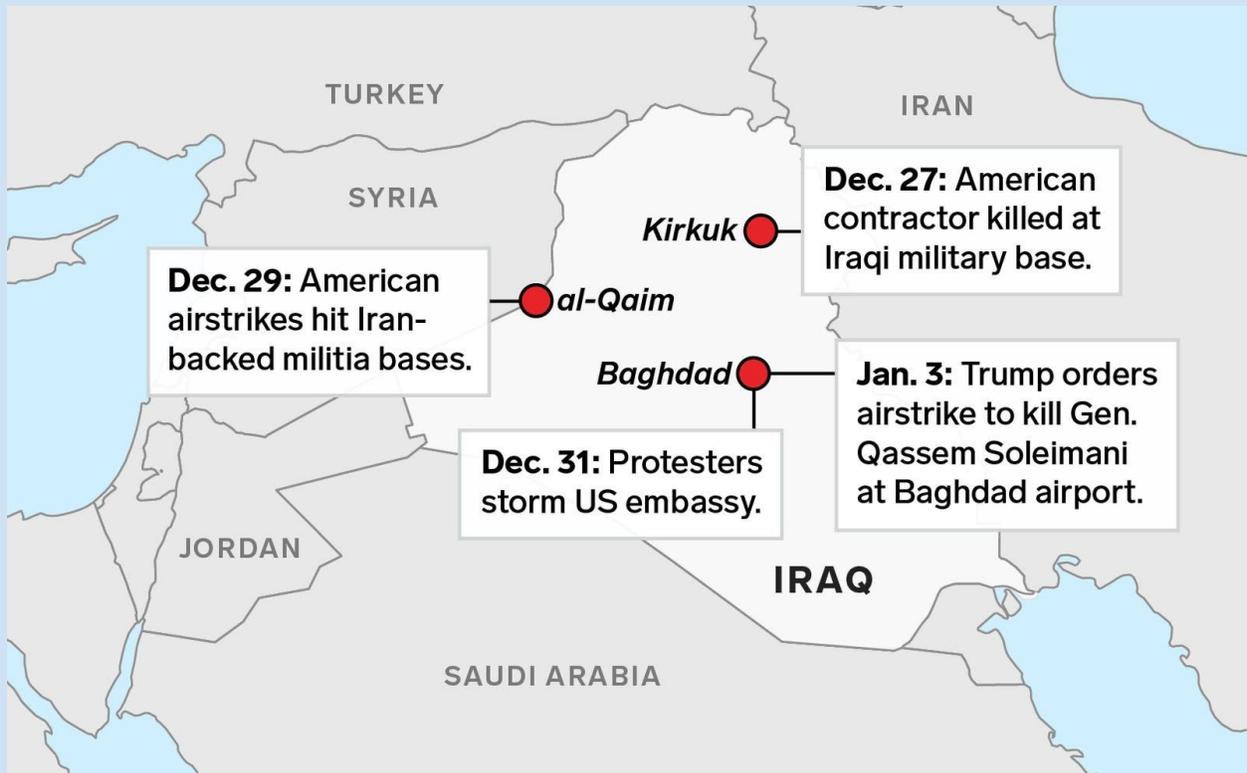


“A Dangerous Moment”: The U.S. and Iran Today
A Discussion Guide for Iranian-American Relations
Guide Last Updated: January, 2020



Map from:

<https://www.businessinsider.com/map-us-iran-tension-in-iraq-soleimani-death-2020-1>

Understanding Iran

After several factions led a revolution in 1979 which ousted the American-backed Shah from power in Iran, an Islamic theocratic regime took over and has since ruled the country. The Supreme Leaders, or Ayatollahs, retain power through a concept known as Velayat-e Faqih, or Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. For the past 40 years, the relationship between Iran and the U.S. have been tense: an infamous hostage crisis at the American Embassy in Baghdad, several notable Iranian terror attacks on the U.S. and her allies, and the specter of an Iranian nuclear power aiming at Israel or Saudi Arabia (Iran’s declared enemies) all contribute to America’s distaste for Iran. The Iranian government’s hatred for the U.S. and the West stems from the time of British monopolies on Iranian oil fields, to the CIA’s 1953 covert operation to overthrow the democratically elected prime minister, to Bush’s declaration that Iran is part of the “Axis of Evil,” to U.S. military and diplomatic support of Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which is an official state entity of Iran external to its regular

military, supports and funds foreign operations including Hezbollah (a Shia political party and militant group in Lebanon with branches elsewhere) and the Quds (a branch of the IRGC specializing in “unconventional warfare and military intelligence”). Terrorist attacks or attempted attacks linked to the IRGC and Iranian general Qassem Soleimani have been carried out in Argentina, Saudi Arabia, and even in the U.S.. Soleimani was considered to be the second most powerful person in Iran, second only to the Ayatollah. *When the U.S. eliminated Soleimani in an airstrike early in 2020, the rising tension between Iran and the U.S. reached an unprecedented breaking point, with many fearing an all-out war on the horizon.*

Below is a timeline of the major events from the past two decades in Iranian-U.S. relations.

