

## Our Upcoming Event

Faculty Co-Chair of the Harvard Weatherhead Center's Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs, Professor **Melani Cammett**, will be moderating a timely discussion on the future of the U.S.-Iran conflict and the dangerous horizon that lies ahead with speakers **Michael Singh, Trita Parsi, Stephen Peter Rosen, and Payam Mohseni**.

**Date:** Friday, Jan. 31, 2020, 2:30pm

**Location:** CGIS Knafel K-262, 1737 Cambridge St., Cambridge MA 02138.

For more information, please visit our [website](#).

THE PROJECT ON SHI'ISM AND GLOBAL AFFAIRS AT THE WEATHERHEAD CENTER PRESENTS:

# DANGEROUS HORIZONS: THE FUTURE OF THE U.S.-IRAN CONFRONTATION

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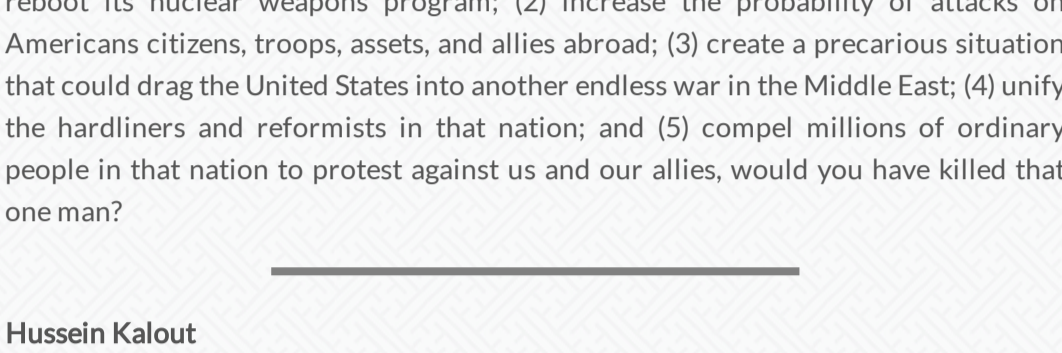
**Payam Mohseni**  
DIRECTOR OF THE PROJECT ON SHI'ISM AND GLOBAL AFFAIRS AT HARVARD, WEATHERHEAD CENTER, AND LECTURER, DEPARTMENT OF GOVERNMENT AT HARVARD

**FRIDAY, JAN. 31 | 2:30PM**  
**CGIS KNAFEL (NORTH) K262**  
**BOWIE-VERNON, 1737 CAMBRIDGE ST., CAMBRIDGE, MA 02138**



## The Implications of the Assassination of Qasem Soleimani

Last week, [The Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs](#) asked its affiliated members to share their thoughts on the assassination of Qasem Soleimani. Published below are the short written submissions of the experts who responded.



**Daniel K. Khalessi**

The late, great strategic thinker and military historian Sir Basil Liddell Hart warned: "If you concentrate exclusively on victory, with no thought for the after-effect ... it is almost certain that the peace will be a bad one, containing the germs of another war." Applying Liddell Hart's wisdom, the Trump Administration's decision to assassinate General Qasem Soleimani was a grave strategic mistake. Assume that the Administration's primary objective is America's security and that this sacred objective is not overshadowed by other tangential personal political motives. Using common sense, one should ask: was it worth it? If killing one man would (1) drive a nation to reboot its nuclear weapons program; (2) increase the probability of attacks on Americans citizens, troops, assets, and allies abroad; (3) create a precarious situation that could drag the United States into another endless war in the Middle East; (4) unify the hardliners and reformists in that nation; and (5) compel millions of ordinary people in that nation to protest against us and our allies, would you have killed that one man?

**Hussein Kalout**

The United States has decided to renounce the logic that has governed its rivalry with the Iranian regime since 1979. Although U.S. President Donald Trump denies wanting a direct confrontation with Tehran, containing the tensions between the two countries has become unlikely. The selective assassination of Qasem Soleimani is a gamechanger in the Middle Eastern Security architecture and in the mutual deterrence dynamic between Iran and the United States. More than a mere general, Qasem Soleimani was the guardian of Iranian national security and the main strategist of the country's regional power-building project in the Middle East. The US military operation not only eroded the so-called red lines between Washington and Tehran but further disrupted the chessboard that governs the balance of power in the Gulf and in the Levant. For Tehran, the most important move is to force an American exit from Iraq. This is what the Iranian regime has been working to achieve ever since preserving the Syrian regime and its spectrum of alliances.

