

Iran Ends Nuclear Limits as Killing of Iranian General Upends Mideast

The consequences of the American assassination of a senior Iranian commander are mounting.

BEIRUT — The consequences of the American assassination of a top Iranian general rippled across the Middle East and beyond on Sunday, with Iran ending commitments it made to limit its nuclear fuel production and Iraqi lawmakers voting to expel American forces from their country.

Steeling for retaliation from Iran, an American-led coalition in Iraq and Syria suspended the campaign it has waged against the Islamic State for years, and hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the street to mourn the assassinated general, Qassim Suleimani.

Warning Iran not to attack, President Trump said the United States had pinpointed 52 targets in Iran — including cultural sites. The sites, he said, represented the 52 American hostages held at the United States Embassy in Tehran during the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

Amid outrage in Iran, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif declared that “targeting cultural sites is a war crime” and predicted that the “end of U.S. malign presence in West Asia has begun.”

Mr. Trump has said that the killing of General Suleimani on Friday was aimed at preventing war.

But so far, it has unleashed a host of unanticipated consequences that could dramatically alter where the United States operates. Increasingly, the killing appeared to be generating effects far beyond the United States’ ability to control.

That may include Iran’s nuclear future.

On Sunday, the Iranian government said it was abandoning its “final limitations in the nuclear deal,” the international agreement intended to prevent Tehran from

developing nuclear weapons. The decision leaves no restrictions on Iran's nuclear program, the statement said, including on uranium enrichment, production, research and expansion.

Iran will, however, continue its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency and return to the nuclear deal if the economic sanctions imposed on it are removed and Iran's interests guaranteed, the government said. American sanctions have hit Iran's oil-based economy particularly hard.

General Suleimani was a towering figure both in Iran and across the Middle East, where he cultivated proxy militias in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Since he was killed in an American drone strike at the Baghdad airport on Friday alongside a powerful Iraqi militia leader, Iran and its partners have stepped up calls for vengeance, although they have yet to follow through on the threats.

American allies have largely kept quiet so as not to put themselves in the line of fire.

Lawmakers in Iraq voted on Sunday to require the government to end the presence of American troops in the country after Mr. Trump ordered the assassination on Iraqi soil.



Iraqi students protesting the United States and Iran in Baghdad on Sunday. Credit...Murtaja Lateef/EPA, via Shutterstock

The vote will not be final until it is signed by the prime minister, and it was unclear whether Iraq's current caretaker government had the authority to end the relationship with the United States military.

Few doubted, however, that the country would take whatever legal actions were necessary to compel a United States departure over the coming months. Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi drafted the language and submitted the bill approved by Parliament on Sunday, leaving little doubt about his support.

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Iraqi lawmakers in Parliament called on the government to oust U.S. troops. Although the vote in Parliament was 170-0, lawmakers were more divided on the issue of ousting American troops than that tally may suggest.

Many of the 328 members of Parliament, primarily those representing the country's ethnic Kurdish and Sunni Muslim minorities, did not attend the session and did not vote. Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority dominates the Iraqi government.

While groups that grew out of Shiite militia organizations have pushed hard for the expulsion, Sunni Muslim factions and the Kurds have wanted the United States to stay.

The legislation threads a fine needle: While using strong language demanding that the government "end any foreign presence on Iraqi soil and prevent the use of Iraqi airspace, soil and water for any reason" by foreign forces, it gives no timetable for doing so.

It would end the mission approved in 2014 that gave the United States the explicit task of helping Iraqi forces fight the Islamic State. That agreement gave the Americans substantial latitude to launch attacks and use Iraqi airspace.

But the measure would leave in place the Strategic Framework Agreement, which allows an American troop presence in Iraq in some form, although only "at the invitation of the Iraqi government."



A photograph provided by the Prime Minister of Iraq's press office of Parliament meeting in Baghdad on Sunday. Credit...Iraqi Prime Minister's Press Office

On Sunday, the American-led coalition in Iraq and Syria said it would pause its yearslong mission of fighting the Islamic State and training local forces in both countries.

A pullout of the estimated 5,200 American troops in Iraq could cripple the fight against the Islamic State, or ISIS, and allow its resurgence. A smaller contingent of about 1,000 United States troops are in eastern Syria.

The general's killing unleashed calls for vengeance in both Iraq and Iran, and reinforced solidarity among hard-liners and moderates in Iran against the United States. After the vote in Iraq calling on the government to expel American troops, Iranian officials reacted with congratulatory messages.

Hesameddin Ashena, a top adviser to President Hassan Rouhani, wrote on Twitter, "Expanding friendship with our neighbors and domestic unity are the best gifts for protecting our national security."

In Iraq, the attack was seen as a violation of the nation's sovereignty. On Sunday,

Iraq's Foreign Ministry said it had summoned the American ambassador in Baghdad.

In Iran, it was viewed as tantamount to an act of war. Hossein Dehghan, a military adviser to Mr. Khamenei, told CNN that Iran's response would include an attack on "U.S. military targets."

