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1. Iran bomb blasts leave 103 dead: How this can impact the Middle East

What happened?

Two blasts struck the city of Kerman in Iran on January 3, leading to the deaths of at least 103 people. Many had gathered at a cemetery to mark the fourth anniversary of the killing of senior military commander General Qassem Soleimani.

Deadly blasts at commemoration for slain Iranian general



The attack is one of the deadliest to have hit the country in around half a century. The Middle East has been on the boil for a few months, with the Palestinian militant group Hamas's October 7 strikes on Israel, the Israeli military's ongoing offensive on the Gaza Strip that has killed more than 20,000 people, and attacks from Yemen-based Houthi

rebels on ships passing through the Red Sea since November. What exactly happened in Iran and what ramifications does it have for the region at large?

Who was Qassem Soleimani?

A crowd was present to mark four years since the 2020 US-ordered killing of General Soleimani. Qassem Soleimani, 62, was in charge of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The IRGC is a wing of the Iranian military and is known to be responsible for undertaking foreign missions. It was designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation by the US in 2019.

Soleimani was known to have participated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which led to the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty and led to the establishment of a theocratic state in Iran. His profile rose in the early 2000s, for carrying out attacks in opposition to the American military presence in Iraq.

Why did the US launch strikes against Soleimani?

In recent years, Soleimani was believed to be the chief strategist behind Iran's military ventures and influence in Syria, Iraq and throughout the Middle East. Around the time of his death, Iranian militias had struck an Iraqi military base, killing an American contractor in the process. The US retaliated with strikes in Iraq and Syria, in a bid to target militias.

How could the Iran attacks affect the current situation in the Middle East?

The attacks in Iran came a day after a top Hamas leader, Saleh al-Arouri, was believed to have been killed in an Israeli drone strike in Lebanon. Israel is yet to claim responsibility for the attack but one Israeli and two US officials confirmed its role to the media.

Various players in the region are involved in the Israel-Hamas conflict, owing to long-existing regional, religious and ethnic alignments and rivalries. For instance, the Lebanon-based militant organisation Hezbollah has supported Hamas. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are believed to be backed by Iran, which has been engaged in a proxy war with Israel for decades.

Iran is also known to support the Houthis in Yemen and is against what it sees as Western interference in the region. This position puts it at odds with the US and its ally Saudi Arabia. As a result, cases of attacks in the neighbourhood have the potential to widen the ongoing conflict and include other groups and countries or elongate it.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: The Indian Express

2. Elections in Bangladesh: Everything you need to know



Introduction

Bangladesh goes to polls on January 7, with incumbent Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League set to cruise to victory as most opposition parties stage a boycott.

How elections work

Bangladesh's unicameral Jatiya Sangsad has 350 members of which 300 are elected in national elections held every five years. Fifty seats are reserved for women appointed by the ruling party/ coalition.

Like India, Bangladesh follows a first-past-the-post system. The Prime Minister is the head of the government, and the most powerful person in the country.

Major parties

While Bangladesh is a multi-party system, it has been a virtual duopoly since the 1990s — the two major parties being the incumbent Awami League and the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Since 1991, AL has enjoyed four terms in power, while BNP has led the government twice.

AL was founded in 1949 by Bangladeshi nationalists as an alternative to the Muslim League in East Pakistan. Under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the AL led the struggle for Bangladesh's independence. Sheikh Hasina, who has been Prime Minister since 2009, is Mujib's daughter.

The BNP was founded in 1978 by Ziaur Rahman, a former army general. After Ziaur was assassinated in 1981, his wife Khaleda Zia led the party until 2018, when she was put in jail. She has been in house arrest since 2020. The BNP is currently headed by Khaleda's son Tarique Rahman, who lives in exile in London.

The BNP has been in disarray over the past several years and, despite a seeming resurgence since 2022 amidst a growing anti-Hasina sentiment, has been written off by many. The BNP is boycotting the elections; Tarique has called it a “sham” with a “predetermined outcome”.

The third largest party in Bangladesh is the Jatiya Party (Ershad), which currently has 27 seats in the Jatiya Sangsad. It will contest the upcoming elections.

Rigged elections and Caretaker government

In an election that most observers anticipate will be one-sided, the major issue is the fairness of the election process.

Elections under Bangladesh’s partisan governments have always been controversial — from Mujib’s victory in 1973 to the elections held under Ziaur in 1979, and then under H M Ershad in 1986 and 1988, to those held in 1996, 2014, and 2018.

This is why a caretaker government system was instituted in 1990, and the 1991 elections under the government of Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed were viewed as the fairest yet. Elections held in 1996 (after Khaleda’s 12-day rule), 2001, and 2008, all under caretaker governments, were considered fair both domestically and internationally.

