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Strike Ordered By Trump Kills Powerful Iranian Leader; Fears of New War Abound

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A vehicle hit by a missile outside Baghdad International Airport By. IRAQI PRIME MINISTER PRESS OFFICE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, leader of the foreign wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, who was considered the second most powerful man in Iran, was killed in a drone airstrike in the wee hours of Friday morning Iraqi time, by the American military. The strike was ordered by President Donald Trump and immediately stoked fears of a new war in the Middle East.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared three days of mourning for the death of Gen. Soleimani and warned that a "hard revenge awaits criminals."

Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif called the strike an “act of international terrorism” and said Tehran would “exhaust all its political, legal and international capacities...to hold the terrorist and criminal regime of the United States responsible regarding this obvious crime.”

The Middle East has responded almost uniformly with condemnation of the killing. And Iranians, according to Al Jazeera, see the killing as an act of war.

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi condemned the targeted killing and said it was a violation of the terms of America's presence in the country. The prime minister made known that he had submitted a request to the Iraqi parliament for the adaption of measures “to protect Iraq’s dignity and sovereignty.”

Gen. Soleimani was killed along with several officials from Iraqi militias backed by Iran when an American MQ-9 Reaper drone fired missiles into a convoy that was leaving the airport.

Gen. Soleimani had led almost every major Iranian operation by the country's intelligence and military forces for over 20 years. His death represented a deeply shocking blow to Iran at a time when conflict in the Middle East shows not sign of abating.

The U.S. Department of Defense justified the targeted action in a statement that blamed Gen. Soleimani for killing hundreds of Americans. “General Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region,” the Pentagon said. “General Suleimani and his Quds Force were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American and coalition service members and the wounding of thousands more.”

The killing, which even some U.S. lawmakers have described as an assassination of another country's leader, represents a dangerous new turn in Iranian-American relations that many fear could drag America into another major, costly conflict with a foe much more potent than America's post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

“The killing of Qassem Soleimani is one of the biggest developments in the Middle East for decades,” said Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, a Washington-based think tank (via the Wall Street Journal). “His death is a serious loss for Iran’s regional agenda, but his ‘martyrdom’ will likely fuel a response that will, at least in the medium term, make up for his death.”

American politicians have responded mostly along party lines. Joe Biden, a former U.S. senator and vice president during the Obama administration, and leading Democratic candidate for the upcoming 2020 election, said Mr. Trump needed to make clear his strategy following the brazen attack.

“President Trump just tossed a stick of dynamite into a tinderbox, and he owes the American people an explanation of the strategy and plan to keep safe our troops and embassy personnel, our people and our interests, both here at home and abroad, and our partners throughout the region and beyond,” Mr. Biden said. He also said that no American would mourn the death of Gen. Soleimani.

But Republican Senator Linsey Graham praised the action and warned Iran against retaliation. “Major blow to Iranian regime that has American blood on its hands,” Mr. Graham wrote in a tweet. “Soleimani was one of the most ruthless and vicious members of the Ayatollah’s regime.”

Then came the warning for Iran in a subsequent tweet from Mr. Graham, “If Iranian aggression continues and I worked at an Iranian oil refinery, I would think about a new career.”

