

International

US ties with Iraq and allies take hit after drone strike

Around 5,200 US soldiers are currently stationed across Iraqi bases

BAGHDAD: A deadly US drone strike in Baghdad has rocked America's ties with allies on the ground, left diplomats scrambling to contain the fallout and Iraqi officials outraged at the airspace violation. The strike on the outskirts of Baghdad's airport early Friday killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and top Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, among others.

The US has hailed it as a win for "peace and stability" in the region, in contrast to Western diplomats and US military officials in Baghdad. None had received prior warning of the pre-dawn strike and learned of it when they woke up, sending them into crisis talks to salvage ties with Iraqi officials.

"The strike was such a surprise to all of us," one Western diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Speaking to the Americans now is extremely complex. We're talking a lot together as the European Union but the Americans have their own problems now," the diplomat said. Most ambassadors were still outside Baghdad for end-of-year holidays on the day of the strike, so political staff still in Iraq began a flurry of outreach to Iraqis. They declined to comment due to the sensitive nature of current ties with Washington but expressed outrage at a statement by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. "Frankly, the Europeans haven't been as helpful as I wish that they could be," Pompeo told Fox News hours after the drone strike. "The Brits, the French, the Germans all need to understand that what we did, what the Americans did, saved lives in Europe as well," he said.

'Major fissures'

Even at the military level, the strike strained ties between the United States and its other partners in the coalition fighting the Islamic State jihadist group. "As for our Western allies, in the grand scheme of things, it appears we screwed them over," a top US defense official deployed in Iraq told AFP.

Some 5,200 US soldiers are stationed across Iraqi bases to support local troops preventing a resurgence of IS. They make up the bulk of the broader coalition includ-

ing troops from dozens of countries, invited by the Iraqi government in 2014 to help combat the jihadists.

On Sunday, in reaction to the strike, Iraq's parliament voted in favor of rescinding that invitation and ousting all foreign troops. The following day, a US general told the Iraqi government troops were preparing to depart "in due deference" to the decision but the Pentagon denied the withdrawal. It only added to the chaos, with diplomats from coalition countries, saying they had not been looped into the letter to Iraq's military, which the US said was a "draft". The US-led coalition and even NATO had already suspended training and anti-IS operations for security concerns in the wake of the assassination of Soleimani.

A second US military official told AFP the strike had made ties with coalition partners "extremely tense". "They would not look us in the eye. Imagine being a part of this team, and one guy decides to strike out on his own," the second official said. Daily interactions with Iraqi officials had also become strained, as the strike was roundly condemned by Baghdad as a violation of its sovereignty. "This has caused major fissures in our relationships with them," the top defense official said. An Iraqi security source said it had created a "crisis of trust" between US troops and Iraqi forces. "They've largely stopped talking to each other," the source said.

'Allies under threat'

In the days following the strike, rockets have hit the high-security Green Zone, home to a host of embassies, and military bases where coalition forces are stationed.

"Whether intentional or not, the US has put its allies on the ground—both civilian and military—under threat," said Robert Ford of the Middle East Institute. Ford was a diplomat at the US embassy in Iraq between 2004-2006 and 2008-2010. He said that Washington's failure to coordinate with its own military assets on the ground and its allies had "left them holding the bag". Donald Trump's administration "is asking European allies to sign a blank check to support whatever the US does, even though US



NAJAF: Mourners carry the coffin of slain Iraqi paramilitary chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis towards the Imam Ali Shrine in the shrine city of Najaf in central Iraq during a funeral procession on Saturday. — AFP

has not been able to articulate a long-term game plan for Iran," said Ford. The behavior of the White House mirrors the lead-up to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, said Jean-Pierre Filiu, a Middle East specialist and former French diplomat. Now, as then, the US was "completely

blind" to the repercussions of its military actions in Baghdad, he told AFP. "The most disturbing thing in the American escalation is the absence of any proper Iraqi strategy, which can only destabilize the US's allies in the anti-jihadist coalition," he said. — AFP

In face of Iraq turmoil, Kurds wait before placing bets

BAGHDAD: Things are moving fast in federal Iraq, as pro-Iran factions flex their muscles and authorities seek to oust foreign troops. Amid the chaos, Iraq's Kurds are watching apprehensively before placing their bets. Caught between the US and Iran and wary of being accused of seeking independence from Baghdad, the autonomous government of northern Iraq's Kurdish region (KRG) has kept relatively mum on latest developments.