Raising the pressure to make the US military's presence in Iran's unsustainable is its primary strategic objective at the moment. In the long term, an Iranian victory does not rely on punctual attacks against US military bases in the Gulf or elsewhere, but forcing a U.S. withdrawal from Iraq is much more valuable strategically for the integration of the Iranian "Axis of Resistance". For Iran, the implications of this situation, despite multiple internal differences, will tend to unite the country. The regime will close ranks. The power and legitimacy of reformist and pro-opening forces in Iran will shrink. If the moderates had prevailed over the hardliners in the recent past and succeeded in moving forward with nuclear negotiations, things may have turned out differently, but any remaining hope for a new nuclear deal now seems to be buried. One thing seems certain, however: Soleimani's elimination will rebuild the Iran's unbridled drive to accelerate the resumption of its nuclear program.

**Hassan Ahmadian**

The assassination of General Qasem Soleimani changes U.S.-related dynamics within Iran as well as the rules of engagement between the U.S. and Iran and their respected allies. Iranian debates on whether or not to engage the Trump administration faded away the moment the news of the assassination spread in Iran. It is definitely way harder for Tehran now to engage the United States under Trump. Millions of mourners demanded revenge and the missile attack on U.S. bases are barely viewed proportional on both public and official levels in Iran—as such, there is more to expect in terms of short to medium term retaliation on the Iranian side. For many Iranians, Soleimani was the national hero who not only deterred a U.S. war on Iran in the past two decades, but also was the number one enemy of ISIS and its sister organizations and played a crucial role in defeating them. As such, assassinating him was equivalent to targeting Iran's national security and the safety of Iranians in their daily life.

Diplomacy is for now one of the main victims of the assassination. In such a situation, talking with the Trump administration could elevate to "treason" in the eyes of ordinary Iranians. There will be military and security blowback as well. Crossing a bulging red line, the United States will be faced with a less tolerant "Axis of Resistance" in the Middle East. Tension is expected to heat up with the Axis' retaliation taking a broad regional and more assertive shape. No matter what Trump's calculus on the assassination was, it definitely does not make the region safer for U.S. interests and forces as it turns Iran and its allies within the Axis of Resistance more assertive and demanding when it comes to U.S. presence in the region.

**Payam Mohseni**

The U.S. assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani marks the beginning of a new and more dangerous chapter in the ongoing shadow wars between the Axis of Resistance and U.S. allies in the Middle East. The United States is now signaling that it will assume a more direct role to pushback Iranian-aligned forces in the region. This is significant as it reflects the increasing abandonment of the "leading from behind" strategy undertaken by the Obama administration. It also reflects a failure of the U.S. "maximum pressure" policy to get Iran to the nuclear negotiating table. The United States is thus pursuing a more muscular kinetic approach in order to force Iran to concede in the nuclear arena. The assassination however fails to advance either of these objectives and only further empowers and legitimates Iran and its allies and undermines U.S. credibility and capacity in the region.

The assassination has united Iranians behind the Islamic Republic in a remarkable way, demonstrated by the millions who participated in Soleimani's funeral processions across Iran as a national hero—an astonishing mobilization that brings to mind the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the funeral of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. This grievance and outpouring of devotion to Soleimani has strengthened national awareness and support of Iranian regional policies and significantly augmented the country's political will to resist U.S. pressure and undermined support for democratic domestic activism as evidenced by the small protests following the downing of the Ukrainian airliner. It has also made anti-Americanism a stronger force in the younger generation of Iranian society which had not experienced the Revolution or the Iran-Iraq war.

