

Terrorism Monitor

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AFGHANISTAN: TALIBAN'S ACTIONS WILL HELP DECIDE FUTURE IS-K

Brian M. Perkins

As the United States and the Taliban are set to begin a partial truce as part of long-running attempts to strike a peace deal, Afghanistan's other preeminent militant group, Islamic State Khorosan (IS-K), remains ambitious and still commands an estimated force of around 2,500 fighters ([Benar News](#), February 7). Despite suffering significant losses in its primary base of Nangarhar in late 2019, a large number of fighters managed to escape through Kunar Province or the Spin Ghar mountains and into Pakistan and are looking to regroup.

The successful operations conducted by Afghan forces in Nangarhar in 2019 significantly disrupted the group but also illuminated the breadth of IS-K's appeal and recruitment efforts. Among those captured were fighters from Azerbaijan, Canada, France, India, Maldives, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan ([The Hindu](#), February 11). There has yet to be a large-scale operation against regrouped IS-K fighters in Kunar, and the group is also still present in the north and west in Faryab and Herat Provinces ([Tolo News](#), December 24, 2019). The Taliban was reportedly also involved in the operations

against IS-K and had also ramped up operations against the group elsewhere in late 2019.

IS-K is no longer the imposing force it was in years past, but it retains a significant core of fighters and is still capable of recruiting new members, including those from outside of Afghanistan. The questions now are whether the Afghan government can, or will, conduct sustained operations against the group and what implications the tentative truce/peace deal with the Taliban will have on IS-K.

The Taliban, as a whole, has been a staunch opponent of IS-K since its arrival in Afghanistan. An increase in attempts to weaken the group have coincided with progress toward peace negotiations, a fact which indicates that the Taliban, too, is concerned about the potential for a peace deal further empowering IS-K. A deal could allow the group to act as a significant spoiler by drawing a large number of disillusioned Taliban members that are against, or do not benefit from, a peace deal. The Taliban has continued these attempts and most recently, on February 8, released a video depicting IS-K fighters surrendering to its members in Kunar ([Jihadology](#), February 8).

An IS-K resurgence will largely hinge on the Taliban's actions in the coming months and year. First, the Taliban's efforts against IS-K have been critical to keeping the group in check, and there are questions as to whether the Afghan forces' operations in Nangarhar would have been as successful if not for IS-K suffering previous losses at the hands of the Taliban. The Taliban could empower IS-K again if it resumes fighting on the same scale seen in 2019, drawing significant focus and resources away from the fight against IS-K. At the same time, progress toward a peace deal in the absence of significant gains against IS-K could leave the group in a powerful enough position to continue recruitment and the ability to draw in disenfranchised Taliban members at a particularly fragile time. Either way, the Taliban will play a critical role in what the future holds for IS-K.

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EGYPT LOOKS TO COUNTER TURKEY ACROSS AFRICA

Brian M. Perkins

Egyptian President Abdel el-Sisi called for the creation of a pan-African force to combat terrorist groups across the continent during the 33rd African Union Summit in Addis Ababa and transfer of the African Union (AU) presidency to South Africa on February 9 ([Egypt Today](#), February 9). Egypt is still struggling with a resilient Islamic State (IS) insurgency in the Sinai, terrorist groups are rapidly gaining ground across the Sahel, and East Africa is facing a growing terrorism threat. Sisi's calls for a pan-African force, however, are not only security motivated. The move must also be seen in the context of countering Turkey's involvement across Africa and Egypt's broader attempts to reassert its influence and transregional leadership.

While Egypt's time at the head of the AU was not universally successful, the country managed to accomplish quite a few goals, particularly by rebuilding relationships on the continent that were sorely strained by Sisi's contentious rise to power—which is a key cause for Egypt's stance against Turkey, as it gave refuge to the Muslim Brotherhood following the coup. Despite being on the Peace and Security Council, the transfer of the AU presidency to South Africa still somewhat lessens Egypt's transregional influence and pulls the country back from the diplomatic forefront on African affairs. Cairo is undoubtedly keen to avoid taking a back seat.