Timeline

- **2002:** General Soleimani is appointed as head of the Quds force of the IRGC.
- **2003:** The U.S. invades Iraq (ruled by dictator Saddam Hussein) under the auspices of finding and destroying Weapons of Mass Destruction and Hussein’s ties to Al-Qaeda.
- **2007:** The U.S. designates the Quds as a terror group; President Bush accuses the Quds of providing powerful roadside bombs to Iraqi Shia militants. The UN places an international travel ban and asset freeze on Qassem Soleimani due to his involvement in arms trafficking and nuclear material smuggling.
- **2009:** Iran admits to the existence of a secret nuclear facility, but denies any uranium enrichment.
- **2011:** Between 2003 and 2011, at least 600 Americans are killed in the Iraq War by Iranian-backed militants. The Quds are deployed to Syria to assist Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.
- **2013:** President Obama increases oil sanctions on Iran; for example, reducing the quantity of petroleum the U.S. purchases from Iran and instead relying on other Middle Eastern sources. This is part of an extensive effort to reach a nuclear agreement with Iran, in which U.S. sanctions would be reduced if Iran were to forgo methods of creating nuclear weapons.
- **2014:** Shi’ite militias and Quds forces battle the Islamic State in Iraq; American air power helps push back ISIS.
- **2015, July:** Iran, the P5 countries (UN Security Council’s permanent 5 member-states), and the EU enter into the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which requires Iran to significantly reduce its nuclear enrichment capabilities for the next 15 years in exchange for reduced economic sanctions.
- **2018, May 8:** President Trump withdraws from the JCPOA, claiming that Iran did not disclose all its prior nuclear research-- a violation of the agreement--and the U.S. levies additional sanctions.

- **2019, April:** The Trump administration designates the IRGC as a terrorist group due to its promotion of “terrorism as a tool of statecraft” (Council on Foreign Relations).
- **2019, May-June:** Iran begins enriching uranium beyond levels specified in the JCPOA. Iran is accused of several attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz, and Iran alleges that one of its tankers is attacked. Iran shoots down a U.S. drone.
- **2019, September 14:** An attack on Saudi oil fields cuts the country’s oil production in half; While Houthi rebels in Yemen claim responsibility, evidence points to Iran as the perpetrator.
- **2019, October:** Soleimani orders the IRGC to move Katyusha rockets and anti-helicopter missiles into Iraq. Soleimani, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (head of the Iranian-backed Shi’ite Popular Mobilization forces in Iraq and founder of Kataib Hezbollah) and other militia leaders meet to discuss strategies to attack U.S. targets in Iraq using the Iranian-provided weaponry. Large-scale protests against Iran’s influence in Iraq begin.
- **2019, December:** After increased Kataib Hezbollah attacks at Iraqi bases housing U.S. troops kill an American, the U.S. strikes several Shi’ite militia targets. Kataib Hezbollah and other militants attack the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad; Russia and China block a UN Security Council condemnation of the attacks. Massive protests in Iran are met with brutal government repression, with hundreds estimated killed
- **2020, January 3:** U.S. airstrikes eliminate Soleimani, Muhandis, and three others. Esmail Qaani, Soleimani’s longtime deputy, replaces him at the head of the Quds.
- **2020, January 4-present:** Iran announces it will no longer abide by the enrichment limits of the JCPOA. The Iraqi Parliament votes to expel U.S. troops, but as Sunni and Kurdish representatives boycotted the vote, the parliament did not technically reach quorum. President Trump threatens to attack 52 significant Iranian targets if Iran retaliates. At Soleimani’s funeral, 56 attendees are killed in a stampede. Iran fires approximately 15 ballistic missiles at Iraqi bases which house U.S. military personnel in what Iranian Foreign Secretary Mohammad Javad Zarif describes as proportionate retaliation against legitimate targets.

Questions for Consideration

What impact could the release of information regarding the “imminent threat” Soleimani presented to American interests have in the U.S. and in the Middle East?

Considering President Trump’s previous accusations that “in order to get elected, Obama will start a war with Iran,” what, if any, factors make the present situation unique?

With such a feeble and divided government holding power in Iraq, how should the U.S. respond to the parliament’s vote to expel U.S. troops?

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