They include a US drone strike that killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad and a federal parliament vote to oust foreign troops, all against the backdrop of months of anti-government rallies.

But statements from the KRG and from Iraq's President Barham Saleh, himself a Kurd, have been limited to calls for restraint and "respecting the sovereignty of Iraq". And on Sunday, not a single Kurdish lawmaker attended the federal parliament's vote to oust foreign troops, declining to take a stance on the controversial issue. "Iraq's Kurds have adopted the short-term strategy of waiting," Kurdish specialist Adel Bakawan told AFP. He said Kurdish authorities were "speaking to everyone" in closed-door meetings, but waiting for the dust to settle before stating their position.

"They want to see what direction events will take and won't pick one side or another until the situation becomes clearer," Bakawan said. Iraq has long had close ties to both the US and Iran, but diplomatic relations with Washington have dimmed in recent years as Tehran's clout in Baghdad has soared. KRG capital Arbil has also been caught in the tug-of-war for influence, with Kurdish armed forces supported by both countries and political parties split along the same lines.



ARBIL: An Iraqi woman buys food at a roadside stall near the citadel of Arbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq. — AFP

'Emotional' decision

The Kurdish region earned de facto autonomy during the 1991 Gulf War over Kuwait, later formalized in the constitution crafted after the 2003 US-led invasion. "The existence of an autonomous Kurdish region is thanks to the direct intervention of the US," said Bakawan. But at the same time, Soleimani "had personal ties with all Kurdish parties," he added. Soleimani was killed early Friday in a US drone strike outside Baghdad's international airport, along with top Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis.

Iraq's government was so outraged that within days, MPs voted to urge the cabinet to kick out all foreign forces. Warned they would be considered "traitors" if they did not support the ouster, Kurdish lawmakers did not attend Sunday's vote as they largely see a US military presence in Iraq as a healthy counterweight to Iran. "Iraq must not become a battlefield to settle scores or political conflicts," pleaded Vian Sabri, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) bloc in the federal parliament.

Even members from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

(PUK), which is seen as closer to Iran, boycotted the session. "Shiite deputies took a radical decision for the future of all of Iraq, under the influence of emotion," said a top PUK official, on condition of anonymity.

"There are a number of violations of Iraq's sovereignty and we should take measures to stop them all, not target a single party," the party official said.

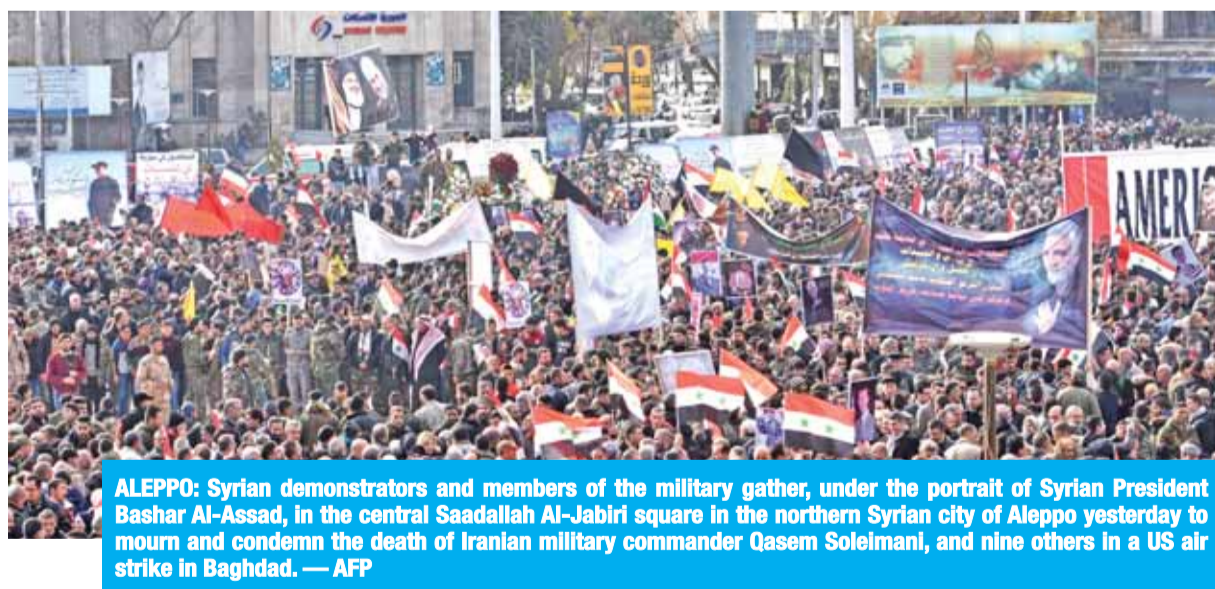
Some 5,200 US troops are stationed across Iraq to back local forces preventing an Islamic State group resurgence. They make up the bulk of the broader coalition including troops from dozens of countries, invited by the Iraqi government in 2014 to help combat IS.

