

Four Iraqi servicemen wounded by rocket attack on air base

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Sun, 2020-01-12 18:31

BAGHDAD: Four members of Iraq's military were wounded Sunday in a rocket attack targeting an air base just north of Baghdad where American trainers are present, Iraqi security officials said.

The attack by at least six rockets came just days after Iran fired ballistic missiles at two bases in Iraq that house US forces, causing no casualties. Recent heightened tensions between the US and Iran were sparked last month when a rocket attack killed an American contractor at a base in Iraq. The US has blamed that attack and others on Iran-backed militias.

Sunday's attack wounded an Iraqi air force officer and three enlisted men, Iraqi security officials said. They spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

No group claimed responsibility for the attack.

The rockets struck Balad air base, which hosts American trainers, advisers and a company that provides maintenance services for F-16 aircraft. Some rockets fell on a restaurant inside the air base, the officials said.

The base is located some 50 miles (80 kilometers) miles north of Baghdad.

A statement from the Iraqi army's official media office confirmed the attack but said eight rockets hit the base, and that two officers had been wounded. The difference in accounts could not immediately be reconciled.

"There are American experts, trainers and advisers at the base," said one defense official, who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to media.

The US and Iran recently stepped back from escalating tensions following the killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, Iran's top general, in a US airstrike in Baghdad. A senior Iraqi leader of an Iran-backed militia was also killed.

Iran's retaliatory attack for Soleimani's death hit two Iraqi bases, Ain Al-Asad and Irbil, where American troops are based.

The limited Iranian strikes appeared to be mainly a show of force, and deescalated tensions that had threatened to turn Iraq into a proxy battlefield.



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[Trump warns Iran not to kill protesters, door still open to talks](#)

Sun, 2020-01-12 17:35

LONDON: US President Donald Trump warned Iran Sunday against killing protesters who have risen up over the regime's downing of a civilian airliner as his defense secretary left the door open to talks with Tehran without preconditions.

Trump's salvo came as Iran's Islamic regime faced a challenge from angry street protests, having come to the brink of war with the US after a series of tit-for-tat confrontations.

"To the leaders of Iran – DO NOT KILL YOUR PROTESTERS," Trump tweeted, warning that the world and "more importantly, the USA is watching."

In an interview with CBS's "Face the Nation" just before the tweet, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Trump was still willing to hold talks with

Iran's leaders.

"We're willing to sit down and discuss without precondition a new way forward, a series of steps by which Iran becomes a more normal country," Defense Secretary Mark Esper said on CBS's "Face the Nation."

And if something happened to the protesters? Esper replied: "The president has drawn no preconditions other than to say we're willing to meet with the Iranian government."

Long-standing US-Iran tensions have soared since January 3 when missiles fired from a US drone killed a top Iranian commander, Qassem Soleimani, near Baghdad's airport.

Iran responded with a barrage of missiles at two US bases in Iraq, inflicting no casualties in what was seen as an attempt to prevent a spiral of escalation.

But hours later, an Iranian Revolutionary Guard unit shot down a Ukrainian passenger jet shortly after takeoff from Tehran.

The death of all 176 people aboard and Iranian leader's belated admission its forces mistook the plane for a cruise missile has set off angry protests against the regime.

The British ambassador to Iran was briefly arrested Saturday after attending a memorial service to the victims at Tehran's Amir Kabir University.

"I just think you see a very corrupt regime that the Iranian people are finally standing up and trying to hold them accountable," Esper said.

On another Sunday talk show, national security adviser Robert O'Brien said the Iranian regime was "reeling from maximum pressure."

"They are reeling from their incompetence in this situation. And the people of Iran are just fed up with it," he said on ABC's This Week.

Meanwhile, said Esper, the US believes it has disrupted the plots that it says precipitated Soleimani's killing, and expects no further Iranian retaliation.

"We do not expect any further attacks. But if you look at what's happening on the ground today, you have just yesterday in Tehran and other cities, Iranians chanting, 'death to the Ayatollah,'" he said.

Esper and O'Brien defended the intelligence that led the administration to claim Soleimani was plotting imminent attacks on US troops and diplomats in the region.

But other than in the case of the US embassy in Baghdad, Esper would not confirm Trump's claim in a recent Fox News television interview that four US embassies in the region were among Soleimani's target.

Asked if there was specific evidence in the intelligence to support the claim, Esper said, "I didn't see one with regard to four embassies."

The administration has come under withering fire from Democrats – and at least two Republican senators – for refusing to share the intelligence with members of Congress.

Senior congressional leaders – the so-called Gang of Eight – were briefed January 8 as skepticism mounted about the administration's rationale for a killing that raised the risk of war with Iran.

"We had exquisite intelligence and the intelligence showed that they were looking at US facilities throughout the region and that they wanted to inflict casualties on American soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, as well as diplomats," O'Brien said on NBC's Meet the Press. "The threat was imminent. I saw the intelligence."

