How the Soleimani strike could kneecap the fight against ISIS

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The U.S. strike that killed Iran's top military leader could put America's fight against the Islamic State in jeopardy, opening the door to the reemergence of the terrorist group.

The Thursday night attack on Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani could also prompt the government in Iraq to kick U.S. troops out of the country, ending America's mission to train the Iraqi military to fight terrorist groups.

U.S. troops have deployed to Iraq since 2014 to fight ISIS and train Iraqi forces with permission from the Iraqi government. As part of this agreement, Iraq asked the U.S. specifically not to target Iran within the country, a request America has now violated "in flagrant fashion" with the strike on Soleimani near the Baghdad airport, said Scott Anderson, a former legal adviser to the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

 "This is going to put a lot of pressure on those aspects of our relationship they have control over," Anderson, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, said Friday. "I strongly suspect we're going to see action in parliament … that's going to seek the curtailment if not total withdrawal of those folks."

Iraq's parliament is set to meet Sunday in an emergency session to discuss the airstrike, which the prime minister called a violation of sovereignty, Reuters reported.

About 5,000 American troops are deployed to Iraq. If Baghdad asks these American forces to withdraw, it would eliminate the home base from which the U.S. has launched its fight against the Islamic State. Though the terrorist group has lost most of the territory it once held, the group recently established a small foothold in northern Iraq made up of fighters crossing the border from Syria, NBC News reported in November.

The rising tension between the U.S. and Iraq could weaken the relationship the two countries built over the past several years while working together to fight the Islamic State, which both viewed as a common enemy.

"Both sides will start to think about other enemies, [including] ... each other," said Daniel Byman, a senior fellow with the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. "Part of what brought them together is the sense that ISIS is a danger to both."

The loss of a U.S. presence in Iraq would also affect the military's anti-ISIS mission in Syria. When the Trump administration moved troops out of Syria last fall, forces had to rely more heavily on personnel based in neighboring Iraq to root out terrorist fighters in Syria.

"If we can't be in Iraq, we can't be in Syria," Barbara Slavin, the director of the Future Iran Initiative at the Atlantic Council, said Friday, because Iraq is America's main point from which to launch missions in Syria. She also added that the power void in Syria ceded by the U.S. is likely to be filled by Iran.

Turkey was also a home base for U.S. operations in Syria, but the relationship between the White House and Ankara has faced significant tension over Turkey's growing ties with Russia, making it unlikely that Syria operations launched from Turkey will increase.

Training Iraqi soldiers to battle terrorists on their own is another important part of America's mission in the country, and one that would also be hurt by the withdrawal of American troops. When U.S. troops left Iraq in 2011, the Iraqi military quickly deteriorated to the point that the Islamic State could grow its presence in the country. Anderson cited this when asked what would likely happen to the Iraqi military if U.S. troops were forced to leave again.

"We saw how rapidly the Iraqi military degraded in the years before the rise of ISIS, [which] contributed to ISIS' rapid march," he said. "The concern has always been that without continued U.S. support and training and encouragement, you would see a similar decimation of Iraqi military corps."

It's possible the Iraqi parliament will not kick American troops out of the country and will instead pursue a less drastic measure like a formal condemnation of the strike. Yet the relationship between the U.S. and Iraq will still suffer. Abbas Kadhim, the director of Iraq Initiative at the Atlantic Council, said the lack of cooperation will extend beyond just government-to-government relations.

"Iraq for [at least] the next year will be completely unsafe for American citizens and business and any other interests," he told reporters. "Forget about any contracts or anything we might see on the ground."

Diplomatic personnel in Iraq are also at risk, as evidenced by an attack on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad this week. While Iraqi security forces eventually intervened to stop the protest, Christopher Preble, vice president of defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, said the response was slow. He also said Iraqi efforts to break up future incidents is likely to even get slower as Iraq fumes about the strike on its sovereign territory.

"The Iraqi government is incensed by this decision to carry out an attack on their soil," he said. "I'm quite concerned about the safety of U.S. personnel, including civilians and diplomats, inside of Iraq."