As the Middle East braced for Iranian retaliation, which analysts said was all but inevitable and American officials said they expected within weeks, Tehran and Washington ratcheted up the rhetoric.

Members of Iran's Parliament chanted, "Death to America!" en masse in the chamber on Sunday in protest over General Suleimani's killing, television footage showed.

The chants came as Mr. Trump fired off a series of Twitter ripostes to the growing anger, saying that the United States had already chosen 52 targets in Iran.

Iran summoned the Swiss envoy representing American interests in Tehran on Sunday to protest Mr. Trump's threat that Washington would target Iranian sites. And Mr. Trump's tweet became a rallying cry among Iranians, many of whom shared it widely on social media with the message, "Attend the funeral for our cultural heritage."

Iran's information and telecommunications minister, Mohammad Javad Azari-Jahromi, denounced Mr. Trump as "a terrorist in a suit."

"Like ISIS, Like Hitler, Like Genghis!" Mr. Jahromi said on Twitter. "They all hate cultures. Trump is a terrorist in a suit. He will learn history very soon that NOBODY can defeat 'the Great Iranian Nation & Culture.'"



Iranian Parliament members in their chamber on Sunday. Credit... Mohammad Hassanzadeh/Tasnim News Agency, via Associated Press

The attack on the Iranian general left America's European allies scrambling to address the safety of their troops in the Middle East and complaining that they had been given no warning about the strike. European leaders called for a de-escalation of the tensions between Iran and the United States.

The European Union's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, invited Mr. Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, to Brussels for talks. Mr. Borrell said that he had spoken with Mr. Zarif, urging "Iran to exercise restraint and carefully consider any reaction to avoid further escalation, which harms the entire region and its people."

Germany's foreign minister, Heiko Maas, said he would seek direct talks with Iran. Europe wants to continue the fight against the Islamic State, Mr. Maas said, and Germany is anxious about the safety of its troops training Iraqi forces.

Germany's defense minister, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, said in a statement: "Iraq cannot be allowed to sink into chaos, and certainly not under the control of extremists. Therefore, it is important not to let up now in the fight against Islamic

State.”

In general, the Europeans did not specifically criticize Mr. Trump for his decision, and generally share the American view that Iran has been a destabilizing force in the Middle East and a supporter of terrorism. At the same time, no European government praised the killing of General Suleimani, emphasizing instead the increased risks to their citizens, troops and interests.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson of Britain was reported to be angry with Mr. Trump for not informing him or other allies with troops in Iraq about the decision to kill General Suleimani. While carried out by the Americans, the killing is seen as having put all European citizens and troops in Iraq and the wider region at heightened risk.

Mr. Johnson, who was said to be returning early from a vacation in the Caribbean, is expected to discuss the issues with Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, President Emmanuel Macron of France and Mr. Trump in the next few days, a Downing Street spokeswoman said.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo complained that the response by European allies had not been “helpful.” He told Fox News in an interview: “Frankly, the Europeans haven’t been as helpful as I wish that they could be. The Brits, the French, the Germans all need to understand that what we did, what the Americans did, saved lives in Europe as well.”

Dominic Raab, Britain’s foreign minister, who is scheduled to travel to Washington this week to meet Mr. Pompeo, said all countries had a right to defend themselves.

Asked in an interview with the BBC whether the killing was legal, Mr. Raab said, “There is a right of self-defense.” He said he did not agree that the killing was an act of war, and described General Suleimani to Sky News, another British broadcaster, as a “regional menace.”

But Mr. Raab also said that he had spoken to Iraq’s prime minister and president to urge a de-escalation of tensions in the region, and that he planned to speak to Iran’s foreign minister.



The coffins of General Soleimani and his comrades who were killed in Iraq were carried on a truck surrounded by mourners during a funeral procession in Mashhad, Iran, on Sunday. Credit... Mohammad Hossein Thaghi/Tasnim News Agency, via Associated Press

In particular, the Europeans have tried to persuade Iran to keep to the terms of the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; Mr. Trump pulled the United States out of it in May 2018, reimposing harsh economic sanctions on Tehran. Iran had slowly abandoned its adherence to parts of the deal before its announcement on Sunday.

The Europeans are also working to keep the Strait of Hormuz open to shipping. About one-third of the world's oil tankers use the waterway, which Iran has intermittently threatened to close. Last July, Iranian forces seized a British-flagged tanker in the Strait, trying to pressure the world to allow its oil exports despite American sanctions.

On Saturday, Britain's defense minister, Ben Wallace, said he had ordered the country's navy to accompany all British-flagged ships through the Strait of Hormuz.

France has also stepped up diplomatic initiatives to ease tensions. President Macron spoke with President Barham Salih of Iraq and the de facto ruler of the United Arab Emirates, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi.

On Sunday, Kataib Hezbollah, the Iraqi armed group arguably closest to Iran, warned Iraqi troops on bases that also house United States forces that they should stay at least 3,000 feet from their American counterparts starting on Sunday evening, and not allow themselves to be used as human shields.

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