Escalating US-Iran conflict: The EU's priorities

On 3 January 2020, a United States (US) strike outside Baghdad killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, the leader of the al-Qods force within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and arguably the second most important man in Iran after Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The assassination was a reaction to an escalation in the growing conflict between the USA and Iran. Iran retaliated on 8 January 2020, by attacking two US bases in Iraq with missiles; luckily – or intentionally – without casualties. Although both the USA and Iran have refrained from any further action, few expect this to mark the end of tensions between the USA and Iran in the region. The EU reaction to the assassination has been to try to de-escalate the situation to prevent all-out war, to focus on stabilising Iraq, and to limit damage to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

What led to the assassination of Qasem Soleimani?

US-Iran relations have been strained since 1979, when the Islamic Revolution removed the US-backed government of the Shah. Since then, US administrations have largely treated Iranian policies in the Middle East as a threat to US interests. As part of international efforts to curtail Iran’s nuclear programme, former US President Barack Obama signed a nuclear agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in 2015. However, current President Donald Trump, a strident opponent of the JCPOA, withdrew the USA from the agreement in May 2018, and re-imposed sanctions that had been lifted as part of the nuclear deal. Tensions between the USA and Iran have been rising ever since. Tehran responded to each new round of US sanctions with increasingly bold attacks, on ships in the Gulf of Hormuz and oil installations in Saudi Arabia. Over several months, the theatre of conflict moved to Iraq, leading to growing clashes between US forces and Iranian-backed paramilitary Popular Mobilisation Units (PMF) in Iraq, and culminating in attacks on the US Embassy in Baghdad, and the death and wounding of American and Iraqi personnel. The USA initially claimed that Soleimani, who the USA holds personally responsible for the deaths of hundreds of US service members in Iraq, posed an imminent threat to US interests in the region. According to later statements, his assassination was part of a ‘broad strategy of deterrence’, or, simply, Soleimani’s ‘horrible past’.

The dangers for Iraq

On 5 January 2020, in protest against the killing of Soleimani and a close associate, Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Iraqi parliament voted to seek the removal of foreign military troops from the country. The parliament also called for the cancellation of an agreement under which US forces are stationed in Iraq to help fight the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIL/Da’esh). In the meantime, the international coalition against ISIL/Da’esh has suspended operations. Any weakening of the international coalition against ISIL/Da’esh could lead to the resurgence of ISIL/Da’esh in Iraq, where the terrorist organisation is still present, with potentially grave humanitarian consequences. Moreover, there is growing concern about increasing instability in Iraq, which has experienced decades of violence and armed conflict, and which has seen large-scale anti-government protests in recent months.

The EU is particularly concerned that any further military escalation could undo many years of international effort to stabilise the country and divert attention from necessary political reforms, the tackling of urgent social challenges, and the fight against corruption. Since 2014, the EU has made €1.2 billion available to support Iraq, in the form of humanitarian aid, support for internally displaced persons, and stabilisation of liberated areas. The EU has also supported civilian security sector reform, including through the common security and defence policy (CSDP) EU Advisory Mission Iraq, since October 2017, and has worked with the Iraqi authorities to improve Iraq’s counter-terrorism efforts. In response to the specific challenges Iraq faces following the territorial defeat of ISIL/Da’esh, the EU adopted an EU strategy for Iraq on 22 January 2018.
Developments in Iran

Soleimani's death led to an outpouring of grief in Iran, with millions reported to have taken to the streets. However, the mood turned rapidly, when it was revealed that, shortly after the Iranian missile attack on US military bases in Iraq on 8 January 2020, the Iranian military accidentally downed a Ukrainian civilian aeroplane leaving Tehran airport, killing all 176 people on board. Iranians took to the streets in large numbers to protest against the country's rulers, who took three days to admit responsibility for the crash.

EU reactions to the assassination

The Trump Administration's approach to Iran has strained EU-US relations in recent years. The EU 'deeply regretted' the US decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and reintroduce sanctions on Iran. While the EU and the E3 (France, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK)) have worked with the other signatories (China, Iran and Russia) to save the JCPOA, the USA has repeatedly called on Europeans to abandon the nuclear agreement and has threatened to undermine the EU’s main initiative to maintain trade with Iran – the INSTEX special purpose vehicle. At the same time, the EU shares US concerns over Iran's missile programme, especially after the 8 January 2020 attack on US air bases in Iraq, and Iran's activities in the region, especially in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Senior US officials complained that European allies have not shown sufficient support for the US, following the Trump ordered assassination of Soleimani. However, neither the EU nor the E3 have condemned the killing of General Soleimani. Instead, EU leaders have called for urgent de-escalation on both sides, for stabilising Iraq and maintaining the coalition against ISIL/Da'esh, and for preserving the JCPOA.

In a joint statement issued on 6 January 2020, France, Germany and the UK condemned Iran for escalating the situation in Iraq prior to Soleimani’s assassination. The statement also highlighted the negative role Iran had played in the region, 'including through the IRGC and the Al-Qods force under the command of General Soleimani'. The E3 ‘specifically called on Iran to refrain from further violent action or proliferation'. At an extraordinary meeting on 10 January 2020, North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg joined EU Foreign Affairs Ministers to discuss the implications of the latest developments in Iraq, including on the international coalition engaged in the fight against ISIL/Da'esh. The Council called for urgent de-escalation and maximum restraint, condemned the attacks on coalition forces and restated that the fight against ISIL/Da'esh remained an EU priority. The EU ministers reiterated their support for Iraq’s stability and reconstruction, and for the JCPOA.

Activating the dispute resolution mechanism

In a separate development on 14 January 2020, following Iran's 5 January 2020 announcement that the country was taking a fifth step away from compliance, the E3 group announced they were triggering the dispute resolution mechanism under JCPOA, paragraph 36, and once again expressed their commitment to the JCPOA, stating that the overarching objective remained to preserve the JCPOA. EU High Representative Josep Borrell reinforced this message during a statement delivered to the European Parliament on 14 January 2020. The dispute resolution process will begin with a meeting of all parties to the JCPOA within 15 days.

In October 2016, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the EU strategy towards Iran after the nuclear agreement by an overwhelming majority. The resolution praised the JCPOA as 'a notable achievement for multilateral diplomacy, and for European diplomacy in particular'. At the same time, Parliament has been critical of Iran's human rights record and its disproportionate use of force against non-violent protests. Parliament has also closely followed the situation in Iraq, and has adopted several resolutions, including on the Situation in Iraq and Syria following the ISIL/Da'esh offensive, and the ensuing humanitarian crisis. Parliament welcomed the conclusion of the EU-Iraq Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and the adoption of the EU Strategy on Iraq. Most recently, Parliament debated the situation in Iran and Iraq in plenary on 14 January 2020.