However, after the army-backed caretaker government far exceeded its remit in 2006-07 — sending hundreds of politicians, including Hasina and Khaleda, to prison on charges of corruption and abuse of power — Hasina decided to do away with the system in 2011. “We cannot allow unelected people to oversee national elections,” she had said.

But the opposition has alleged that this has only allowed her to continue to rig elections in Bangladesh, and stamp out all opposition. The BNP has been boycotting elections since 2014, and had run a campaign focussed on bringing back the caretaker system last year.

Financial conditions

The state of the economy could be a factor in the elections as well. While Hasina has been credited with taking Bangladesh’s economy to a good place, the cost of living has jumped as the country struggles to pay for costly energy imports amid weakening domestic currency and depleting dollar reserves.

In December last year, the International Monetary Fund cleared the first review of the country’s \$ 4.7 billion bailout, providing immediate access of \$ 468.3 million.

What India wants

Despite Hasina's autocratic tendencies, she remains a firm friend of India, and New Delhi's preferred candidate to lead Bangladesh.

Her relationship with India dates back to the 1970s, when India was the biggest backer of Bangladesh's liberation movement, led by her father Mujib. Her four terms in power have been extremely fruitful in furthering the India-Bangladesh relationship — most border issues have been sorted, economic cooperation has been furthered, and most importantly, Hasina has firmly supported India's national security interests.

Crucially, the major alternative to Hasina, Khaleda Zia's BNP, is an absolute no-no for India. During Khaleda's reign, Bangladesh became a safe haven for terrorist and militant outfits with anti-India designs, as she let Islamist radicals share power. Supported by Pakistan's ISI, these outfits terrorised Northeast India and the Bangladesh border.

Moreover, clashes at the Bangladesh border became increasingly frequent. In 2001, Bangladeshi paramilitary troops killed and mutilated 16 BSF guards in a border clash. Hasina, on the other hand, has been steadfast in her commitment to keep the ISI and Islamist radicals out of power in Bangladesh, especially since a 2004 assassination attempt which was orchestrated by radical Islamist outfits, including the Jamaat, which was a part of the BNP government at the time.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; International Relations

Source: The Indian Express

3. Indian Navy Foils Hijacking Attempt in Arabian Sea

Introduction

In a successful operation conducted in the North Arabian Sea, the Indian Navy's Marine Commandos (MARCOS) thwarted a hijacking attempt on the merchant vessel Lila Norfolk. The incident concluded with the secure evacuation of all 21 crew members, including 15 Indians.

Swift Response and Evacuation

The attempt, which took place approximately 460 nautical miles off the coast of Eyl, Somalia, was reported by the bulk carrier Lila Norfolk on the UK Maritime Trade Operations portal. Responding promptly, the Indian Navy diverted the destroyer INS Chennai, engaged in anti-piracy patrol, to intercept the vessel. The crew's safety was

confirmed through contact established by a Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) that overflew the vessel.

Ships in distress

In the last month of 2023, India responded to three distress calls from ships in trouble



Dec 14: Malta-flagged vessel m.v. *Ruen*, with an 18-member crew, sent a mayday message indicating boarding by about six unknown persons around 700 nautical miles from the Indian coast

Dec 23: m.v. *Chem Pluto*, with 21 Indian and 1 Vietnamese crew members, reported a projectile attack around 217

nautical miles southwest of Porbandar. Initial investigation by the Navy indicated a drone attack

Dec 23: A Gabon-flagged crude oil tanker m.v. *Sal Baba* with an all-Indian crew heading to India was hit by a one-way attack drone in the Southern Red Sea; no injuries were reported

Safe and secure: The cargo ship *Lila Norfolk*, after the rescue, prepares to move to the next port of call. PTI

Abandonment of Hijacking Attempt

The hijacking attempt was likely abandoned following a forceful warning by the Indian Navy's MPA and the interception by INS Chennai. The vessel, en route to Khalifa Bin Salman Port, Bahrain, from a port in Brazil, reported being boarded by approximately five to six unknown armed persons.

Successful Boarding and Sanitization

INS Chennai intercepted the vessel, with MARCOS boarding for a complete sanitization process. The crew, who had gathered in the citadel, a strong room within the ship, were successfully evacuated after the sanitization operation.

Enhanced Maritime Security Measures

This marks another hijacking incident in the region, prompting the Indian Navy to bolster maritime surveillance efforts in the Central and North Arabian Sea. Additionally, force levels have been increased to address and respond effectively to such incidents in the future.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Internal Security

Source: The Hindu