Like many other countries, particularly in North Africa, Egypt has watched as international state and non-state actors have exerted increased influence and leveraged military and counterterrorism support to their geopolitical and economic advantage, often to the detriment of African nations. The conflict in Libya, and particularly Turkey's involvement there, continues to deeply unsettle the Egyptian government. Turkey's Mediterranean agreement with the GNA is demonstrative of the Egyptian perception of opportunities stolen away by non-African actors. The Egyptian government has made its disdain for Turkey's role in Libya public and unconfirmed reports have indicated that Abbas Kamel, the head of Egypt's General Intelligence Service, has visited multiple countries—which remain unknown—to forge military intelligence alliances to counter Turkey's involvement in the region ([Arab Weekly](#), February 18).

Looking beyond neighboring countries, Turkey's presence has also notably grown in Somalia, another area of strategic importance for Egypt. Turkey maintains a military base in Mogadishu, where it has helped to train Somali soldiers. Like Egypt, Turkey has also signed memorandums of understanding to begin exploring for oil off Somalia's coast, further adding to Egypt's perception that Turkey is challenging both African and Arab interests in the region ([MOPMR](#), February 12). Turkish President Erdogan even referenced Libya during a press conference about Somalia, stating "There is an offer from Somalia. They are saying: 'There is oil in our seas. You are carrying out these operations with Libya, but you can also do them here'" ([Al Jazeera](#), January 21). Further, there is ongoing tension over Somalia and Kenya's maritime borders, a conflict that Egypt has been at the forefront of trying to calm (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), July 12, 2019).

A hypothetical pan-African military force would serve the dual purpose of reducing terrorism while providing Egypt with the ability to bring itself closer to regional countries as a means to counter Turkey and boost its own influence within the region. While the likelihood of this force being stood up is seemingly slim, Egypt is likely to continue its efforts through multilateral meetings and partnerships, such as the country's recent hosting of a joint meeting with Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso, where Sisi once again reiterated his desire to push forward the creation of this force. The country's efforts in the Sahel are both a response to Turkish involvement in Libya and a way to project regional leadership at a time when the country could fill the potential vacuum that would be left if the United States does pivot away from the region.

Brian M. Perkins is the Editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Whither al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula?

Michael Horton

On January 29, an airstrike killed Qasim al-Raymi, the "emir" of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Al-Raymi, who assumed the leadership of AQAP in 2015, has been reported dead on numerous occasions in the past. However, on February 6, the White House released a statement confirming al-Raymi's death ([al-Jazeera](#), February 7).

What does the death of al-Raymi mean for AQAP's future operations and long-term strategies? In short, very little. While al-Raymi was, by some accounts, a skilled tactician, his influence within the organization was never as pronounced as that of his predecessor, Nasir al-Wuhayshi. While this partly reflects the different styles and core competencies of the two leaders, more importantly, it reflects the fact that AQAP has moved away from relying on a hierarchical core for leadership. [1] Instead, it is implementing an atomized organizational structure that empowers local operatives. [2] AQAP has also reordered its priorities and objectives.

Such changes began as early as 2017. They were a response to the increased pressure from coalition-backed forces and the fluid socio-political environment that AQAP must navigate. [3] While AQAP maintains a veneer of ideology, it has long since deprioritized imposing strict interpretations of sharia, holding territory, and carrying out attacks on foreign targets. Instead, AQAP's focus is parochial and pragmatic. [4]

