

IRAN-US TENSIONS

Tensions between Iran and US have been steadily escalating for months now. Here is a recap:

TERROR BLACKLIST: On April 8, 2019 Washington declares Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard Corps a "terrorist" group. Its Quds Force, which operates abroad, is also put on the blacklist. On May 5, White House national security adviser John Bolton announces the deployment of an aircraft carrier and a bomber task force to the Middle East.

NUCLEAR ACCORD UNRAVELS: On May 8, a year after Washington unilaterally withdrew from an international 2015 deal curbing Iran's nuclear programme and reimposed sanctions, Tehran warns it is prepared to resume nuclear activity. Trump announces new measures against Iran's steel and mining sectors. On November 7, Tehran resumes uranium enrichment at its underground Fordo plant – its fourth walkback from the 2015 nuclear accord.

ATTACKS ON SHIPS: On May 12, four ships, including three oil tankers, are damaged in mysterious attacks in the Gulf that the United States blames on Iran. Two tankers, Norwegian and Japanese, come under attack in the Gulf of Oman on June 13. Washington, London and Riyadh blame Iran, which denies involvement.

US DRONE SHOT DOWN: Iran's Revolutionary Guard says on June 20 it shot down a US drone which violated Iranian airspace near the Strait of Hormuz. Trump approves a retaliatory strike, but cancels it at the last minute.

SAUDI OIL ATTACK: On September 14, aerial attacks claimed by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels spark fires at two major Saudi oil facilities. Tehran is accused by the United States and other powers of being responsible but denies involvement.

US BACKS PROTESTERS: Iran is furious when the US expresses support for protesters who take to the streets on November 15 after a fuel price hike. The White House condemns Iran for using "lethal force". Iran's foreign ministry criticises "American economic terrorism". SOURCE: AFP

AGENCIES

Iran's Revolutionary Guards commander Qassem Soleimani's death in Iraq has opened a new chapter in the region's endless conflicts and no one can predict how this will turn out.

The world reacted with alarm yesterday after Soleimani was killed in a US strike, with leaders appealing for restraint. Iran has warned of "severe revenge" and its regional proxies have vowed to avenge his death.

In the latest tit-for-tat round of the proxy war in Iraq, an American contractor had been killed in a rocket attack on Friday, triggering retaliatory airstrikes against Iranian-supported militia camps. This in turn led to the storming of the US embassy compound by pro-Iran militiamen, in which no one appears to have been hurt.

Washington delivered its most decisive blow early yesterday when a volley of strikes hit near Baghdad international airport, leaving two cars torched on the access highway. Iran's Revolutionary Guards confirmed Soleimani was killed in the strike, while Iraq's Hashed al-Shaabi announced its deputy chief Muhandis's death.

The killing was not like other attacks to eliminate enemies of the US—the raids that killed Osama bin Laden or IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Soleimani was a major public figure in Iran, a Major General in Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, who was easily the most popular official in an Iranian government that generally is not. Inside Iran, and on social media posts circulated globally, he was the frontman

of, as well as chief architect for, Iran's regional ambitions – in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and, most immediately in Iraq, where he met his end.

He was arguably Iran's second most powerful figure after the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Killing him can be seen as a blunt act of war against a substantial regional power. Its half-million-strong armed services are the most potent military force the US has faced since confronting the Chinese



People's Volunteer Army more than 60 years ago in Korea.

Analysts say the killings threaten to drag Iraq into the abyss of regional conflict.

Slamming the strike as an "aggression," Iraq's caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi said it would "spark a devastating war in Iraq."

Fanar Haddad of Singapore University's Middle East Institute said: "Iran's strongest cards are in Iraq, and I

think that Iraq will pay the price for this."

Analysts said the outbreak of a wider conflict was looking increasingly likely.

Following the killing, Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement vowed "appropriate punishment" and Yemen's pro-Tehran Houthi rebels called for "swift reprisals".

"If Iran does need to respond and make a performance out of this, the fear is that there will be something more than just loading rockets at embassies,"

said Haddad.

"It could set Iraq along the path of internal conflict and that's something Iran can very easily instigate," he said.

There will be difficult questions like who leaked Soleimani's whereabouts in Iraq to US. And those will be hard to answer.

There was nothing inevitable about this conflict. Six years ago the legacy of loathing left by the Islamic Revolution began to fade. There was a multilateral

agreement to curb Iran's nuclear programme in 2015, and an unspoken mutual non-aggression pact with Suleimani during the shared campaign against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

"For a while when we were doing counter-Isis operations, we essentially had a gentleman's agreement with him, that his forces wouldn't target us and we wouldn't target him," Kirsten Fontenrose, the former senior director for the Gulf in Trump's national security council, told The Guardian.

