

# US exposes Saudi Arabia to peril after Iranian killing

**RIYADH:** The US has put its ally Saudi Arabia in Iraq's crosshairs with the assassination of a top general, leaving it bracing for retaliation just as it was working to ease tensions after a torrid 2019. American officials say the kingdom faces a "heightened risk" of drone and missile attacks after the killing in Baghdad last week of powerful Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani in a US drone strike. The assassination has sparked fears of a regional conflagration as Tehran vows to take "severe revenge", with Saudi Arabia calling it a "very dangerous moment".

Riyadh has tried to distance itself from the US strike, with a Saudi official telling AFP the kingdom was "not consulted" by Washington before the killing. Saudi newspapers close to the regime have sought to deflect blame onto rival Doha, saying the drone that downed Soleimani took off from a US base in Qatar, glossing over the deployment of American troops in the kingdom.

A Saudi delegation led by Prince Khalid bin Salman, the deputy defense minister, arrived in Washington on Monday for de-escalation talks, while King Salman has urged Iraq to take urgent measures to defuse tensions.

"It's pretty clear that the Saudis don't welcome this crisis even though they have to be quietly delighted with the killing of Soleimani," said Hussein Ibish, a scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. "They know they would be in the crossfire if war breaks out, so they are doing everything they can to bring down the temperature."

In recent months, Saudi Arabia and its arch-nemesis Iran have taken steps towards Iraq-brokered talks in a bid to defuse tensions that have brought the Middle East to the brink of war. Iraq's prime minister, Adel Abdel Mahdi, said Sunday that he was expecting to meet Soleimani on the day he was killed, saying the general had travelled to deliver a response from Tehran to an earlier Saudi message. The outreach marks a shift from Saudi ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's earlier aggressive stance towards Iran, which sent regional tensions soaring.

Analysts had fretted that Saudi leaders, frustrated with former US president Barack Obama's outreach to Iran and who welcomed Donald Trump's hostile stance,

would drag Washington into another intractable conflict. But Riyadh appears chastened by coordinated attacks on key oil installations last year, which were blamed on Iran, despite its denials.

Washington's seemingly tepid response after the Sept 14 attacks affirmed the view that the kingdom could not rely on its closest Western ally to come to its aid if a conflict erupted, analysts say. "The September 14 assault in Saudi Arabia demonstrated its inability to protect their critical infrastructure against asymmetrical attacks," said Kristian Ulrichsen, a fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute in the United States. "With both the Saudis and its ally the UAE gearing up for global events this year - the G20 summit in Riyadh and the Dubai Expo 2020 - both will be desperate to avoid any escalation that could put them in doubt."

## 'Reward for outreach'

Riyadh has quietly tried to disentangle itself from other regional crises. It appears to have stepped up direct talks with Yemen's pro-Iran Houthi rebels it has

been fighting for almost five years, leading to a noticeable decline in attacks by both sides. Riyadh is also in talks with Qatar over ways to ease a two-year Saudi-led boycott on its neighbor. "The killing of Soleimani... threatens to upend this progress," said Stephen Seche, vice president of the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

"It greatly increases the likelihood that elements within the Huthi movement close to Tehran will be tempted to... strike deep into Saudi Arabia, a move that would almost certainly scuttle the ongoing peace initiative." The Yemeni rebels, who have proved surprisingly impervious to Saudi Arabia's expensive military arsenal, have pledged "swift reprisals", voicing solidarity with Tehran. But Iran and its proxies are likely to target American installations. "Because the Iranians need to go after something American, they can find a way to do so without necessarily destroying their outreach to Saudi Arabia," said Ryan Bohl, of US geopolitical think-tank Stratfor. "That could be a reward for Riyadh for its outreach." — AFP



This handout image released on Jan 6, 2020 shows an artist's illustration of the planet TOI 700 d, the first Earth-size habitable-zone planet discovered by NASA's Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite (TESS). — AFP

## Assembly delays grilling of Aseri...

Continued from Page 1

Adasani vowed that if the government does not apply the law by referring those suspected of stealing public funds to the public prosecution, he will file to grill the prime minister. MP Yousef Al-Fadhlah said that the issue of lawmakers receiving money from government officials is highly disturbing and a big blow to the constitution and values.

Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem told the Assembly that he has coordinated with the government to hold a special session tomorrow to discuss a number of issues including the recently signed agreement between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia over the neutral zone, adding

that voting on the agreement will be made only after the foreign relations panel submits its report. Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah said he was prepared to provide the details of the historic agreement to the National Assembly.