One of AQAP's core strategies is the seeding of its operatives and fighters throughout Yemen's disparate collection of security forces and militias. AQAP fighters have been knowingly and unknowingly recruited into many of these forces which operate throughout south Yemen and in pockets of territory in northern Yemen. Various fighting forces—even those opposed to one another—value these operatives and fighters for their expertise, discipline, and, in some cases, for their ability to access dark networks ([Terrorism Monitor](#), January 26, 2018). AQAP and the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY) have benefited directly and indirectly from the involvement of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Both countries have, at times, de-prioritized battling AQAP in favor of fighting the Houthis and pursuing their own objectives

in Yemen ([The New Arab](#), June 12, 2018; [al-Jazeera](#), August 6, 2018). AQAP-linked fighters fight alongside many of Yemen's militias and security forces, most notably in the still-contested city of Taiz and in the governorates of Marib and al-Jawf. [5]

The seeding and even the hiring out of its fighters to various militias is a way of securing influence, funds, and access to illicit trade networks. All of these are fundamental to AQAP's long-term survival and to the survival of its operatives. AQAP has followed the tactical and strategic moves that have been made by many terrorist and insurgent groups. Groups like al-Qaeda in Syria, which adeptly morphed into various "moderate" rebel groups, and others are tailoring their strategies and tactics to very local contexts. Access to illicit trade networks and engagement with emergent elites and external powers are more useful than ideological adherence and costly foreign terrorist attacks.

AQAP is weaker in some respects. It no longer has the same capability that it once had to orchestrate attacks abroad, although this capability was always quite limited. AQAP is also no longer able to hold and govern large areas as it did in 2015 and 2016. However, this diminishment is only partly due to counter-terrorism efforts. It also reflects AQAP's attempts to remake itself in the face of the many-sided conflict in Yemen.

The complexity of Yemen's interlocking and overlapping wars demands that AQAP focus on what are often very local agendas and battles ([Middle East Eye](#), August 3, 2019). Understanding, much less figuring out, how to benefit from the wars in Yemen, is akin to playing three-dimensional chess with missing pieces. Ever-shifting alliances between Yemen's many warring parties and their external backers continue to test and recast Yemen's established and emergent political factions, its militias, as well as terrorist organizations such as AQAP and the Islamic State in Yemen (ISY) ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 17, 2019).

AQAP's atomization is, at least partly, its strategy for taking advantage of the disorder in Yemen. By transitioning into some kind of umbrella organization that no longer relies on a hierarchical core, AQAP can more easily insert itself, or at least its operatives, into localized conflicts. Both former and current AQAP operatives and fighters are active in large swaths of Yemen where they operate alongside various militias and security forces. This is particularly the case along the hotly contested frontlines between the Houthis and their allies, Saudi-

backed forces, and UAE-backed forces in south Yemen. Places like the gateway city of Taiz and the governorate of al-Bayda yield abundant opportunities for AQAP, and, to a lesser degree, ISY, to build influence, tap dark networks (especially those that engage in arms trafficking), and to sell their services as fighters ([Inside Arabia](#), January 30).

Just as war drives innovation and change in war-fighting technologies, it also supercharges the evolution of insurgent and terrorist groups. An organization's failure to change in response to the dynamic environment in which it operates likely portends its end. AQAP's resilience is a testament to the group's ability to remake itself. The complexity of Yemen's interlocking wars and the prolonged involvement of outside powers mean that AQAP has been forced to evolve into a more diffuse organization. This will impact the "AQAP" brand and may mean that AQAP becomes something of a constellation of loosely allied groups in Yemen. At the same time, AQAP will be less legible than it has been in the past. This lack of legibility is very much in its interest as it attempts to evade counter-terrorism efforts, access illicit networks, and profit from Yemen's wars. AQAP's evolution may point toward how the next wave of insurgent and terrorist groups will operate. These groups will be more amorphous, increasingly local, and more purposefully illegible.

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Notes

[1] Author interview, Yemen based analyst, January 2020; author interview former Yemeni security official, February 2020.