Adam Schiff, chair of the House Intelligence Committee, said there was no discussion in the briefing given to the Gang of Eight about plots against four embassies.

"In the view of the briefers, there was plotting, there was an effort to escalate, a big plan, but they didn't have specificity," he said.

"So when you hear the president out there on Fox, he is fudging intelligence," he said on Face the Nation.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the congressional leadership should have been informed of the strike against Soleimani in advance.

"I don't think the administration has been straight with the Congress of the United States," she said on Meet the Press.

This comes as the leaders of Britain, France and Germany on Sunday called in a joint statement on Iran to return to full compliance with a 2015 nuclear deal with world powers and refrain from further violence.

"We urge Iran to reverse all measures inconsistent with the agreement and return to full compliance," the leaders said in the statement issued by the office of French President Emmanuel Macron.

"We call on Iran to refrain from further violent action or proliferation; and we remain ready to engage with Iran on this agenda in order to preserve the stability of the region," they added.

Also on Sunday, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei called for countries in the region to bolster ties to overcome turbulence caused by the presence of the US and its allies.

"The current situation in the region demands – more than ever before – strengthening of relations between countries in the region as well as avoiding influence of foreigners'" meddling, Khamenei was quoted as saying on his official Twitter account as he hosted Qatar's emir.

"The reason for the current turbulent situation in our region is the corruptive presence of the US and its cohorts. The only way to confront this is to depend on cooperation within the region," he said.

(With AFP and Reuters)



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Iran summons UK ambassador over Ukrainian airline rally

[Qatar emir visits Iran amid regional crisis](#)

Sun, 2020-01-12 12:44

DOHA: Qatar's ruler, Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, said during a visit to Iran on Sunday that de-escalation and dialogue were needed to resolve regional crises at a "sensitive" time.

He was speaking in a televised news conference with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani during a visit to Tehran at a time of heightened US-Iranian tensions that threaten to destabilize the region.

In a meeting between Iran's President Hassan Rouhani and the visiting emir of Qatar, both sides agreed de-escalation is the "only solution" to the regional

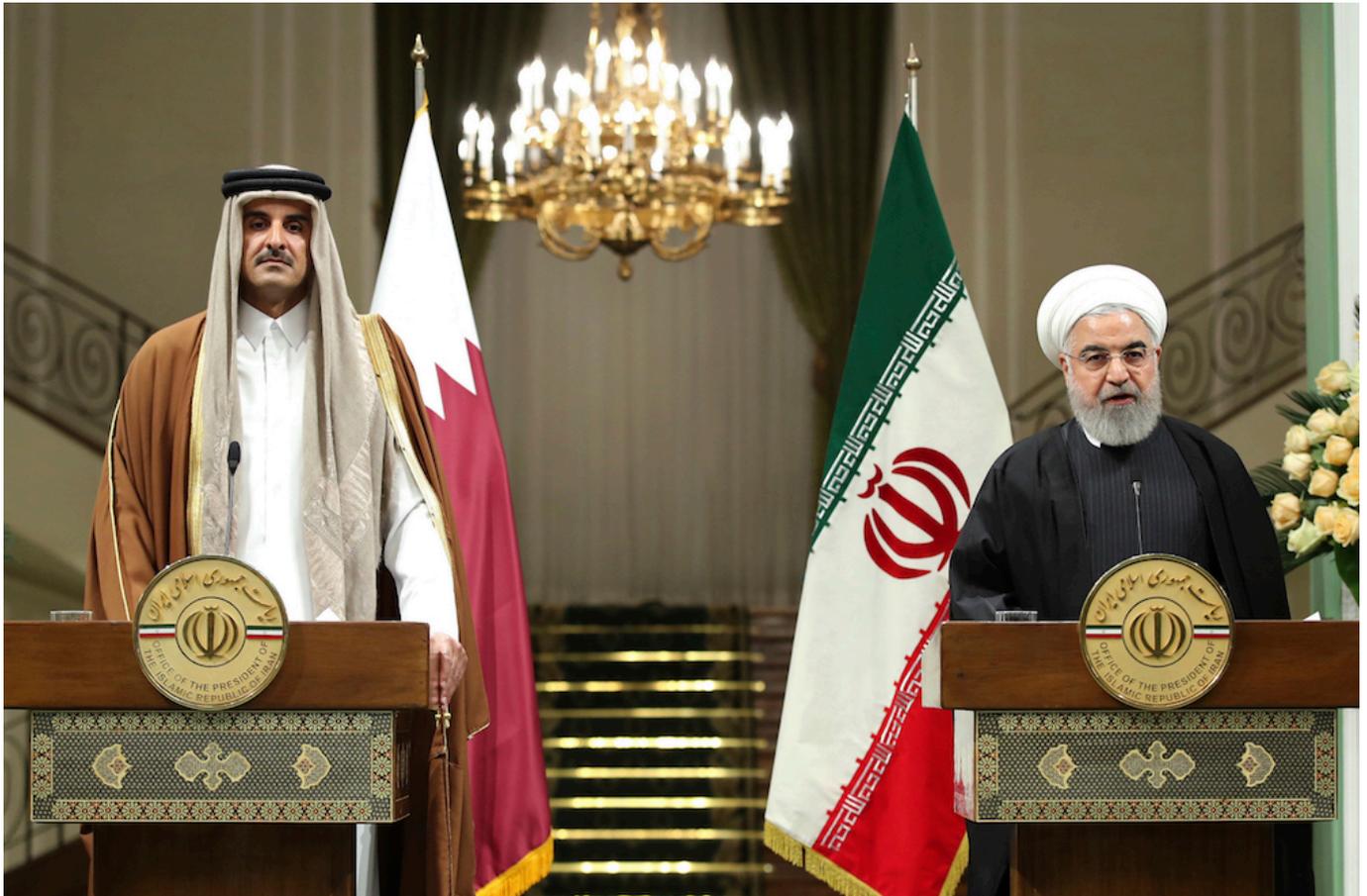
crisis, the emirate's ruler said.

