

Inside the plot by Soleimani to attack US

REUTERS

In mid-October, Iranian Major-General Qassem Soleimani met with his Iraqi Shia militia allies at a villa on the banks of the Tigris River, looking across at the US embassy complex in Baghdad.

The Revolutionary Guards commander instructed his top ally in Iraq, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and other powerful militia leaders to step up attacks on US targets in the country using sophisticated new weapons provided by Iran, two militia commanders and two security sources briefed on the gathering told Reuters.

The strategy session, which has not been previously reported, came as mass protests against Iran's growing influence in Iraq were gaining momentum, putting the Islamic Republic in an unwelcome spotlight. Soleimani's plans to attack US forces aimed to provoke a military response that would redirect that rising anger toward the United States, according to the sources briefed on the gathering, Iraqi Shia politicians and government officials close to Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi.

Soleimani's efforts ended up provoking the US attack on Friday that killed him and Muhandis, marking a major escalation of tensions between the United States and Iran.

Before the attacks, the US intelligence community had reason to believe that Soleimani was involved in "late stage" planning to strike Americans in multiple countries, including Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, US officials told Reuters Friday on condition of anonymity.

There had been a spat of rocket attacks recently, including the Dec 27 attack on an Iraqi military base near the northern Iraq city of Kirkuk that killed a US civilian contractor, to support this view.



An Iraqi woman holds a placard during the funeral of Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani, Iraqi paramilitary chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and eight others in Baghdad's district of al-Jadriya, in Baghdad's high-security Green Zone, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Was top Iran general's killing legal?

REUTERS, New York

The Trump administration on Friday justified its killing of a top Iranian general as an act of self-defense, trying to deflect accusations that it violated international law and concerns raised by legal experts and a senior UN rights investigator.

Qassem Soleimani, the 62-year-old commander of Iran's elite Quds Force, was killed in the US air strike in Baghdad overnight. The attack, ordered by President Donald Trump, sent tensions between the United States and Iran soaring, with Iranian officials promising revenge.

As Republican and Democratic lawmakers sparred over the wisdom of the attack, some legal experts questioned whether Trump had the legal authority to target Soleimani on Iraqi soil without the permission of Iraq's government, and whether it was legal under international and US law.

Iraq's prime minister said Washington had with the attack violated a deal for keeping US troops in his country, and several Iraqi political factions united in a call for American troops to be expelled.

The UN Charter generally prohibits the use of force against other states but there is an exception if a state gives consent to the use of force on its territory. Legal experts said the absence of consent from Iraq makes it difficult for the United States to justify the killing.

Yale Law School professor Oona Hathaway, an international law expert, said on Twitter that

the available facts "do not seem to support" the assertion that the strike was an act of self-defense, and concluded it was "legally tenuous under both domestic and international law."

The Pentagon said targeting Soleimani was aimed at deterring "future Iranian attack plans," while Trump said the Iranian general was targeted because he was planning "imminent and sinister" attacks on US diplomats and military personnel.

Scott Anderson, a former legal adviser to the US Embassy in Baghdad under Trump's predecessor, Barack Obama, said Trump's justification so far under international law is questionable, but he could try to argue that the Iraqi government was either unwilling or unable to deal with the threat posed by Soleimani, giving the United States the



right to act without Iraq's consent.

Article 51 of the UN Charter covers an individual or collective right to self-defense against armed attack. The United States used the article to justify taking action in Syria against Islamic State militants in 2014.

A strategic framework agreement signed in 2008 between Washington and Baghdad called for close defense cooperation to deter threats to Iraqi "sovereignty, security and territorial integrity," but prohibited the United States from using Iraq as a launching point for attacks on other countries.

Under historic norms of international law, a country can defend itself preemptively if it acts out of necessity and responds proportionally to the threat.

Agnes Callamard, the UN special rapporteur on extra-judicial executions, questioned whether the attack met this threshold.

The targeting of Soleimani "appears far more retaliatory for past acts than anticipatory for imminent self-defense," she said. "Lawful justifications for such killings are very narrowly defined and it is hard to imagine how any of these can apply to these killings."

Democratic lawmakers called on Trump to provide details about the imminent threat that he said Soleimani represented.

Other critics raised questions about Trump's authority to kill Soleimani under US law, and whether he should have acted without first notifying Congress. Democrats say they weren't informed.

