

'Total nonsense'

Israel slams Iran's charge that it seeks to trick US into war

REUTERS, Jerusalem

An Israeli official yesterday dismissed as "nonsense" an allegation by the Iranian foreign minister that Israel was trying to trick the United States into waging war on Iran.

It was Israel that needed to be on alert for possible Iranian strikes on the one-year anniversary on Sunday of the assassination of Tehran's top general, Qassem Soleimani, in a US drone strike in Iraq, Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said on Kan public radio.

Washington blames Iran-backed militia for regular rocket attacks on US facilities in Iraq, including near the US embassy. No known Iran-backed groups have claimed responsibility.

On Saturday, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Twitter: "New intelligence from Iraq indicate that Israeli agent-provocateurs are plotting attacks against Americans — putting an outgoing (President Donald) Trump in a bind with a fake casus belli."

"Be careful of a trap, @realDonaldTrump. Any fireworks will backfire badly, particularly against your same BFFs," Zarif wrote, in what appeared to be a veiled threat against Israel.

Steinitz said the remarks showed that Iran, after mounting US sanctions billed as curbing its nuclear programme and involvement in regional conflict-zones, was "under pressure - economic pressure, and pressure in terms of national security".

"We hear this nonsense by Zarif, that Israel would set off terrorist attacks against the United States - this really is total nonsense," Steinitz told Kan public radio.

"But on the other hand it is a warning sign - a warning sign that Iran is taking aim at Israel, is looking for excuses to lash out at Israel, and therefore we need to have our finger on the pulse and be at the highest state of alert."

The US military flew two nuclear-capable B-52 bombers to the Middle East in a message of deterrence to Iran on Wednesday, but the bombers have since left the region.

Interviewed separately on Kan, Israeli Culture Minister Chili Tropper confirmed media reports that Israel was on heightened alert for the Soleimani anniversary.



Iraqis hold placards and flags as they gather to mark the one year anniversary of the killing of senior Iranian military commander General Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a US attack, in Baghdad, Iraq, yesterday. Tens of thousands of supporters of Iranian-backed Iraqi paramilitary groups chanted anti-American slogans in central Baghdad yesterday to mark the occasion.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Will Trump launch attack on Iran?

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

US President Donald Trump could take "reckless" military action against Iran in his final days in office, experts have warned, as tensions rise between Tehran and Washington.

With less than a month left in the White House, Trump is under pressure from key allies in the Middle East - namely Israel and Saudi Arabia - to take action on Iran, said Danny Postel, assistant director of the Center for International and Area Studies at Northwestern University.

"Trump is a very wounded and very cornered animal in an end-game scenario. He's got a few weeks left, and we know that he is capable of extremely erratic behaviour," Postel, an expert on Iran and US foreign policy, told Al Jazeera in an interview.

"It may be the case that his most erratic, most reckless lashing out is yet to come."

However, experts are unconvinced that Tehran would give the Trump administration a pretext to launch a military confrontation right now as US

President-elect Joe Biden, who intends to restart diplomatic engagement with Tehran, is set to assume office on January 20. Biden has said he plans to rejoin the Iran nuclear deal.

This week, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Iran's uranium stockpile was 12 times the



limit set by the deal in November. Iran also notified the IAEA on Friday that it planned to enrich uranium to 20 percent.

Experts also said in November that the assassination of a top Iranian nuclear scientist - an act that many observers blamed on Israel, but for which no claim of responsibility has been made

- aimed to complicate Biden's plan to restart diplomacy with Iran.

Trita Parsi, executive vice president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, a think-tank in Washington, DC, said key Trump backers - Evangelicals and supporters of Israel, in particular - could be pushing for a confrontation. With rumours swirling that Trump is planning a 2024 run for president, the Republican leader could decide "to start a war of choice with Iran to finally kill the JCPOA and strengthen his grip over the GOP [Republican Party]", Parsi told Al Jazeera in an email.

Postel said who is in power in the US and Iran has a critical impact on the prospects of diplomacy. For example, the Iran nuclear deal was reached when Obama and Rouhani - both of whom favoured international engagement - were in office.

He added that Iranian hardliners may be poised to defeat Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in the country's next elections later this year, making the current moment - with Biden set to take office - all the more important.

Scotland must wait a generation for new vote

Says UK PM amid new referendum bid

AFP, London

Another Scottish independence referendum should not take place for a generation, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said yesterday, as Scotland's leader renewed calls for a fresh vote in the wake of Brexit.

"Referendums in my experience, direct experience, in this country are not particularly jolly events," the prime minister told BBC's Andrew Marr Show. "They don't have a notably unifying force in the national mood, they should be only once in a generation."

Scotland voted to remain part of the United Kingdom in 2014. Scottish National Party leader Nicola Sturgeon at the time called it a once-in-a-generation vote, but now argues that Britain's departure from the European Union, which a majority of Scots opposed, has changed the game.

Recent polls have shown consistent support for independence, boosted by rows between London and the devolved governments over the handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

"For too long, successive UK governments have taken Scotland in the wrong direction, culminating in Brexit. It's no wonder so many people in Scotland have had enough," she wrote on her party's website on Saturday. "We didn't want to leave and we hope to join you again soon as an equal partner," she added, in a message to the EU.

Johnson has ruled out holding another vote, but Sturgeon will likely claim a mandate and heap pressure on the prime minister should her party perform well in upcoming local elections.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Homes of top Republican and Democrat vandalized

Vandals have targeted the homes of Republican Senate leader Mitch McConnell and Democrat Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi with graffiti, fake blood and a pig's head, US media said.