Prudence pays off?

Late Monday, an American general told Baghdad that US troops were preparing to depart "in due deference" to parliament's decision, but the Pentagon denied a pull-out. An ouster of foreign troops would likely rattle Arbil, as the US-led coalition worked closely with Kurdish peshmerga fighters to clear jihadists from swathes of the north. And with Iran-US tensions soaring, Kurdish figures fear they could lose their hard-won autonomy, which grants them many more rights than their kin in neighboring Syria, Turkey and Iran. Even before the US strike, Iraq had been rocked by its own domestic political crisis. Three months of anti-government protests in Baghdad and across the Shiite-majority south prompted Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi to step down.

He had been seen as a major ally to the KRG, making his resignation a stinging blow to their standing in Baghdad. But as Washington distances itself from an ever-more hostile Baghdad, Kurdish prudence could pay off.

Seen as more reliable partners to the US and a safe haven for entrepreneurs, diplomats and humanitarians, the KRG could ultimately become Washington's best asset in Iraq. "International and even regional powers have an interest in securing and even developing this state within a state that is the Kurdistan regional government," said Bakawan. — AFP



ALEPPO: Syrian demonstrators and members of the military gather, under the portrait of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, in the central Saadallah Al-Jabiri square in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo yesterday to mourn and condemn the death of Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani, and nine others in a US air strike in Baghdad. — AFP

Allow cross-border aid into Syria, UN pleads as millions trapped

GENEVA: More than three million Syrian civilians are trapped in a war zone in the northwest of the country and utterly dependent on cross-border aid, the United Nations said yesterday, as it urged states to extend the mandate for that aid which expires in days. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last month that Russia and China had blood on their hands after the two countries blocked a UN Security Council resolution that would have allowed cross-border humanitarian deliveries for a further 12 months.

Since 2014, the United Nations has sent 30,000 trucks with life-saving food and medicines into Syria from Turkey,

Iraq and Jordan at four places annually authorized by the Security Council. Jens Laerke of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said.

The humanitarian situation has become more acute with at least 300,000 civilians now on the run in Idlib, following a sharp escalation in hostilities in December, he said. More than 3 million civilians remains trapped in the war zone, the vast majority women and children, and "they currently have nowhere to go", Laerke said. It is critical to renew the provisions of the Security Council resolution, which expires on Friday, he said. "Across northern Syria 4 million people in need are supported by the UN cross-border humanitarian assistance mechanism in total. And that includes 2.7 million in the northwest who rely solely on the operation for their assistance. "We have made our position very clear, there is no plan B." The latest mass displacement follows weeks of renewed bombardment by Russian and Syrian government forces. "Air strikes and shelling are now taking place in many towns and villages on a near daily basis," Mark Cutts, UN deputy regional humanitarian coordinator for the Syria crisis, said in a statement voicing alarm at the "deteriorating humanitarian situation in Idlib". — Reuters

Iran weighs response to Soleimani killing

DUBAI: Iran's leaders have promised to avenge the killing of General Qasem Soleimani, commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, by the United States.

