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Iran Vows Forceful Retaliation Against U.S. to Avenge Death of top Commander

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Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani attends a meeting in Tehran in 2016 By. (OFFICE OF THE IRANIAN SUPREME LEADER/AP)

U.S. — Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has vowed to avenge the death of its powerful commander who was killed yesterday in a U.S. drone strike, warning the U.S. that a forceful response is imminent.

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.

"His work and path will not cease, and severe revenge awaits those criminals who have tainted their filthy hands with his blood and the blood of the other martyrs," Mr. Khamenei said in a statement.

Iran Defense Minister, Amir Hatami, said the killing of Mr. Soleimani would be met with a "crushing" response. Experts say U.S. troops in Iraq and American economic interests in the Middle East would be likely targets.

For his part, Mr. Trump told reporters Friday that he ordered the assassination of Mr. Soleimani to "stop a war." Mr. Trump said, "We did not take action to start a war."

The Department of Defense, nonetheless, was mobilizing troops to the Middle East, well aware of the surge in tensions that followed the air strike. The Pentagon said it was preparing to deploy an additional 3,500 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division to the region. According to two defense officials, speaking to the Washington Post, the military also has put hundreds of soldiers from the Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade in Italy on alert for potential deployment.

Leaders around the world have condemned the killing of Mr. Soleimani as a careless escalation of tensions in the Persian Gulf. Iraqi caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi called the attack an "aggression" on Iraq that would "spark a devastating war".

Moscow warned that the assassination of Soleimani would increase tensions across the Middle East.

"The killing of Soleimani ... was an adventurist step that will increase tensions throughout the region," news agencies RIA Novosti and TASS quoted the foreign ministry as saying.

"Soleimani served the cause of protecting Iran's national interests with devotion. We express our sincere condolences to the Iranian people."

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is deeply concerned by the recent rise in tensions in the Middle East, his spokesperson said in a statement.

"The secretary-general has consistently advocated for de-escalation in the Gulf," Farhan Haq said. "This is a moment in which leaders must exercise maximum restraint. The world cannot afford another war in the Gulf."

China appealed for restraint from all sides, "especially the United States".

"We urge the relevant sides, especially the United States, to remain calm and exercise restraint to avoid further escalating tensions," foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said at a daily news briefing.

The 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.”

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