[2] There are persistent rumors in Yemen that many in AQAP regarded al-Raymi with suspicion. In the past, AQAP has used coalition (United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia) strikes as a way to "shape" the socio-cultural terrain and even the organization itself by eliminating internal and external enemies. Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia maintain extensive networks of informal and formal agents whose job is to gather intelligence on potential targets. As with any intelligence network, especially those that are poorly monitored and often working at cross-purposes, these networks are permeable.

[3] See: "Fighting the Long War: The Evolution of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula," CTC Sentinel, January 2017.

[4] This is not to say that AQAP will not try to inspire "lone wolf" attacks abroad. Most recently AQAP claimed credit for directing Saudi Arabian Air Force officer Mohammed Saeed al-Shamrani to launch a terror attack in Pensacola, Florida on December 6, 2019 (Middle East Monitor, December 8, 2019). AQAP's ties to Al-Shamrani remain unclear.

[5] Author interviews with Yemen based analysts and journalists, February 2020.

Islamic State-Inspired Knife Attack Exposes the Vulnerability of the Maldives

Animesh Roul

The image of the Maldives as a tropical paradise received a significant jolt on February 4, when three foreign nationals—two Chinese and one Australian—were stabbed and injured by Islamist militants near the Hulhumale Redbull Park Futsal Ground in the country's North Male Atoll. The incident happened amid growing concerns about secret extremist networks inspired by transnational jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS) that are active in the country.

The hitherto unknown extremist media outlet al-Mus-taqim released a video message on February 5, shortly after the stabbings, featuring three unidentified masked men. The nearly three-minute video message was in the local Dhivehi language with a couple of Quranic verses in Arabic. However, the video has English subtitles claiming responsibility for the knife attacks, stating, "We announce to you that we claim responsibility for the recent stabbings of tourists [in the Maldives]." It further states that "the portrayal that this [Maldives] is paradise [...] has become a mirage. From now on, the only thing they [foreign travelers] will taste [in the Maldives] is fire" ([Twitter.com/nautymatox](https://twitter.com/nautymatox), February 5).

This short video was shared on multiple social media platforms and warned of future violence and heavily criticized the Maldivian government and its leaders as "apostates." While inciting Maldivians to take up arms for retribution, the message urged them to "stand up against the oppression of Muslims." It also accused the Maldivian government of causing distress to Muslims only to please "the *taghout* (unbelievers) from America, the West and India." Broadly, the Islamists have threatened to launch further knife attacks ("sharp blades") on travelers to spread fear among visitors and hurt the tourism industry. The message suggested hitting the "vulnerable" parts of the country, i.e., the tourism sector, which is the backbone of the Maldivian economy ([Raajje.MV](https://raajje.mv), February 6). Though the message didn't claim any IS links or inspirations or use any IS insignia, it had a jihadist *nashid* (or *tarana*, meaning anthem) running at the start of the video that was previously used by

IS propaganda units. [1] Nevertheless, IS has not officially claimed the knife attacks in the Maldives, yet.

Stabbing or knife attacks are prevalent in the Maldives, and knives and machetes seem to be the preferred weapon for criminal and gang entities. However, knife attacks against tourists or foreigners are rare. The recent incident was a stark reminder of the first-ever Islamist terrorist attack in the Maldives, which took place in Male in September 2007, targeting foreign nationals. A crude improvised explosive device (IED) injured nearly 12 foreigners, including tourists from the United Kingdom, Japan, and China in the capital's Sultan Park area. The attack targeted the tourism industry for its alleged un-Islamic practices and sinful influence on local culture. A massive crackdown across the country prompted extremist elements to flee the country (see [Terrorism Monitor](#), February 12, 2010).

Meanwhile, by February 13, Maldivian police claimed to have arrested seven Islamists for the early February incidents, some of whom previously engaged in spreading extremist ideologies in Madduvarri, Raa Atoll ([Edition](#), February 15). Though security agencies investigating the recent attacks have yet to divulge any details about the connection, the knife attacks could be revenge for the search and sweep operation codenamed Operation Asseyri, which was conducted on Madduvarri Island in December 2019.

