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'No room for criticising Iran'

The protest movement is past, Iran's influence stronger than before. Tim Petschulat on the US military strike's effect in Iraq

Read this interview in German.

Following the US missile strike in Baghdad, in which the high-ranking Iranian General Qassem Suleimani was killed, Iran has announced massive retaliation. What kind of measures can we expect and what could be consequences for the region?

Hossein Deghan, the military adviser to the Iranian revolutionary leader, stated in a CNN interview that the Iranian retaliatory strikes would not be directed against US civilian but military installations. This statement has since been repeated by various Iranian decision-makers and also by Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah.

Iran's most likely response would be attacks on US military installations in Iraq, where Iran has many motivated and battle-tested allies. Furthermore, attacks on US warships in the Strait of Hormus or on US air bases within reach of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards — for example in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain or Saudi Arabia — cannot be ruled out. Less likely, but also possible are also attacks by Lebanese Hezbollah on American targets.

In the event of an Iranian retaliatory strike, President Trump has already announced that he will respond heavy-handedly, including threats of military strikes against Iranian cultural sites. Should this actually happen, Iranians could further escalate by attacking US economic interests or US allies. Iran would be in a position to block the Strait of Hormus or at least to obstruct merchant shipping in the longer term. 30 per cent of global oil trade is currently conducted in this way. Attacks on Saudi oil production or drinking water supplies are also possible, as Iran has already proven.

Depending on the course of the confrontation, an attack on targets in Israel cannot be ruled out, which in turn would entail Israeli retaliation. As collateral damage of a military escalation between the

USA and Iran, new civil wars may also occur in countries with a proportionate Shiite population — especially in Iraq and Lebanon.

However, it's also possible that Iran, contrary to all predictions, will initially hold back or limit itself to cyber attacks. Tehran's strategists know that any military escalation would benefit President Trump domestically, both with regard to the Republicans' standing together in the current impeachment process and in the upcoming US election campaign.

The US intends to weaken Iranian influence in the region. Did the killing of Suleimani serve this goal?

No, on the contrary. Take Iraq, for example. The attack on Suleimani and on the Iraqi militia leader Abdul Mahdi Al-Muhandis, who was also killed, has achieved what Iran has long been striving for in vain: the political unification of the Iraqi Shiites against American influence in the country.

In Shiite-dominated regions, voices critical of Iran were muzzled with reference to the "murderous occupying power US". Any deviation from this line is branded as treason. While the mass protests of the past months had an explicitly Iran-critical tone, at present hardly anyone in the Shiite camp dares to criticise Iran publicly.
Since 2003, the US acted as the polar opposite to the massive Iranian influence in Iraq. But now it's room for manoeuvre is severely restricted. And the Iranian leadership rejoices more than anyone else. Khamenei replaced Suleimani the day after the assassination by his long-time deputy Ismail Qaani, who knows the network of allied militias and decision-makers very well that his predecessor created throughout the region. He can therefore continue to lead in Khamenei's spirit.

In Iran itself, the killing of the "national hero" Suleimani — in violation of international law — stabilised the regime. More than a million mourners participated in the funeral ceremonies, which caused surprise even in Tehran. Hardliners are strengthened in Iran. They are getting what they have long wanted: Iran's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement, at least for the time being, and the already announced resumption of uranium enrichment. In this respect, there can be no question of weakening Iranian influence.

In what way could Europe be directly affected by the escalation of the conflict?

First of all, economically. The price of oil rose by 4 per cent on the day of the attack, the dollar fell and stock market prices fell briefly. A stagnating economy damages Europe and a falling dollar exchange rate

is not good for export-oriented economies like Germany.

Depending on whether and how strong retaliation and reactions are, there will be a negative echo from the markets. The drone attack on Saudi oil production facilities in September 2019 demonstrated what can happen. Iran would be quite capable militarily to interrupt the oil transport through the Strait of Hormus. 30 per cent of global oil trade goes through this route. Experts predict that if this trade route were to be disrupted for any length of time, oil prices would rise to over USD 100 per barrel, which would be a problem for the European economy as it's not exactly booming.

Beyond economic concerns: an escalation of violence in several populous countries in the Middle East would provoke displacement of refugees towards Europe again. Iraq and Iran alone have a combined population of about 120 million.

In Iraq, massive social protests have taken place in recent months, which were directed against the government, Iran's influence, corruption in the country and the political system as a whole. What effects does the military strike have on the protest movement and the political climate in Iraq?

The protest movement has effectively ended on 3 January 2020. On the streets of the protest strongholds, there's a climate of fear and mistrust. In the centres of protest, which have been dominated by Shiites throughout, hardly anyone dares to criticise the Iranian role in Iraq to avoid being branded as a traitor. And critics of Iran are openly threatened.

After the entire Shiite establishment has condemned the air strike in varying degrees of severity as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty and partly as an act of terrorism, the enemy is clear: the US. Three Iraqis, two Iranians and one Lebanese were killed in the air strike. They all had one thing in common: they were Shiites. The pro-Iranian groups, which were already strong before, used this fact to declare Shiite unity and anti-Americanism as a civic duty.

The example of Muqtada Sadr illustrates most clearly the change in attitude of the largest Iraqi population group: The Shiite cleric and leader of the movement with the most seats in parliament was one of the most prominent critics of Iranian influence in Iraq before the attack. He's known for his keen sense of public sentiment. Immediately after the attack, he called on his followers to get ready to defend their homeland, called for retaliation and castigated the killings as a terrorist act by which the US had murdered the most effective fighters against the IS. He also announced the resurrection of the Mahdi Army with which he had already fought the US presence

in Iraq in 2004 and called for the regional foundation of a pan-Shiite resistance movement against American aggression. Sadr's change of heart illustrates: in the current political climate there's no room for peaceful protest and especially no room for criticising Iran.

A majority of members of the Iraqi parliament voted this weekend in favour of a resolution calling for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Will the US forces really have to leave the country?

No, at least not immediately. The resolution isn't binding. The basis for the presence of all coalition forces belonging to the anti-IS coalition is an agreement concluded in 2014, which only the Iraqi Prime Minister can cancel. Prime Minister Adel Abd Al-Mahdi resigned under the pressure of the protests on 29 November 2019 and continues to conduct business until a successor is found, but with limited powers.

It's legally unclear whether he, as acting prime minister, is able to terminate the agreement and expel the country's troops. Since President Trump has announced the most severe sanctions for this case, he will probably interpret the unclear legal situation in the American interest. One consequence of the resolution, however, is that the US military's room for manoeuvre in the country has already been considerably reduced.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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