

**The Washington Post**  
*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

# Airstrike at Baghdad airport kills Iran's most revered military leader, Qassem Soleimani, Iraqi state television reports

By **Missy Ryan** and **Dan Lamothe**

January 2, 2020 at 8:23 PM EST

***BREAKING: It was not clear who carried out the strike, but the death of Soleimani, the Iranian Quds Force commander, seems certain to send tensions soaring between the United States and Iran. This story will be updated.***

Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper said Thursday that Iran and its proxies may be preparing renewed strikes on U.S. personnel in Iraq, even as the Trump administration increases the number of troops in the region to guard against what it characterized as sustained Iranian aggression.

“There are some indications out there that they may be planning additional attacks,” Esper said at the Pentagon, a day after members of an Iranian-linked militia, Kataib Hezbollah, withdrew from the area around the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad following their assault on the diplomatic facility.

“So do I think they may do something?” he said. “Yes, and they will likely regret it.”

The attempted siege — in which militiamen threw molotov cocktails, stormed into a reception area and then established a camp outside the sprawling American compound — marked the most intense flare-up in U.S.-Iran tensions in Iraq since the end of the Iraq War in 2011.

The incident has strained relations with the Baghdad government, which has sought to maintain stable ties with both its chief Western backer, the United States, and its powerful neighbor, Iran, and the violence posed a new test of the Trump administration's hawkish policy against Tehran.

Hours after Esper made his remarks, a suspected drone strike killed a senior Shiite militia figure traveling in a vehicle near Baghdad airport Thursday night. The strike, which the militias were blaming on the United States, could signal a sharp new escalation of tensions in Iraq between the United States and Iran.

A statement from the Popular Mobilization Forces, the leadership of the umbrella organization grouping Shiite militias, said the strike targeted a convoy of two vehicles, killing the group's head of protocol, Mohammed Ridha, along with an unidentified number of “guests” whom he was escorting from the airport.

There was immediate speculation that the guests may have included Iranians who traveling to Baghdad through the airport, where U.S. troops are based alongside Iraqi security forces. Hisham al-Hashemi, a political analyst close to the government, tweeted that three Iranians were among the dead.

There were reports of gunfire erupting in the airport vicinity at the time of the strike, and the Iraqi Army command said three Katyusha rockets, which are typically fired by Iranian backed militias, exploded nearby.

The Defense Department did not respond to a request for comment.

Kataib Hezbollah's targeting of the embassy followed U.S. strikes over the weekend on militia facilities in Iraq and Syria. Officials said they came in response to repeated rocket and artillery attacks on U.S. facilities, including one recent incident that killed an American contractor in Iraq. At least 25 militia members were killed in the retaliatory strikes.

Tensions between the United States and Iran have been building. The Trump administration withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 and has since imposed new sanctions that have devastated the Iranian economy. In June, President Trump authorized and then called off airstrikes in Iran following Tehran's downing of an American surveillance drone.

"The game has changed," Esper said. "And we're prepared to do what is necessary to defend our personnel and our interests and our partners in the region."

He said that could include military action to preempt militia attacks if U.S. officials learn about them ahead of time.

Speaking alongside Esper, Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the embassy compound, which contains hardened offices and residences and occupies more than 100 acres in Baghdad's international zone, remained secure.

"There is sufficient combat power there, air and ground, that anyone who attempts to overrun that will run into a buzz saw," Milley said.

In response to the attack on the embassy, the administration has deployed 750 troops from a special quick-action battalion from the 82nd Airborne Division to Kuwait, a staging ground for forces going into Iraq. About 100 Marines were sent into Baghdad to protect the embassy.

Milley said the increase in forces in Kuwait was needed in part to compensate for the Marine deployment and ensure readiness to respond to other possible incidents in the region.

About 5,000 U.S. troops are stationed in Iraq as part of efforts to combat the remnants of the Islamic State and support Iraqi security forces. While the number of diplomats there is far fewer than it has been in past years, hundreds of embassy personnel were forced to shelter in safe rooms during the militia siege.

Milley also appeared to question whether the Iraqi government, which includes senior officials seen as having strong allegiances to Tehran, intended to take action to check militia groups.

Last year, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi issued an order aimed at strengthening government control over militia units, which have gained new military and political clout since 2014 because of their instrumental role in battling the Islamic State.

“They have the capability,” Milley said. “It’s a question of political will, and that’s not for us to decide. That’s for the internal political dynamics of Iraq.”

The Iraqi government has been in crisis for months amid massive popular protests focused on widespread corruption and, to a lesser extent, Iranian influence in Iraq. The mass mobilizations prompted Abdul Mahdi to resign late last year, though he remains in office in a caretaker capacity.

It is unclear in the wake of the U.S. strikes and the embassy episode whether some Iraqi politicians’ calls for a full American withdrawal will gain momentum.

Speaking in a subsequent Fox News interview, Esper suggested a potential shift in U.S. strategy in Iraq, saying the Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate “remains physically defeated, if you will,” and now the administration’s “aim is to deter further Iranian bad behavior that has been going on now for over 40 years.”

Asked whether Iranian leaders needed a “punch in the nose” that goes beyond sanctions and tough rhetoric, Esper declined to answer directly. The Trump administration has already sent thousands of troops and additional assets to the Middle East, including missile defense systems, in response to the perceived Iranian threat.

Esper said Iran must end its nuclear and long-range missile programs, stop taking hostages and move away from “malign behavior where they are inspiring terrorist groups, and resourcing and directing them all the way from Africa across the Middle East and into Afghanistan.”

Col. Myles Caggins, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State, said the embassy episode had not damaged efforts to target the once-powerful militant group, which no longer holds territory but continues to conduct insurgent attacks.

“Although they are a dangerous distraction, recent attacks from Kataib Hezbollah militias have not deterred us from partnering with local security forces for training missions and outside-the-wire operations to catch ISIS members,” he said in an email, using an acronym for the Islamic State.

*Carol Morello and Liz Sly contributed to this report.*