Importantly, Soleimani's assassination has also united the transnational Shi'a world behind the "Resistance" and inflamed anti-Americanism across regional Shi'a communities representing some 40% of the population of the Middle East. Leading Shi'a religious leaders including Ayatollah Ali Sistani in Iraq eulogized Soleimani as a martyr while condemning his assassination. Given the extant vulnerabilities of pro-American Arab regimes in the Middle East as well as U.S. forces in the region, the transnational popular support, political will, and effective asymmetrical military strategy of Iran and the Resistance firmly places the cards in their favor.

This is all the more the case as Iran and its allies have demonstrated their upgraded technological capabilities through their calibrated missile strikes on a U.S. military base in Iraq and the Saudi Aramco bombings. Within Iran, the missile strikes on the Ain al-Asad base demonstrate that their strategy of deterrence against the United States is working as they stopped potential American military escalation in its tracks. These combined factors will result in Iran and the Axis of Resistance to more forcefully consolidate their positions. Iraq will serve as the first arena in which the United States will see its influence and role directly undermined.

**Hassan Abbas**

Targeting Iran's super star and highly influential General Qasem Soleimani was an extraordinary hit. He had become a symbol of Iranian defiance to the Arab status quo as well as American security interests in the Middle East. Battle hardened through the bloody Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s and later reportedly trained in-part by the Pakistani Special Services Group, he rose to prominence when he emerged in late 1990s as the mastermind behind Iran's regional policy of exerting influence and building alliances through proxy militant groups. He is credited by many as having effectively challenged a range of opponents including the Taliban, Al Qaeda and ISIS (Daesh). However, in parallel he was the lead Iranian strategist who opposed and indirectly fought the U.S. forces in Iraq. His support and collaboration with Lebanon's Hezbollah and Palestinian armed groups placed him in a special enemy status for the United States, and many of their Arab and Gulf allies.

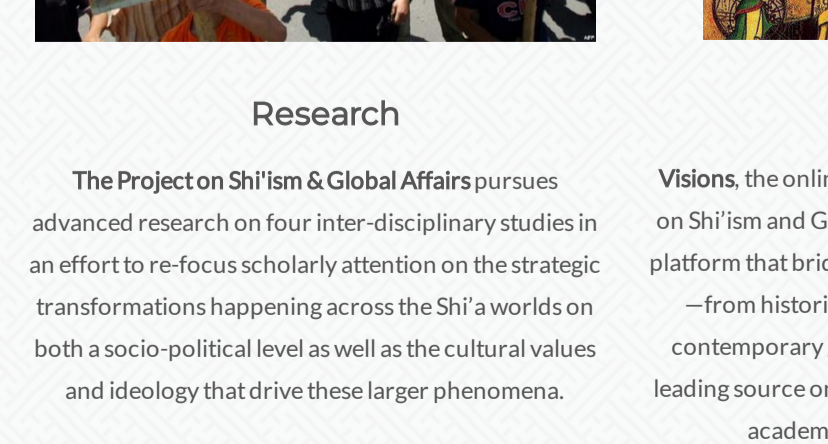
In this sense his elimination is a tactical victory for the United States. However, in the process the US paid a heavy price in the following three arenas: a) Qasem Soleimani's death has potentially given a new lease of life to the Islamic Revolution in Iran as evident from his massive funeral processions in various cities and broad sympathy for him in Iran and at least among the Shi'a Muslims and their allies across Middle East and South Asia, b) losing Iraq in the process as it will be very hard for the United States to re-establish its influence and links with political elite in Iraq especially as the U.S. precision strike also killed Muhandis Abu Mahdi, the popular leader of the Iraqi militias that defeated Daesh, and c) rumors gaining currency that Soleimani was assassinated because he was moving close to cutting a Saudi-Iran deal to freeze their destabilizing rivalry in the region. True or not, popularity of such theories damage U.S. credentials in the region.

While Qasem Soleimani had presumably crossed the Trump administration's red lines, the American reaction has also presented the Trump administration's arena that can be employed by emerging global powers against the U.S. interests and in pursuance of their global ambitions. Only time will tell whether this US action was part of a well thought out long-term strategy or a misstep.