"Were [sic] my money," and "Mitch kills the poor," was daubed on McConnell's front door and window in Louisville, Kentucky, US media reported. A pig's head and fake blood were left outside Pelosi's San Francisco home on January 2, according to local media Saturday. The homes of the top Republican and Democrat were targeted following intense debate over a Covid-19 stimulus bailout for Americans.

A long-awaited \$900 billion pandemic relief package was finally approved Christmas Eve, with the Democrat-led House of Congress approving an increase in aid from \$600 to \$2,000. But the Republican-led Senate has not approved the increase - despite furious calls to do so from President Donald Trump.

US news star Larry King hospitalized with Covid-19

Veteran talk show host Larry King has been hospitalized with Covid-19, US media reported Saturday. Citing a "source close to the family," CNN reported that King, one of the network's biggest stars, has been hospitalized for more than a week at Cedars Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles.

King, 87, has Type 2 diabetes and has had a long history of medical issues, including several heart attacks, lung cancer and angina, a condition caused by reduced blood flow to the heart. King hosted CNN's "Larry King Live" for 25 years, retiring in 2010. He continued to do interviews on his own website and then, in 2012, he began hosting "Larry King Now" on Ora TV, an on-demand digital network that he co-founded. In 2013, he also began hosting a show called "Politicking with Larry King" on Ora TV.

Gunmen kill 11 Shia miners in southwest Pakistan

Gunmen in southwestern Pakistan have killed at least 11 workers at a remote coal mine, officials said yesterday. The victims of the attack in Baluchistan province were from the minority Shia Hazara community. Ethnic Hazara make up most of the Shia population in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan. They are often targeted by Sunni militants, who consider them heretics, though it was unclear why the attackers targeted the coal mine specifically. The attack, before dawn yesterday, took place in the far-flung and mountainous Machh area while the miners slept, police said. No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A Palestinian woman pushes back an Israeli border police officer during a protest, in Yatta in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Expecting the worst

Says Chomsky as court to rule on Assange's US extradition

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

A British judge will decide today if WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange will be extradited to the United States to face espionage charges for publishing secret US military documents.

The 49-year-old Australian is accused of illegally hacking into US government websites and leaking documents containing logs on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and diplomatic cables in 2010.

"I am expecting the worst," MIT professor and prominent US foreign policy critic Noam Chomsky told Al Jazeera.

"I hope I am wrong," the 92-year-old activist added, calling Assange's incarceration "unfair, unjust and criminal - but power reigns".

Assange, whose trial began in February last year and concluded in October, is currently being held at the maximum-security Belmarsh prison in southeast London.

The Australian citizen was arrested in April 2019



from the Ecuador embassy in London, where he was granted asylum in 2012, in order to avoid being arrested after Interpol issued an arrest warrant for him on rape allegations in Sweden, an investigation which was later dropped.

That same month, a grand jury in the US state of Virginia charged him with one count of computer hacking for allegedly assisting former US Marine Chelsea Manning in accessing the classified documents.

In May 2019, the WikiLeaks founder was indicted under the US Espionage Act of 1917 on 17 counts for soliciting, gathering and publishing US military and diplomatic documents in 2010, all provided by Manning.

The Australian is the first publisher to be charged under the act and could face up to a maximum of 175 years in prison.

If extradited, the Wikileaks publisher is likely to appeal the decision, which could delay extradition proceedings for an indefinite period. In case he is not, Assange is expected to remain in jail in the United Kingdom.

'MILITANT ATTACKS' At least 70 killed in Niger

REUTERS, Niamey

At least 70 civilians were killed in simultaneous attacks on two villages by suspected Islamist militants in Niger, near the border zone with Mali, security sources said on Saturday.

About 49 villagers were killed and 17 people wounded in the village of Tchombangou, said one of the security sources. A second source, a senior official in Niger's interior ministry, said that around 30 other villagers had been killed in the village of Zaroumdareye.

The West African nation has previously suffered attacks by Islamist militants linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State. Attacks near the western border with Mali and Burkina Faso, and the southeastern border with Nigeria, killed hundreds of people last year.

Dozen US senators plan to oppose Biden certification

AGENCIES

A group of Republican senators led by veteran lawmaker Ted Cruz said Saturday they will challenge Joe Biden's election win - the latest last-ditch move to support Donald Trump's efforts to undermine the vote.

The initiative, which appears certain to fail, flies in the face of rulings in dozens of courts and the findings by officials in several key states that there were no widespread voting problems.

The Republicans' statement, signed by Cruz and six other current senators along with four senators-elect, asserts that "allegations of fraud and irregularities in the 2020 election exceed any in our lifetimes."

The group said that when Congress convenes in a joint session on Wednesday - for what normally would be a pro-forma certification of Biden's victory - they will demand the creation of a special commission to conduct an "emergency 10-day audit" of the election results.

The statement says individual states could then convene special legislative sessions and potentially revise their vote totals.

"An attempt to steal a landslide win. Can't let it happen!" Trump tweeted Saturday.

A Republican member of the House of Representatives, Louie Gohmert, has also announced his plan to oppose certification, and more than 100 House Republicans reportedly will back his challenge.

As with Trump's other attempts to reverse his election defeat, the latest political maneuvering appears doomed. Democrats control the House, and many Republicans are expected to vote Wednesday for certification.

Meanwhile, the new US Congress faces many uncertainties as it takes office later Sunday, with Senate control undecided, a narrower Democratic majority in the House of Representatives and Republicans planning an immediate fight over the normally routine election certification.

Democrats lost 11 House of Representatives seats in the November elections, leaving them with a narrow 222-212 majority that gives Speaker Nancy Pelosi little room to maneuver in her first task of being re-elected as the chamber's leader.



Students along with their parents hold placards and shout slogans in support of farmers protesting against the central government's recent agricultural reforms, in Amritsar, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP