

This article is related to General Studies-Paper-III (International Relations)

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"The killing by the US of Iran's military and intelligence commander has raised concerns about worldwide ripple effects. What made Gen-Qassem Soleimani so important, and what was the Quds Force he headed?"

ON Friday, Iran's top security and intelligence commander, Major General Qassem Soleimani, was killed in a US drone attack in Baghdad. Why is the killing causing concern in the Middle East and beyond?

What exactly happened in Baghdad on Friday morning?

Gen Soleimani was killed in an airstrike, for which the US later claimed responsibility. The strike was carried out by a drone on a road near Baghdad's international airport. Soleimani had reportedly just disembarked from a plane. The blast also killed others including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq known as Popular Mobilisation Forces. The Associated Press quoted Iran's state TV as saying those killed included Soleimani's son-in-law.

The strike capped a week of conflict between the United States and Iranian-backed militia in Iraq, starting with a rocket attack at a military base on December 27, which killed an American contractor.

Who was Gen Soleimani?

Soleimani, 62, was in charge of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which the US designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in April last year. The Quds Force undertakes Iranian missions in other countries, including covert ones.

Soleimani, who had headed the Quds since 1998, not only looked after intelligence gathering and covert military operations, but also drew immense influence from his closeness to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He was seen as a potential future leader of Iran, according to various reports.

"... To say that today's Iran cannot be fully understood without first understanding Qassem Soleimani would be a considerable understatement. More than anyone else, Soleimani has been responsible for the creation of an arc of influence — which Iran terms its 'Axis of Resistance' — extending from the Gulf of Oman through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea," the United States Military Academy (USMA) wrote in a dossier in November 2018.

Why is his killing such a big deal?

Because of his influence, observers have equated his killing with the killing of a United States Vice President. While he commanded respect in Iran, he was by most accounts a quiet man who usually stayed inconspicuous

in public. However, there have been occasions when he has taken to bluster. One such occasion came last year, after US President Donald Trump tweeted: “To Iranian President (Hassan) Rouhani: NEVER, EVER THREATEN THE UNITED STATES AGAIN OR YOU WILL SUFFER CONSEQUENCES THE LIKES OF WHICH FEW THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAVE EVER SUFFERED BEFORE.”

At a speech quoted by the USMA, Soleimani responded: “It is beneath the dignity of the President of the great Islamic country of Iran to respond, so I will respond, as a soldier of our great nation... Mr Trump, the gambler!... You are well aware of our power and capabilities in the region. You know how powerful we are in asymmetrical warfare. Come, we are waiting for you...”

An earlier display of his power came in 2008, in a text message to US General David Petraeus, then commanding the Multi-National Force in Iraq. According to The Guardian, Soleimani texted: “General Petraeus, you should know that I, Qassem Soleimani, control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan. And indeed, the ambassador in Baghdad is a Quds Force member. The individual who’s going to replace him is a Quds Force member.”

How did he rise to this stature?

In a September 2013 article in The New Yorker, Dexter Filkins charted Soleimani’s life and career. Then 56, Soleimani lived in Tehran with his wife, and had three sons and two daughters; Filkins described him as “evidently a strict but loving father”.

In 1979, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s rebellion toppled the Shah in Iran, Soleimani, then 22, joined the Ayatollah’s Revolutionary Guard. During the Iran-Iraq War, Soleimani was sent to the front with the task of supplying water to soldiers, but ended up undertaking reconnaissance missions, and earning a reputation for bravery and élan, Filkins wrote.

In 1998, Soleimani was made head of the Quds Force, which launched his rise to power.

What did the Quds Force do?

Khomeini had created the prototype in 1979, with the goal of protecting Iran and exporting the Islamic Revolution, Filkins wrote. In 1982, Revolutionary Guard officers were sent to Lebanon to help organise Shia militias in the civil war, which eventually led to the creation of Hezbollah. According to the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, the IRGC including the Quds Force has contributed roughly 125,000 men to Iran’s forces and has the capability of undertaking asymmetric warfare and covert operations.

As Quds head, Soleimani briefly worked in cooperation with the US. This was during the US crackdown in Afghanistan following 9/11; Soleimani wanted the Taliban defeated. The cooperation ended in 2002 after President George W Bush branded Iran a nuclear proliferator, an exporter of terrorism, and part of an “Axis of Evil”, the USMA wrote. By 2003, the US was accusing Soleimani of plotting attacks on US soldiers following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which eventually toppled Saddam Hussein. And in 2011, the Treasury Department placed him on a sanctions blacklist.

In recent years, Soleimani was believed to be the chief strategist behind Iran’s military ventures and influence in Syria, Iraq and throughout the Middle East. “(Soleimani) has sought to reshape the Middle East in Iran’s favour, working as a power broker and as a military force: assassinating rivals, arming allies, and, for most of a decade, directing a network of militant groups that killed hundreds of Americans in Iraq,” Filkins wrote.

How has the US justified his killing?

The Department of Defense issued a statement underlining Soleimani's leadership role in conflict with the US: "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 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."

In its April 2019 decision designating the IRGC including the Quds Force as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, the State Department had said: "The IRGC FTO designation highlights that Iran is an outlaw regime that uses terrorism as a key tool of statecraft and that the IRGC, part of Iran's official military, has engaged in terrorist activity or terrorism since its inception 40 years ago. The IRGC has been directly involved in terrorist plotting; its support for terrorism is foundational and institutional, and it has killed US citizens."

What could happen now?

The strike has left the Middle East on edge, with possible repercussions beyond the region. President Rouhani said the killing would make Iran more decisive in resisting the US, while the Revolutionary Guards said anti-US forces would exact revenge across the Muslim world. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued a statement: "His departure to God does not end his path or his mission, but a forceful revenge awaits the criminals who have his blood and the blood of the other martyrs last night on their hands."

Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Javad Zarif tweeted: "The US' act of international terrorism, targeting & assassinating General Soleimani-THE most effective force fighting Daesh (ISIS), Al Nusrah, Al Qaeda et al-is extremely dangerous & a foolish escalation. The US bears responsibility for all consequences of its rogue adventurism."

News agencies reported that US officials were braced for Iranian retaliatory attacks, possibly including cyberattacks and terrorism, on American interests and allies. Israel, too, was preparing for Iranian strikes. The New York Times reported that the killing could have a ripple effect in any number of countries across the Middle East where Iran and the US compete for influence. The State Department urged US citizens to leave Iraq immediately. Oil prices have already jumped by \$3 a barrel. In India, a high-level meeting involving senior officials of Finance Ministry and Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas was held to assess the impact of a price rise and to review contingency measures.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements in the context of recent reorganization of the Frailway Board.

1. The number of members of the revised Railway Board has been increased.
2. The eight services of the Group 'A' in Railways have been integrated into the Indian Railway Management Service.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1 (b) Only 2
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 3 Jan., is 1 (b)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

Q. Could the US drone attack on Iran's commander create a new crisis in Middle-East Asia? Discuss. (250 words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.

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