## Publications



**Iran's Retaliation is Not Over**  
Hassan Ahmadian, *Al Jazeera*  
[Read Now](#)

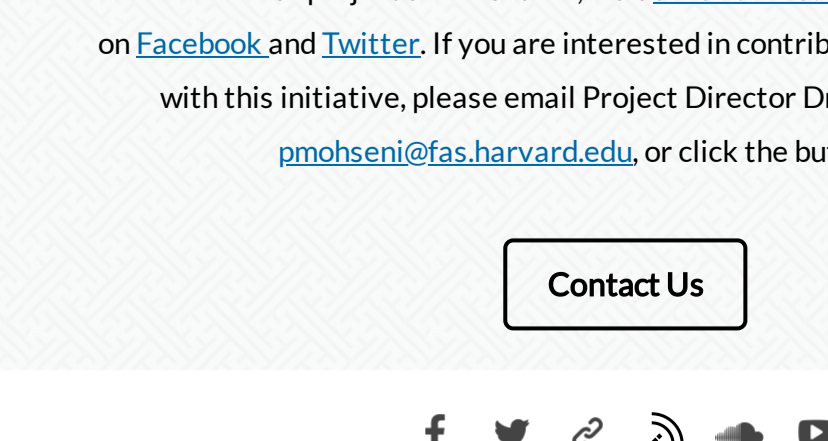


**Is America Safer after the Assassination of Gen. Soleimani?**  
Daniel Khalessi, *The National Interest*. [Publisher's Version](#)  
[Read Now](#)

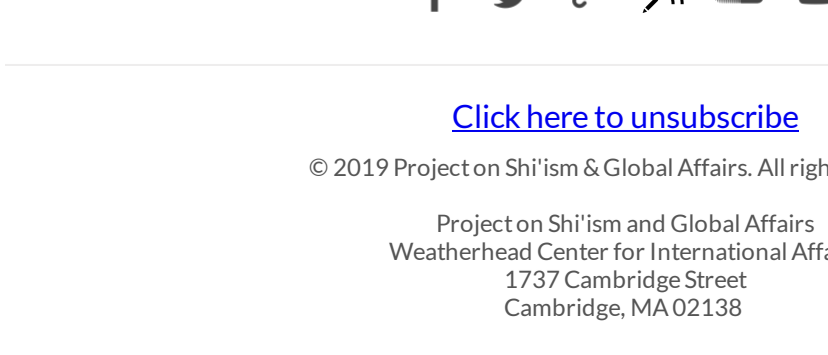


**Why Invading Iran Would Be a Military Disaster (Worse Than Vietnam)**  
Daniel Khalessi and Reid Pauly, *The National Interest*. [Publisher's Version](#)  
[Read More](#)

## Recommended Readings



**Iran's Syria Strategy: The Evolution of Deterrence.**  
Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, *International Affairs*. [Publisher's Version](#)  
As Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni wrote a year ago: "today, the potential for direct inter-state conflict is rising as proxy warfare declines and Iran attempts to maintain the credibility of its forward deterrence."  
[Read More](#)



**Iran's Axis of Resistance Rises: How It's Forging a New Middle East**  
Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, *Foreign Affairs*. [Publisher's Version](#)  
[Read More](#)



**The Myth and Reality of Iraq's al-Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces): A Way Forward**  
Hassan Abbas, *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)*. [Publisher's Version](#)  
[Read More](#)



**The United States Cannot Afford to Pick a Side in the Shia-Sunni Fight**  
Payam Mohseni and Seyed Ammar Nakhjavani, *The National Interest*. [Publisher's Version](#)  
[Read More](#)



**Research**  
The Project on Shi'ism & Global Affairs pursues advanced research on four inter-disciplinary studies in an effort to re-focus scholarly attention on the strategic transformations happening across the Shi'a worlds on both a socio-political level as well as the cultural values and ideology that drive these larger phenomena.  
[See Our Research](#)

**Visions**  
Visions, the online publication platform of the Project on Shi'ism and Global Affairs, provides an educational platform that bridges the dispersed field of Shi'a studies—from historical hagiography and philosophy to contemporary geopolitics and world affairs—into a leading source on the latest analysis on Shi'ism from an academic and scholarly perspective.  
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