KILLING OF SOLEIMANI
IRAN'S POSSIBLE RESPONSES

MILITARY CONFRONTATION: Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and US President Donald Trump have talked tough during several crisis but neither have indicated an interest in all-out war. But the possibility of a military confrontation cannot be ruled out. Khamenei faces a dilemma. If he calls for restraint, he could look weak at home and among proxies who have expanded Iran's reach. For this reason, Iran may choose to opt for a smaller scale retaliation. Iran says it has precision-guided missiles, cruise missiles and armed drones capable of hitting US military bases in the Gulf, and reaching Tehran's arch-enemy Israel.

BLOCKING THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ: A military confrontation or heightened tensions could halt the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz, where one-fifth of the world's oil production is shipped through. Such interruption, even for a short period of time, could affect the United States and many countries around the world. Iran cannot legally close the waterway unilaterally because part of it is in Oman's territorial waters. However, ships pass through Iranian waters, which are under the responsibility of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Navy.

IRAN'S ASYMMETRIC TACTICS AND PROXIES: The targeted killing of Soleimani could endanger US forces stationed in the Middle East. Iran mainly relies on asymmetric tactics and its regional proxies in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Lebanon in order to counter more sophisticated US weaponry. Iran has passed on its drones and technical expertise to allies. Yemen's Houthis have used Iran-made missiles and drones to bomb airports in Saudi Arabia, Iran's main regional foe. Iran-backed militias in Iraq have used mortars and rockets to attack bases where US forces are located.

TIMING: Iran is unlikely to rush into action, according to Ali Alfoneh, senior fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. "Iran has no choice but to strike back and retaliate assassination of Major General Suleimani," he said. "But the Islamic Republic is patient and the timing and nature of that strike is not yet known to us."

DIPLOMACY NOT CONFRONTATION: Iranian leaders have in the past kept the door open to diplomacy to achieve its aims, especially when its economy is squeezed hard by US sanctions designed to weaken the leadership. Iran and America, who have common interests and common enemies, worked together in the past, in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places. Iran has ruled out any talks with the United States unless it returns to a 2015 nuclear deal and lifts all sanctions it reimposed on Tehran after exiting the pact in 2018. Signalling that the door was open for diplomacy, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said after Soleimani's killing that Washington was committed to reducing tensions in the region. "While many are predicting WWII, the last 40 years of Iran's history reflect that what's paramount for the Islamic Republic is its survival. Tehran can ill-afford a full-blown war with the US while facing onerous economic sanctions and internal tumult, especially without Soleimani," policy analyst Karim Sadjadpour said. SOURCE: AFP



Chile protesters burn the furnishings of the San Francisco de Borja church after setting the church itself on fire, during the first protest of the year against the government of President Sebastian Pinera, in Santiago on Friday. At least 29 people have been killed in the violence so far.

PHOTO: AFP

Australian bushfires developing their own weather systems

REUTERS, Melbourne

The bushfires ravaging Australia are generating so much heat that they are creating their own weather systems including dry lighting storms and fire tornadoes.

Yesterday, the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (RFS) warned that a fire on the coast was generating its own weather system 287 km (178 miles) south of Sydney.

"A fire-generated thunderstorm has formed over the Currowan fire on the northern edge of the fire near Nowra. This is a very dangerous situation. Monitor the conditions around you and take appropriate action," the RFS said on social media.

The weather conditions are the results of the formation of pyrocumulonimbus clouds. They have been recorded all over the world but as the global climate changes, they may become a more frequent occurrence for Australians, the country's Climate Council said in a 2019 report.

HALF A BILLION ANIMALS KILLED!

There is a widely-reported estimate that almost half a billion (480 million) animals have been killed by the bush fires in Australia. It's a figure that came from Prof Chris Dickman, an expert on Australian biodiversity at the University of Sydney. On Friday, he released a statement explaining how he had reached the figure - a statement which refers to the number of animals affected rather than those necessarily dying as a direct result of the fire. The numbers are based on a report he co-wrote in 2007 for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) on the impact of land-clearing on Australian wildlife in New South Wales. It estimated that there were an average of 17.5 mammals, 20.7 birds and 129.5 reptiles per hectare. They've then multiplied that by the amount of land hit by the fires. The estimation of 480 million mammals, birds and reptiles came out of it. But he said large mammals are expected to be move away from fire and the less mobile species really in the firing line.

