a phone call Friday that the airstrike will likely create discontent between allies and nations that have partnered with the U.S. on counterterrorism campaigns across the Middle East, especially coalition members in the counter-Islamic State campaign.

"In many cases, they're [also] vulnerable" from this action, said Anderson.

Additionally, prospects for a much needed U.S.-Iran de-escalation have decreased significantly, added Daniel DePetris, a fellow at Defense Priorities.

"The U.S. has 60,000 troops in the Middle East spread across multiple countries. All of them will now be at risk of being targeted," he said. "There is no love lost for Soleimani; he had a lot of blood on his hands. But this isn't the issue. The issue is whether killing Soleimani was necessary to protect U.S. interests in the Middle East, which are quite narrow."

While some experts argued it may be too soon to tell what may happen in the next few days and weeks -- whether directly against U.S. assets in the region or a larger global response, they said further escalation from the U.S. is not the solution.

"Further escalation isn't going to yield policy changes," said Emma Ashford, a research fellow at the Cato Institute with expertise in oil, international security, Russia and the Middle East.

"No escalation so far has done so," she said.