The Assembly then continued to debate the Amiri speech delivered on the opening day of the current term late October. MP Safa Al-Hashem complained that some government departments are "penetrated" by foreign advisors, saying that an 80-year-old expat advisor to the finance ministry undersecretary has just got a renewal, "although he sleeps during meetings".

MP Mohammad Al-Hadiya complained of flagrant violations in the citizenship issue and criticized the government for refusing to launch an investigation into the allegations. MP Thamer Al-Suwait however said there are unfounded allegations into this sensitive issue, saying that a lawmaker had claimed that 6,000 people were granted nationality in a deliberate attempt to raise baseless and racist concerns.

## At least 56 mourners killed in stampede...

Continued from Page 1

The assassination of Soleimani set off an escalating war of words between Iran and the United States. In Tehran, President Hassan Rouhani on Monday warned Trump to "never threaten" Iran, after the US leader issued a US strike list of 52 targets in the Islamic republic. Yesterday, Iranian lawmakers voted to designate all US forces around the world "terrorists" over Soleimani's killing. Parliament also agreed to bolster the coffers of the Quds Force by \$244 million.

In Kerman, people converged from afar on Azadi Square where two flag-draped coffins were on display, with the second one reportedly containing the remains of Soleimani's closest aide, Brigadier General Hossein Pourjafari. "We're here today to pay respects to the great commander of the holy defense," said one of the mourners who came from the southern city of Shiraz. "Haj Qasem was not only loved in Kerman, or Iran, but also the whole world," Hemmat Dehghan told AFP. "The security of the whole world, Muslims, Shiites, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and especially Iran, all owe it to him," said the 56-year-old war veteran. Another mourner said Soleimani's assassination "boils the blood of the Iranian people".

Iraq's parliament has demanded the government expel the 5,200 American troops stationed in the country in response to the drone attack which also killed top Iraqi military figure Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis. Baghdad requested in a letter to the UN - seen by AFP - that the Security Council condemn the US strike so that "the law of the jungle" is not allowed to prevail. The operation represented "a dangerous escalation that could lead to a devastating war in Iraq, the region and the world," wrote Iraq's UN ambassador Mohammed Hussein Bahr-Aluloom.

On Sunday night, the US mistakenly notified Baghdad of an imminent troop pullout in a letter that sparked confusion in Washington. "We respect your sovereign decision to order our departure," said the letter, whose authenticity was confirmed to AFP by both Iraqi and US defense officials. In the letter, US Brigadier General William Seely said the US-led coalition would "be repositioning forces".

"In order to conduct this task, Coalition Forces are required to take certain measures to ensure that the movement out of Iraq is conducted in a safe and efficient manner," said the letter. It said helicopters would be travelling in and around Baghdad's Green Zone where the US embassy is located as part of the preparations. AFP could hear helicopters flying low over Baghdad throughout the night on Monday.

But Pentagon Joint Chiefs Chairman Mark Milley said the letter was a draft that was sent by mistake. "It was a mistake, an honest mistake, a draft unsigned letter, because we are moving forces around," Milley told reporters in Washington. US Defense Secretary Mark Esper said the letter was "inconsistent" with Washington's position and denied there had

been a decision to leave Iraq.

Some of Canada's 500 military personnel based in Iraq will be temporarily moved to Kuwait for safety reasons, the country's top military official said yesterday, due to fears of possible retaliation there. General Jonathan Vance, chief of the defense staff, said in a letter to military families that "the news coming out of the Middle East is alarming for many of you". "Some of our people will be moved temporarily from Iraq to Kuwait," he added. Simply put, we are doing this to ensure their safety and security.

Germany said it was withdrawing some of its troops deployed to the anti-IS coalition in the country. NATO also said it would temporarily reduce its presence in Iraq because of the increased risk to troop safety. France, however, has "no intention" of pulling its troops from Iraq, a French government source told AFP. Saudi Arabia - an oil-rich US ally seen as vulnerable to Iranian counter strikes - also appealed for calm after a "very dangerous" escalation.

Iran's foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said he was informed by UN chief Antonio Guterres that Washington had denied him a visa for a planned trip to UN headquarters in New York. "What we know is that the US State Secretary (Mike Pompeo), in a call to the Secretary General of the United Nations, said: 'We did not have time to issue a visa for Mohammad Javad Zarif and we will not issue a visa'," Zarif said. "The Secretary General responded by saying that it is Iran's right to take part in this session," Tehran's top diplomat said, quoted by semi-official news agency ISNA.