A RFS firefighter was killed on Monday by a fire tornado caused by the collapse of a pyrocumulonimbus cloud formation that rolled over the fire truck he was in.

The pyrocumulonimbus clouds are essentially a thunderstorm that forms from the smoke plume of a fire as intense heat from the fire causes air to rise rapidly, drawing in cooler air, according to information from the Australian Bureau of Meteorology.

As the cloud climbs and then cools in the low temperatures of the upper atmosphere, the collisions of ice particles in the higher parts of the cloud build up an electrical charge, which can be released as lightning. These can cause dangerous and unpredictable changes in fire behaviour, making them harder to fight as well as causing lightning strikes that could ignite new fires.

Spain electoral board disqualifies Catalan president from office

AFP, Madrid

Spain's electoral board ordered Friday that Catalan separatist president Quim Torra be disqualified from being a member of Catalonia's regional parliament, meaning he would lose his presidential post.

The electoral board decision comes after Catalonia's High Court of Justice last month convicted Torra of disobedience for failing to remove separatist symbols from public buildings during an election campaign and banned him from holding public office for 18 months.

Catalonia's autonomy statute specifies that the head of the region's government must be a lawmaker in the regional assembly.

The election board ruling comes as Spain's acting Prime Minister, Socialist Pedro Sanchez, faces a confidence vote in the national parliament next week following a November election. Sanchez he is counting on the abstention of Catalan



separatist party ERC's 13 lawmakers in order to take office for a second term.

The ERC rules Catalonia in coalition with Torra's more hardline Junts per Catalunya, or Together for Catalonia, party which has said it will vote against Sanchez's investiture.

Torra slammed the board ruling as a "new coup against Catalan institutions."

"I will take every step possible against this authoritarian and completely irregular decision," Torra said, announcing that the Catalan regional parliament would meet in plenary session.

The only body competent to order his dismissal was this parliament, he said, as about a 1,000 people gathered in his support outside the regional government's offices in Barcelona.

The electoral board was responding to a request from right-wing parties that it ban Torra from public office, following his conviction for disobedience, even before his appeal is heard.

China replaces top envoy to Hong Kong

AFP, Beijing

China has replaced its top envoy to Hong Kong, state media reported yesterday, the most significant personnel change by Beijing since pro-democracy protests erupted in the city nearly seven months ago.

The removal of the head of the Liaison Office, which represents the central government in semi-autonomous Hong Kong, comes as the city grapples with its biggest political crisis in decades.

"Wang Zhimin has been dismissed from his position as head of the Liaison Office" and replaced by Luo Huining, state broadcaster CCTV said.

Millions have come out on the streets since June last year in a wave of protests sparked by opposition to a now-abandoned proposal to allow extraditions to mainland China. But they soon morphed into a larger demand for greater democratic freedoms in the starkest challenge to Beijing since the former British colony was returned to Chinese rule in 1997.

Hong Kong is ruled under the "one country, two systems" principle, which gives the territory rights unseen on mainland China -- but demonstrators say these are being steadily eroded by an increasingly assertive central government in Beijing. Protesters are demanding fully free elections to elect the city's leadership, amnesty for the thousands arrested during the protests, and an inquiry into the conduct of the police.

Thousands in shelters as Indonesia flood toll hits 53

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian rescue teams flew helicopters stuffed with food to remote flood-hit communities yesterday as the death toll from the disaster jumped to 53 and fears grew about the possibility of more torrential rain.

Tens of thousands in Jakarta were still unable to return to their waterlogged homes after some of the deadliest flooding in years hit the enormous capital region, home to about 30 million.

In neighbouring Lebak, where half a dozen people died, police and military personnel dropped boxes of instant noodles and other supplies into remote communities inaccessible by road after bridges were destroyed.

"It's tough to get supplies in there... and there are about a dozen places hit by landslides," Banten police chief Toms

Tohir told AFP.

"That is why we're using helicopters although there aren't any landing spots."

Local health centre chief Surtipo, who goes by one name, said injured residents were flowing into his clinic.

Around Jakarta, more than 170,000 people took refuge in shelters across the massive urban conglomeration after whole neighbourhoods were submerged.

Torrential rains that started on New Year's Eve unleashed flash floods and landslides in the region and Lebak at the south end of Java island.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo has announced a plan to move the country's capital to Borneo island to take pressure off Jakarta, which suffers from some of the world's worst traffic jams and is fast sinking due to excessive groundwater extraction.