Maduvvari, Radical Paradise

Operation Asseyri was conducted to check religious extremism, to investigate cases of separatism that were being conducted under the guise of Islamic practices, and to cease the exploitation of women and children. The operation also aimed to curb the spread of terrorist propaganda and recruitment drives in Maduvvari. During the weeklong crackdown, which commenced in the sparsely inhabited island on December 18, a joint force of Maldivian Army and police arrested several Islamists who had denied their family members (women and children) education and primary health care under the garb of strict adherence to Islamic practices ([The Sun](#), December 21, 2019; [Edition](#), January 8). Close scrutiny of the recent Islamist video message reveals a cryptic mention of this operation that perhaps led to the attack: "Your presumption that after deceiving the masses you can snatch our wives and children from us and dismantle our families and then live in peace is false."

For the first time, the country's security apparatus geared up against groups of radicalized individuals in Maduvvari, which is fertile ground for terrorist recruitment and indoctrination. Many of the radical individuals who have traveled to Syria and Afghanistan have a connection with Maduvvari and its version of radical Islam. According to media reports citing security sources, radicalized individuals in the community consider the Maldives a "land of sin," and believe people who do not subscribe to their extremist views are "infidels" ([Edition](#), December 22, 2019). There were also cases related to "child brides" in Maduvvari that surfaced in November last year, which prompted the authorities to monitor the island closely ([Maldives Independent](#), November 24, 2019).

The operation in Maduvvari is not the only eye-opening case for the Maldivian government and security agencies. The lack of monitoring and surveillance on its remote inhabited islands led them to become hubs of extremism in the past. A similar situation surfaced in October 2007 following the Sultan Park bombing, when security forces unearthed a breeding ground for extremists in the illegal Dhar-ul-Khair mosque on the isolated island of Himandhoo after a violent confrontation. Subsequently, an al-Qaeda linked jihadist forum showcased the mosque standoff in its propaganda video ([Minivan News/Web Archive](#), October 9, 2007 ; [Minivan Archive](#), February 10, 2010).

IS Still has Traction

In October 2019, Maldivian security agencies arrested Mohamad Ameen, an Islamist militant recruiter associated with IS. Local media reports blamed Ameen for changing the religious profile of Maduvvari during his banishment there a decade ago ([The Sun](#), December 19, 2019). Security officials also came out publicly and raised concerns over the recent high rate of radicalization in the country. According to information shared by the country's top police official, Mohamed Hameed, there are around 1,400 radicalized individuals in the Maldives who subscribe to violent extremist ideology and, "who would not hesitate to kill in the name of Islam" ([Maldives Independent](#), December 17, 2019). Around the same time, Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) sources revealed that several radicalized individuals operating in the Maldives think of education as a "Western idea" and kept their children away from mainstream schooling. The MNDF official also revealed how Islamists are averse to vaccination drives in the

country's remote islands and consider preventative healthcare “antithetical to reliance on God.” In mid-January, Maldives Police initiated an investigation into ongoing anti-vaccination campaigns on social media purportedly run by Islamist groups ([The Edition](#), December 16, 2019; [Edition](#), January 15).

Officially, 173 radicalized Maldivians have traveled to Syria to fight alongside jihadist groups linked with al-Qaeda and IS, while 432 have reportedly attempted to travel to Syria ([The Edition](#), December 18, 2019). These official statistics did not mention Maldivians who traveled and joined IS’ branch in Afghanistan, where a court has sentenced a Maldivian couple for charges related to terrorism. Unsurprisingly, the Maldives has earned notoriety for being one of the most significant per capita contributors of foreign jihadist fighters to Syria and Iraq. Even though there maybe discrepancies in official numbers, it portrays a bleak picture of how radicalized Maldivians desire to join the ongoing jihad in Syria or Afghanistan.