Zarif was speaking to reporters in Tehran at a gathering to promote an Iranian peace plan for the Gulf. Zarif later took to Twitter, saying the rejection violated the terms of a 1947 agreement on the travel of representatives of UN members to and from the headquarters. But he said "denying me a visa... pales in comparison to" US sanctions and threats, as well as the "cowardly assassination" of Soleimani last week. "What are they really afraid of? Truth?" he tweeted.

Zarif said the US visa decision was "a sign of the bankruptcy of the US government and Trump's regime", according to ISNA. The Iranian foreign minister said he had been planning to go to UN headquarters on Thursday for an open debate on "Upholding the Charter of the United Nations". But he added that he had also intended to "raise America's crimes" during his visit to New York.

Trump's US political rivals have challenged his decision to order the killing of Soleimani and questioned its timing in a US election year. His administration said Soleimani was planning new attacks on US interests, without giving evidence. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo again defended the decision at a Washington news conference yesterday, saying attacks allegedly planned by Soleimani "were going to lead, potentially, to the death of many more Americans".

Pompeo also held Soleimani responsible for a Dec 27 rocket attack in Iraq in which a US civilian contractor was killed. Kuwait's Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah received a phone call on Monday from Pompeo, KUNA said. They discussed the latest developments in the region, and affirmed the importance of de-escalation and dealing with these developments in a spirit of wisdom and self-restraint in order to achieve its security and stability, KUNA reported. — Agencies

## Planet hunter finds Earth-sized world in 'Goldilocks zone'

**WASHINGTON:** NASA's planet hunter satellite TESS has discovered an Earth-sized world within the habitable range of its star, which could allow the presence of liquid water. Another first for the Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite is its discovery of a world orbiting two stars, evoking the planet Tatooine from Star Wars but unlikely to be hospitable to life as we know it.

The potentially habitable planet, named "TOI 700 d", is relatively close to Earth - only 100 light years away, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory announced during the winter American Astronomical Society meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii on Monday. Proxima Centauri, the closest star to Earth, is just over four light years away. "TESS was designed and launched specifically to find Earth-sized planets orbiting nearby stars," said Paul Hertz, NASA astrophysics division director.

TESS initially misclassified the star, which meant the planets appeared larger and hotter than they actually are. But several amateur astronomers, including high school student Alton Spencer - who works with members of the TESS team - identified the error. "When we corrected the star's parameters, the sizes of its planets dropped, and we realized the outermost one was about the size of Earth and in the habitable zone," said Emily Gilbert, a graduate student at the University of Chicago.

The discovery was later confirmed by the Spitzer Space Telescope. A few other similar planets have been discovered before, notably by the Kepler Space Telescope, but this is the first discovered by TESS, which was launched in 2018. TESS stabilizes on one area of the sky to detect whether objects - planets - pass in front of stars, which causes a temporary drop in the stars' luminosity. This allows TESS to infer the presence of a planet, its size and orbit. Star TOI 700 is small, about 40 percent of our Sun's size and only about half as hot.

TESS discovered three planets in orbit, named TOI

700 b, c and d. Only "d" is in the so-called "Goldilocks zone," not too far from and not too close to the star, where the temperature could allow the presence of liquid water. The name is an allusion to the fairytale "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", in which a young girl samples three bowls of porridge and finds that one is "just right - not too hot and not too cold".

TOI 700 d is about 20 percent larger than Earth and orbits its star in 37 days. It receives 86 percent of the energy that Earth receives from the Sun. It remains to be seen what d is made of. Researchers have generated models based on the size and type of star in order to predict d's atmospheric composition and surface temperature. In one simulation, NASA explained, the planet is covered in oceans with a "dense, carbon-dioxide-dominated atmosphere similar to what scientists suspect surrounded Mars when it was young."

The planet is tidally locked to TOI 700, meaning that one side always faces the star, in the same way that Earthlings never see the "dark side" of the Moon. This synchronous rotation meant that, in another model, one side of the planet was constantly covered in clouds. A third simulation predicted an all-land world, where winds flow from the planet's dark side to its light one. Multiple astronomers will observe the planet with other instruments, in order to obtain new data that may match one of NASA's models. Another discovery announced at the meeting was TESS's first finding of an exoplanet orbiting two stars instead of one, also known as a circumbinary planet. The announcement prompted comparisons with Luke Skywalker's home world of Tatooine in the "Star Wars" movie series, with its bewitching double sunsets. But the newly found planet's size alone - it is 6.9 times larger than Earth, almost the size of Saturn - makes it unlikely to be livable.