But with Trump's abrogation of the 2015 nuclear deal and the collapse of the IS caliphate, which largely removed a common foe, it was Suleimani who emerged as the US's arch-enemy.

Fontenrose predicted that, while the Iran-backed militias in Iraq might lash out immediately, in revenge for one of their own top commanders killed alongside Suleimani, Tehran would wait and pick the time, place and manner of its retribution – again and again possibly over years to come.

"I think they'll probably try to hit us in other parts of the world, maybe west Africa maybe Latin America to send the message that they could get us anywhere – we should never feel safe. And I think the US is going to kind of try to spread out our assault in a similar way," she said.

"I don't think we're looking at a war. I think we're looking at a series of asymmetric semi-unpredictable strikes against each other's interests."

But where this new raised level of tensions will lead is hard to tell. Both sides have a long history of misreading each other's intentions and overreaching.

KILLING OF TOP IRAN COMMANDER

WORLD REACTION

"There is no doubt that the great nation of Iran and the other free nations of the region will take revenge for this gruesome crime from criminal America."



Iran President Hasan Rouhani



"This is a moment in which leaders must exercise maximum restraint. The world cannot afford another war in the Gulf."

UN chief Antonio Guterres

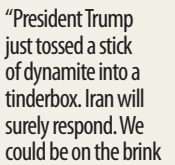
"This action can seriously aggravate the situation in the region."

Russian President Vladimir Putin



"Wow - the price of killing and injuring Americans has just gone up drastically."

US Senator Lindsey Graham



"President Trump just tossed a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox. Iran will surely respond. We could be on the brink of a major conflict across the Middle East."

Former US vice president Joe Biden



"Meting out the appropriate punishment to these criminal assassins... will be the responsibility and task of all resistance fighters worldwide."

CHINA APPEALS FOR RESTRAINT

"China has always opposed the use of force in international relations," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a press briefing. "We urge the relevant sides, especially the United States, to remain calm and exercise restraint to avoid further escalating tensions." He said Iraq's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity must be respected.

COWARDLY US AGGRESSION: SYRIA

Syria is "certain that this cowardly US aggression... will only strengthen determination to follow in the path of the resistance's martyred leaders," a foreign ministry official said. The strike was "part of the (US) policy aiming to create tensions and fuel conflict in countries in the region".

BERLIN URGES 'PRUDENCE'

"We are at a dangerous point of escalation. It is now important through prudence and restraint to contribute to de-escalation," said Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer.

YEMEN REBELS FOR 'SWIFT REPRISALS'

Yemen's Houthi rebels called Friday for "swift reprisals". "We condemn this killing and direct and swift reprisals are the answer," senior rebel political official Mohammed Ali al-Huthi tweeted. SOURCE: AFP

GENERAL QASEM SOLEIMANI

IRAN'S REGIONAL POINTMAN

AFP, Tehran

Revolutionary Guards commander Qasem Soleimani, who was killed Friday in a US strike, was one of the most popular figures in Iran and seen as a deadly adversary by America and its allies.

General Soleimani, who headed the external operations Quds Force for the Guards, had wielded his regional clout publicly since 2018 when it was revealed that he had direct involvement in top-level talks over the formation of Iraq's government.

His profile rose suddenly when he was pushed forward as the public face of Iran's intervention in the Syrian conflict from 2013, appearing in battlefield photos, documentaries -- and even being featured in a music video and animated film.

In a rare interview aired on Iranian state television in October, he said he was in Lebanon during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war to oversee the conflict.

To his fans and enemies alike, Soleimani was the key architect of Iran's regional influence, leading the fight against jihadist



forces and extending Iran's diplomatic heft in Iraq, Syria and beyond.

"To Middle Eastern Shias, he is James Bond, Erwin Rommel and Lady Gaga rolled into one," wrote former CIA analyst Kenneth Pollack in a profile for Time's 100 most influential people in 2017.

"To the West, he is... responsible for exporting Iran's Islamic revolution, supporting terrorists, subverting pro-Western governments and waging Iran's foreign wars," Pollack added.

While he has dismissed rumours he might one day run for president, the general

Renewed fire threat sparks exodus to Australian cities

AFP, Nourra

Beleaguered Australian communities braced for yet more catastrophic bushfire conditions expected today, as Australia's navy evacuated around one thousand people from a southeastern town.

In the town of Mallacoota, residents and tourists hemmed to the foreshore since New Year's Eve fires clambered aboard landing craft with family, pets and a few belongings.

