

Soleimani was Iran's most important military strategist and tactician in Tehran's long-standing campaign to expand Shi'ite and Iranian influence throughout the Middle East. Dexter Filkins, a veteran chronicler of Middle East conflict, described him in a profile in the New Yorker magazine as "the single most powerful operative in the Middle East today,"<sup>2</sup> Jammie Dettmer wrote in a profile for VOA.

That's an assessment shared by current and former U.S. officials.

"We have killed one of the most significant militant actors inside the Iranian government," said Patrick Kimmitt, a former U.S. assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs. "It takes the whole issue of the United States and Iran, and the United States and Iraq to a whole new place. This is an inflection point that can't be understated."

For Iranians, Qassem Soleimani widely represented the most prominent figure outside its Shiite theocracy of national resilience in the face of four decades of U.S. pressure

The 62-year-old Soleimani wasn't a run-of-the-mill military commander. He was the second most powerful man in Iran, answerable only to the country's supreme leader, Ali Hosseini Khamenei. And even more than that, he was at the nexus linking Iran's various proxy forces in the region.

"He was the major figure who ran Iran's growing regional 'Islamic Resistance' network that has tens of thousands of fighters from Palestinian areas, Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Syria," tweeted Phillip Smyth, an analyst at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a U.S.-based think tank.

In Iran and among its Shi'ite allies across the Middle East, Soleimani had near-mythical status, and he was included in Time magazine's 100 most influential people, listed as a cross between "James Bond, Erwin Rommel and Lady Gaga."

His celebrity status in the Middle East was a far cry from his humble start in the tiny village of

Qanat-e Malek in southern Iran's Kerman Province to an impoverished peasant family. As a teenager, he moved to the city of Kerman to get work as a construction worker, remitting most of his earnings back to his parents. He later became a water contractor.

He was a fan of martial arts and a karate black belt. Aside from that, his other great passion was religion. He fell into the circle of a protege of of Ayatollah Khomeini, which allowed him to join and rise up the ranks of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which was set up after the 1979 revolution to protect the new Islamic regime. As a guardsman he participated in the suppression of a Kurdish uprising in West Azerbaijan Province.

He later rose to fame as a daring field commander in the Iran-Iraq War. In his New Yorker profile of Soleimani, Dexter Filkins quotes the general saying: "I entered the war on a 15-day mission, and ended up staying until the end." Soleimani added: "We were all young and wanted to serve the revolution." He ended up as a divisional commander, often leading commando raids deep into Iraqi territory and was seriously injured in one attack.

In the 1990s, Soleimani was given command of the elite al-Quds force, a shadowy unit that undertakes missions outside Iranian borders, often working with its client in Lebanon, the Shi'ite militia Hezbollah, which al-Quds helped to establish. In that role Soleimani became the architect of Iran's expansionist Mideast strategy, shaping a "Shia crescent" across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

In a broadcast interview in October 2019, Soleimani disclosed he'd been in Lebanon in 2006 helping to direct Hezbollah's battles with Israel. His irregular warfare background proved crucial for Iran in Iraq, say former U.S. intelligence and military officials. He was one of the tacticians behind Iraqi Shi'ite attacks on Western soldiers after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq,

"We have been in a proxy war with Iran's revolutionary guards for 10 years, longer than 10 years. Qassem Soleimani and his people were killing Americans in 2005 and 2006," said former U.S. official Patrick Kimmitt. He says the Quds Force supplied Iraqi Shi'ites with the most deadly improvised explosive devices the Americans saw in Iraq. Scores of Americans were killed by them.

War makes for strange bedfellows - American military commanders had little choice in 2014 but to coordinate airstrikes with Tehran-sponsored Shi'ite militias in Iraq against their common foe during the fightback against the Islamic State terror group. In the wake, though, of liberating Mosul and other Iraqi towns of IS, that temporary alliance of necessity fell apart. Soleimani had been a frequent visitor to Baghdad in recent weeks, say analysts, helping to direct Shi'ite attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and the protests aimed at expanding Iran's influence on Iraq.

Soleimani stepped out of the shadows in recent years, emerging as one of the masterminds of the military comeback in Syria by Iranian ally President Bashar al-Assad. He coordinated airstrikes with Russian generals, frequently traveling to Moscow, and analysts say he was key in smoothing out the battlefield efforts of Assad's regular forces with Shi'ite militias, which Iran helped to raise from Afghanistan and Iraq. Soleimani appeared in press photographs and broadcasts visiting the front lines — and even appeared in a popular Iranian music video.

Last year, Soleimani warned the U.S. president in a boastful video message: "I'm telling you Mr. Trump the gambler, I'm telling you, know that we are close to you in that place you don't think we are. You will start the war but we will end it."

The threat was in keeping with his bragging in 2010 to U.S. General David Petraeus, who was then the commander of U.S. forces in Iraq. The two were in communication and Petraeus disclosed that the Iranian general had told him in one message: "You should know that I, Qassem Soleimani, control the policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza and Afghanistan."

Soleimani is likely to prove a challenging foe in death, too, according to analysts and current and former Western officials. Some are critical of the targeted killing of the Iranian, saying that U.S. President Donald Trump's predecessors in the White House passed targeting Soleimani, fearing messy, violent repercussions. At the time of publication, Iran's response beyond mass demonstrations and rhetoric remained to be revealed.

One analyst says the U.S. move will send a clear intimidating message to Tehran that no one in the Iranian regime is safe. "For all the talk about a full upscale war between Iran and the U.S. over the killing of Tehran's terror master Qassem Soleimani, the fact that Iran now realizes America is not a paper tiger anymore will resonate in the ears of Supreme Leader Khomeini," says counterterrorism analyst Olivier Guitta, who runs GlobalStrat, a London-based risk

consultancy.

He adds: "Despite all the declarations of vengeance from the Iran regime and the likelihood of attacks abroad against U.S. and Israeli interests, the mullah's regime would like more than anything to save their skins and can't afford a full-blown conflict with the U.S."

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