Named TOI 1338 b, it is the only planet in the TOI 1338 system, which lies 1,300 light-years away in the constellation Pictor, and orbits its stars every 95 days. The two stars orbit each other every 15 days. One is about 10 percent bigger than our Sun, while the other is cooler, dimmer and only one-third the Sun's mass. TOI 1338 b was identified by Wolf Cukier, a high school student who had an internship with NASA last summer. — AFP

## India suffers hottest decade on...

Continued from Page 1

globally, but is still taking hold in India, where heatwaves in 2015 and 2016 have so far been tied to climate shifts. According to the IMD, 2019 was the seventh warmest year on record in India. Overall about 1,630 people died in extreme weather events over the year, it said.

The South Asian giant - home to 1.3 billion people - last year experienced a longer summer as well as monsoon rains that were delayed but ultimately the biggest in 25 years. It also saw a record number of cyclones, and later record cold, with Delhi seeing its coldest day in over a century last month. A dry spell also triggered crippling droughts and dire water shortages, including in the southern city of Chennai, which was plunged into crisis when its four main water reservoirs ran dry.

More unpredictable weather - including more frequent droughts and heatwaves - can threaten harvests

and food security, especially in developing nations such as India, climate scientists say. Weather extremes also can lead to more water shortages and outbreaks of water and mosquito-borne diseases such as diarrhoea and malaria. In early December, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) said that 2019 was on course to be the second or third warmest year on record globally. It said the global mean temperature during the first 10 months of 2019 was 1.1C above pre-industrial levels.

The 2015 Paris Agreement, a global pact to fight climate change agreed to by nearly 200 countries, aims to keep the Earth's temperature rise well below 2C, striving for 1.5C. But current national plans to curb emissions and limit climate change, even if achieved, would produce warming of more than 3 degrees - one reason countries are due to update them this year, as global emissions continue to rise rather than fall.

WMO Secretary-General Petteri Taalas warned that if urgent climate action was not taken "then we are heading for a temperature increase of more than 3 degrees C by the end of the century, with ever more harmful impacts on human wellbeing". "We are nowhere near on track to meet the Paris Agreement target," he said. — Reuters

## Putin in surprise visit to Assad...

Continued from Page 1

the war. Russia has thousands of forces deployed across Syria in support of the army, while an unknown contingent of Russian private security personnel also operates on the ground.

Putin had already been to Hmeimim, the Mediterranean base where the largest number of Russian forces is deployed, in December 2017 but had not visited Damascus since the start of the conflict in 2011. The Russian strongman is next expected in Turkey, the other key broker in a conflict that has left more than 380,000 people dead and displaced half of the country's population. His visit to the region comes as the United States, whose military dominance in the region has waned while Russia's has grown, touched off what many fear could be a high-stakes cycle of region-wide tit-for-tat violence.

The head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' foreign operations arm, Qassem Soleimani, was killed on Friday in a US strike on Baghdad international airport. The head of the Quds Force was widely seen as one of the most powerful men in the region and the architect of Iran's support for the Syrian army. Tehran has reacted by vowing bloody revenge, as have the militias it controls in Iraq, while parliament in Baghdad has voted to request a

full US troop withdrawal.

US President Donald Trump, who boasted in a tweet that Soleimani should have been killed earlier, in turn threatened Iran with more strikes and Iraq with sanctions if US forces were targeted or forced to leave. Putin's reaction to the escalation between Iran and Washington had been laconic, warning only that Soleimani's killing could "seriously aggravate the situation in the region".

The United States still has forces deployed in Syria as part of the coalition against the Islamic State jihadist group, some in Kurdish-controlled areas in the northeast and others at a base further south near the Iraqi and Jordanian borders. Peskov told Interfax, RIA Novosti and TASS that Putin had met Assad at a command post for Russian forces in Syria, driving through Damascus on the way. "Putin also noted that on the streets of Damascus the signs of how peace has been restored can be seen with the naked eye," according to Peskov.

He said the two men had heard military reports on the situation in various parts of Syria. "The Syrian president expressed appreciation for the help of Russia and the Russian military in the fight against terrorism and the restoration of peaceful life in Syria," Peskov said. Accompanied by Assad, Putin later visited the Old City of Damascus including, the 8th century Umayyad mosque and an ancient church. "I think Putin is there to reinforce the Russian position in Syria and with the person of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, especially as Iran's position has been indelibly weakened, since Soleimani was essentially Iran in Syria," said David Lesch, an expert on Syria. — Agencies