By late yesterday, around 1,000 had been taken to the HMAS Choules and the MV Sycamore, which were to sail down the coast to safety.

Since late September, at least 20 people have died, dozens have gone missing, more than 1,300 homes have been damaged and an area roughly double the size of Belgium or Hawaii has burned.

But experts predict Saturday could bring even more devastating conditions with temperatures expected to rise well above 40 degrees Celsius (104 Fahrenheit).

A state of emergency has been declared across much of Australia's heavily populated southeast and more than 100,000 people have been told to leave their homes across three states.

"There is still a window for people to leave," said New South Wales premier Gladys Berejiklian. "If you don't need to be in the area, you need to leave."

Thousands of tourists, heeding that warning, abandoned their summer holidays on a popular 300-kilometre (190-mile) length of the southeastern coastline, prompting queues of cars stretching toward Sydney and Canberra.

Eloise Givney, 26, escaped from the blazes with a police escort after she and a large group of family members spent four days isolated without power, phones or internet.

"The fire came within about 50 metres of us and we drove through fire, because there's only one road in and one road out," she told AFP.

Emergency declared across the southeast

100,000 people told to leave their homes across three states



This handout photo taken yesterday and released by the Royal Australian Navy shows people being evacuated from Mallacoota, Victoria state on a landing craft to MV Sycamore, during bushfire relief efforts.

PHOTO: AFP

CHINA'S CRACKDOWN ON UIGHUR MUSLIMS

100 graveyards destroyed

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

China has demolished more than 100 Uighur graveyards in what human rights groups described as an escalation of the Communist regime's campaign to destroy the Muslim minority's culture.

Hundreds of satellite images analysed by CNN showed burial sites in western Xinjiang province have been wiped out, with some turned into car parks and playgrounds.

The US broadcaster found the majority of the cemeteries, where generations of Uighurs had been buried, were destroyed over the last two years.

Aziz Isa Elkun, a Uighur poet who fled the region more than 20 years ago and now lives in London, said he had "visited" his father's grave on Google Earth for nearly two years after he died. But one day an updated satellite image showed the cemetery had been replaced with a field.

"I had no idea what happened," he told CNN. "I was completely in shock."

China did not deny destroying the cemeteries, and at least one official notice said one of the burial sites been

relocated "to meet the demand of city planning and promote construction".

A spokesperson for Beijing told CNN: "Governments... in Xinjiang fully respect and guarantee the freedom of all ethnic groups... to choose cemeteries, and funeral and burial methods."

Sophie Richardson, China director at Human Rights Watch, told The Independent: "Authorities in Beijing and Urumqi don't seem content tormenting Turkic Muslims alive today – it appears their hostility to that community also extends to the dead."

"Trying to justify the destruction of cultural property on the grounds of fighting terrorism or urban planning fools no one – instead it reinforces the urgent need for an independent international investigation into gross human rights violations across the region."

Last year, AFP reporters who visited some of the destroyed burial grounds which had been identified from satellite images analysed by Earthwise Alliance described seeing unearthened bones which independent forensic experts said were human remains.



'Are you Pak ambassador?'

Mamata hits out at Modi asking why he frequently compares India with Pakistan

Pri, Siliguri

Hitting out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi for "frequently comparing India with Pakistan", West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee yesterday wondered if he was an "ambassador of Hindustan or the neighbouring country".

Mamata, while addressing an anti-citizenship law rally in Siliguri, said it was a shame that people were being asked to prove their nationality, even after 70 years of Independence.

"India is a big country with a rich culture and heritage. Why does the PM regularly compare our nation with Pakistan? Are you the prime minister of India or the ambassador of Pakistan?"

"Why do you have to refer to Pakistan in every issue? You (Modi) should rather speak of Hindustan. We don't want to be Pakistan. We love Hindustan," she said.

Modi had on Thursday dared the Congress and its allies to raise their

voice against Pakistan's atrocities on its minorities for the past 70 years.

Mamata, who is also the TMC supremo, said the prime minister and his party spoke of Pakistan every now and then to divert attention from the prevailing economic crisis and unemployment in India.

"If someone says give me job as I have no work, PM says go to Pakistan. If someone says we don't have any industries, he says go to Pakistan. Pakistan can talk about themselves as much as they want, we should talk about India, this is our motherland, all of us were born here..." she said.

The TMC boss vowed to continue her protests till the amended citizenship Act was repealed.

"On one hand, the prime minister says there will be no NRC; on the other, the union home minister and other BJP ministers claim the exercise will be conducted across the country," she said accusing the BJP leaders of creating confusion.

