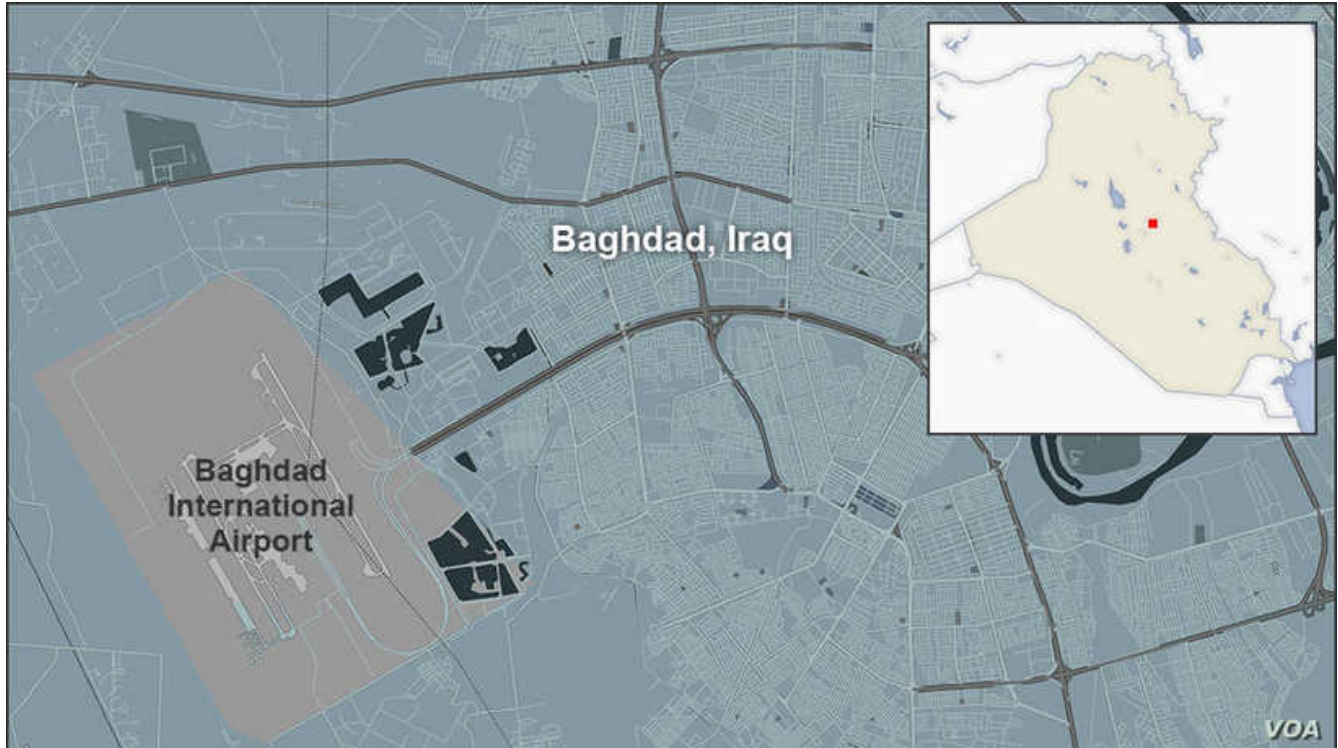


Middle East

Iraqi TV: Iran's Gen. Soleimani Killed in Baghdad Strike

By Associated Press

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Baghdad airport

BAGHDAD - Iraqi TV and three Iraqi officials said Friday that Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, has been killed in an airstrike at Baghdad's international airport.

The officials said the strike also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of Iran-backed militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.

An official with an Iran-backed paramilitary force said Friday that seven people were killed by a missile fired at Baghdad International Airport, blaming the United States.

The official with the group known as the Popular Mobilization Forces said the dead included its airport protocol officer, identifying him as Mohammed Reda.

Earlier, Iraq's Security Media Cell, which releases information regarding Iraqi security, said Katyusha



FILE - Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani, center, attends a meeting in Tehran, Iran, Sept. 18, 2016.

rockets landed near the airport's cargo hall, killing several people and setting two cars on fire.

It was not immediately clear who fired the missile or rockets or who was targeted. There was no immediate comment from the U.S.

The security official said the bodies of those killed in the airport attack Friday were burned and difficult to identify. The official added that Reda may have been at the airport to pick up a group of "high-level" visitors who had arrived from a neighboring country. He declined to provide more information.



FILE - Protesters are seen through broken windows of a burned checkpoint in front of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, Jan. 1, 2020.

The attack came amid tensions with the United States after a New Year's Eve attack by Iran-backed militias on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. The two-day embassy attack which ended Wednesday prompted President Donald Trump to order about 750 U.S. soldiers deployed to the Middle East.

The breach at the embassy followed U.S. airstrikes on Sunday that killed 25 fighters of the Iran-backed militia in Iraq, the Kataeb Hezbollah. The U.S. military said the strikes were in retaliation for last week's killing of an American contractor in a rocket attack on an Iraqi military base that the U.S. blamed on the militia.

U.S. officials have suggested they were prepared to engage in further retaliatory attacks in Iraq.

"The game has changed," Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Thursday, telling reporters that violent acts by Iran-backed Shi'ite militias in Iraq — including the rocket attack on Dec. 27 that killed one American —

will be met with U.S. military force.

Esper: US Prepared to Take 'Preemptive' Action on Iran

Pentagon says it continues to see indications that Iran and Iranian-backed militias may be planning more strikes on US forces in the Middle East

He said the Iraqi government has fallen short of its obligation to defend its American partner in the attack on the U.S. embassy.

The developments also represent a major downturn in Iraq-U.S. relations that could further undermine U.S. influence in the region and American troops in Iraq and weaken Washington's hand in its pressure campaign against Iran.