A 2015 landmark report titled, “A Preliminary Assessment of Radicalisation in the Maldives,” warned long before about this prevailing situation in the country. [2] The report was produced by the Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN)—which was dissolved following lobbying by Islamists—and warned about growing extremism in the country, the role of Salafist NGOs and the role social media plays in radicalization in the Maldives ([Maldives Times](#), October 8, 2019). The report also exposed how the extremist ideal is diluting the religious belief system of Maldivian society at large. Long after the MDN report, the government-approved Commission on Disappearances and Deaths unearthed and revealed for the first time al-Qaeda and IS networks and their crimes in the country. The present coalition government under President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has no choice but to tackle the long-ignored extremist threat, irrespective of political pressures and religious orientations.

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Notes

[1] A shorter version of the video is still accessible at the time of this writing. See, Twitter, February 05, <https://twitter.com/i/status/1225093264883122176>

[2] The Full text of the Report Titled “A Preliminary Assessment of Radicalisation in the Maldives” can be accessed at <https://www.docdroid.net/qyCy9gk/preliminary-assessment-of-radicalisation-in-the-maldives-final80856731625919353631.pdf>

What's Next for Hezbollah After Soleimani?

Andrew Devereux

The death of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Qasem Soleimani has caused aftershocks in the Middle East and farther afield. His assassination was surprising, with U.S. forces taking advantage of Soleimani's presence in Baghdad to target his convoy with a fatal drone strike. Since his death, despite aggressive rhetoric from Tehran and its allies, the military response has been limited; Iranian missile strikes against two Iraqi bases that host U.S. forces that caused no deaths have been the extent of the Iranian response ([Middle East Online](#), January 7).

Long-term repercussions have taken precedence over the short-term implications, as both the United States and Iran have moved away from direct military confrontation. One of the most pertinent questions is what impact Soleimani's death will have on Tehran's most important proxy ally—the Lebanese political and militant force, Hezbollah.

Hezbollah and Tehran – Proxy and Commander

The relationship between Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and Soleimani was well documented. In a rare television interview in October 2019, Soleimani recounted how he and Nasrallah were almost killed in an Israeli drone strike during the Second Lebanon War in 2006, while officials have spoken of their “unique and close” friendship ([Middle East Eye](#), January 17). Soleimani also had a close relationship with Imad Mughniyeh, a Hezbollah leader killed in Syria in 2008, and Mohammed Hejazi, who led IRGC forces in Lebanon. The three were at the heart of modernizing Hezbollah weaponry, with Tehran providing high-precision missiles under Soleimani's direction ([Jerusalem Post](#), January 22).

Soleimani described how he oversaw military operations in Lebanon throughout the 2006 conflict and was in constant communication with Tehran and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ([Asharq Al-Awsat](#), October 3, 2019). Hezbollah has remained under the direction of Soleimani and IRGC forces, with Nasrallah taking direction from Tehran. Soleimani coordinated Hezbollah's intervention in the Syrian war to ensure pro-Iranian President Bashar al-As-

sad reasserted power over large swathes of the country while also ensuring a permanent presence for both Hezbollah and Iranian forces in south-western Syria ([Asharq as-Awsat](#), October 2, 2019). A second front against Israel is one of many converging military goals for Hezbollah and the IRGC.

Hezbollah is a vital component of the so-called ‘axis of resistance,’ also composed of the Syrian Assad government and Iran. Out of all of Iran's proxy allies, including Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen and Shia militias in Iraq and Bahrain, Hezbollah's military and political clout make it Iran's greatest regional ally. Hezbollah benefits from significant material, financial, and tactical assistance from Tehran, with the IRGC's ability to send supplies extended in recent years by the expansion of the land corridor from Tehran to Beirut, utilizing its allies in Baghdad and Damascus to protect supply chains ([Arab News](#), June 13, 2017).