Here are some of Tehran's options: Military Power

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and US President Donald Trump talk tough but neither have indicated an interest in all-out war although the possibility of military confrontation cannot be ruled out. If Khamenei calls for restraint, he could look weak at home and among regional proxies. So he may opt for small-scale retaliation.

Karim Sadjadpour, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said Khamenei must carefully calibrate the reaction. "A weak response risks losing face, an excessive response risks losing his head." A US Defense Intelligence Agency report in December said Iran relies on three main military capabilities - its ballistic missile program, naval forces that can threaten navigation in the oil-producing Gulf region, and militia proxies in countries such as Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. Iran says it has precision-guided missiles, cruise missiles and armed drones capable of hitting US military bases in the Gulf and reaching Tehran's arch-enemy Israel. Tehran or its proxies could attack oil tankers in the Gulf and Red Sea, shipping routes for oil and other trade linking the Indian Ocean with the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal.

Blocking The Strait Of Hormuz

A military confrontation or heightened tensions could disrupt shipping via the Strait of Hormuz, through which one-fifth of the world's oil production passes. Any interruption could drive up oil prices sharply. Iran cannot legally close the waterway unilaterally because part of it is Oman's territorial waters. However, ships pass through Iranian waters, which are under the responsibility of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Navy. Tehran could use missiles, drones, mines and speedboats to confront the United States and its allies. US officials say closing the Strait would be crossing a "red line" and America would take action to reopen it.

Asymmetric Tactics And Proxies

US forces in the Middle East could be endangered. Iran mainly relies on asymmetric tactics and its proxies to counter more sophisticated US weaponry. Iran has passed on weaponry and technical expertise to allies. Yemen's Houthis have used Iran-made missiles and drones to bomb airports in Saudi Arabia. The United States and Saudi Arabia accuse Iran of attacking oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz last year and say Tehran was behind attacks on Saudi oil facilities. Tehran denies this. Iran-backed militias in Iraq have attacked bases where US forces are located. In June, Iran downed a US drone with a surface-to-air missile, bringing to two sides to the brink of direct conflict.

Timing

Iran is unlikely to rush into action, said Ali Alfoneh, senior fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. "Iran has no choice but to strike back and retaliate for assassination of Major General Soleimani," he said. "But the Islamic Republic is patient and the timing and nature of that strike is not yet known to us."

Iran's Long Reach

Iran and its allies could project power beyond the region. In 1994, a member of the Lebanese movement Hezbollah bombed the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Society building in Buenos Aires, killing 85 people. Argentina blamed Iran and Hezbollah for the attack. They deny any responsibility. — Reuters

US eyes sanctions over growing Russian support for Venezuela

WASHINGTON: The United States will take action in response to growing Russian support for Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, a senior US official warned Monday. US President Donald Trump's administration has sanctioned Maduro's regime and called it a dictatorship after he was re-elected in 2018 in elections widely seen as fraudulent. "We are looking at additional sanctions, personal sanctions, economic sanctions that we think will bring more pressure," Elliot Abrams, the State Department's Venezuela envoy, told reporters.

Abrams, who did not specify what the sanctions would be, said the US had been looking closely at Russia's role in Venezuela and would not allow the level of support to go unchecked. Abrams said Russia was mainly interested in "the oil economy" in Venezuela, while Maduro has grown increasingly reliant on Moscow over the past year.

"Russian companies are now handling more than two-thirds, more than 70 percent of Venezuelan oil," Abrams said. "So the Russian role is increasingly important." Abrams did not speculate on whether Russia was involved in pushing Maduro to take control of the opposition-majority National Assembly on Sunday, which Washington currently considers the only democratic body in Venezuela.

Police had prevented opposition leader and self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaido from entering the parliament, and in his absence Luis Parra, a corruption-tainted opposition lawmaker, declared himself parliament speaker. Maduro holds actual power but Guaido's claim to the presidency is recognized by more than 50 countries, including the United States and many European nations.

Among Maduro's remaining supporters are Russia, North Korea and Cuba. Abrams admitted that the US had underestimated the support Maduro received from Russia and Cuba, saying that the two countries had supplied Venezuela with thousands of intelligence agents. — AFP