Nasrallah's rhetoric in the aftermath of Soleimani's death was predictably fiery. Nasrallah claimed that Hezbollah would “raise his [Soleimani's] flag in all battlefields” and there would be “retaliation against the American military presence in our region” ([Islam Times](#), January 3). This sort of adversarial reaction was largely symbolic and intended to show solidarity with Tehran. Despite this reiteration of commitment, the promise of reprisal killings has not emerged in reality.

Lack of Military Response

There has been no internal movement against U.S. troops or assets within Lebanon. In reality, the United States only has a minimal security presence in Lebanon, limited to low-level troop deployments in two Lebanese sites ([The National](#), January 11). The scope for retaliation against such bases is negligible, owing to the potential for Lebanese civilian or military casualties. The United States also trains and equips the Lebanese Army, which is separate from Hezbollah's military wing. This is largely due to the fact that the United States views the regular armed forces as a counterweight against Hezbollah's military might.

In the long term, Hezbollah is likely to continue its campaign of disrupting, restricting and intersecting the United States and its allies' military operations near Lebanese borders, but Nasrallah's bellicose rhetoric has proved to be nothing more than symbolic resolve with Iran. Some evidence of troop movement near the Israeli border has emerged, but this is normal practice. Recip-

rocal, but low-level, acts of aggression with Israel are credible, but the likelihood of direct confrontation targeting U.S. assets became minimal after Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said Iran's response concluded with the missile attacks on the U.S. bases in Iraq ([Tehran Times](#), February 15).

Domestic Issues

A large part of this rationale is that Hezbollah does not want to get drawn into a regional conflict at this juncture due to the domestic political situation in Lebanon. Since October 2019, the country has been rocked by large-scale anti-government protests, with activists demonstrating against a corrupt political elite and spiraling economic crisis ([Arab News](#), January 19). Nasrallah has spoken of his concern of an impending economic collapse, an event that could heavily impact Hezbollah's domestic standing. While Hezbollah's military strength stems from Iranian assistance, its political strength depends on domestic support.

Hezbollah leaders have agreed to be part of a technocratic government, after resisting the move for numerous months as it limits its own power within the governing coalition. The need to stabilize the domestic political situation has taken precedence over any military response to the death of Soleimani. Despite huge rallies denouncing the death of the Iranian commander, the majority of the Lebanese population favors the resurrection of a functioning government and economy over military engagements; any action by Hezbollah would be perceived as further threatening internal stability. The group has to secure its own position in Lebanon before pursuing external activities.

Internationally, Hezbollah has to balance its ideological commitment to Iran without provoking a reaction from the United States. A military response to Solemani's death would risk inciting a response from the United States; the imposition of punitive sanctions would have a devastating impact on the Lebanese economy. Nasrallah's promises of retaliation included no firm commitments to military engagement, with the Hezbollah leader likely deliberately keeping his rhetoric vague to avoid drawing U.S. ire. The new technocratic Lebanese administration has reiterated its pledge that the government will have no confrontational position towards the West.

Conclusion

In the short term, Soleimani's death will have limited impact on the overall direction of Hezbollah. Nasrallah's position as an influential Shia leader will likely expand in the region, and the secretary general will continue to take tactical and material direction from Tehran. The structure of coordination between the axis of resistance will continue unabated, although an immediate military response targeting U.S. assets appears highly unlikely.

Once stability has been regained domestically, Hezbollah might begin to pursue a military response and escalate hostilities between itself and the United States and Israel. Troop movement near the border with Israel is commonplace, and the resumption of reciprocal attacks targeting the Israel Defence Force (IDF) is highly likely. Hezbollah remains committed to the removal of all U.S. bases in the Middle East and limiting U.S. influence in the region, in line with the strategy dictated by Tehran. These long-term goals are highly unachievable without military intervention and it is possible there will be a drift toward conflict with the United States. The death of Soleimani will likely act to harden Hezbollah's anti-U.S. resolve, but in the short term, any military response is unlikely as Hezbollah attempts to regain domestic stability.

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