Qatar hosts the largest US military base in the region but also enjoys strong ties with Iran, with which it shares the world's largest gas field.

"This visit comes at a critical time in the region," Sheikh Tamim said on what was believed to be his first official visit to Iran.

"We agreed... that the only solution to these crises is de-escalation from everyone and dialogue."

For his part, Rouhani said: "Given the importance of security of the region... we've decided to have more consultations and cooperation for the security of the entire region."



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How Iranian, Qatari media glorified Qassem Soleimani

[Iran summons UK ambassador over](#)

Ukrainian airline rally

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Sun, 2020-01-12 08:42

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and German Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned the arrest of Britain's ambassador to Tehran, a spokesman from Johnson's office said in a statement issued after the two leaders spoke on Sunday.

"On Iran, they discussed the tragic loss of life on the Ukraine International Airlines passenger jet. They condemned Iran's arrest of the UK Ambassador to Tehran as a violation of international law," the spokesman said.

"The leaders also discussed our shared interests in ensuring Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon, and reaffirmed their continued commitment to preserving the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal)."

Iran summoned the UK envoy on Sunday to complain about his attendance at an "illegal" rally in Tehran to commemorate those killed in a Ukrainian airliner mistakingly downed by the country's military forces.

"Today, Rob Macaire was summoned because of his unconventional behaviour of attending an illegal rally on Saturday," the Iranian foreign ministry's website reported.

Britain said earlier that its ambassador in Iran had been briefly detained on Saturday, which Iranian media said was because he was inciting anti-government protests.

Macaire denied Sunday that he took part in a demonstration that broke out at a memorial for the 176 people killed when a plane was shot down.

"Can confirm I wasn't taking part in any demonstrations! Went to an event advertised as a vigil for victims of #PS752 tragedy," Macaire said on Twitter, adding he had been detained for half an hour.

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Detained half an hour after leaving the area. Arresting diplomats is of course illegal, in all countries. See comments by Foreign Secretary @DominicRaab. <https://t.co/djpr99iSwI>

– Rob Macaire (@HMATehran) [January 12, 2020](#)

The EU's diplomatic chief criticized Iran on Sunday for briefly detaining the British ambassador to Tehran, calling for "de-escalation."

Very concerned about the temporary detention of the UK Ambassador @HMATehran in Iran. Full respect of the Vienna convention is a

must. The EU calls for deescalation and space for diplomacy.

– Josep Borrell Fontelles (@JosepBorrellF) [January 12, 2020](#)

“Very concerned about the temporary detention of the UK Ambassador @HMATehran in Iran. Full respect of the Vienna convention is a must. The EU calls for de-escalation and space for diplomacy,” Josep Borrell tweeted.

(With Agencies)



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British ambassador to Iran arrested amid protests against Khamenei over plane downing

Libya's GNA accepts cease-fire after rival Haftar's declaration

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Sun, 2020-01-12 07:37

TRIPOLI: Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) agreed on Sunday to a cease-fire urged by Moscow and Ankara, several hours after rival strongman Khalifa Haftar announced a cessation of hostilities.

The head of the GNA, Fayez Al-Sarraj, announced in a statement "a cease-fire from (Sunday) January 12 at midnight (2200 GMT)," underlining however the "legitimate right" of GNA forces to "respond to any attack or aggression that may come from the other camp."

Sarraj said the cease-fire had been accepted in response to a call from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, who have emerged as key players in the Libyan arena.

Late Saturday, forces of the eastern Libya-based Haftar announced a cease-fire starting Sunday at midnight in his months-long battle to take the capital Tripoli from the UN-recognized GNA, but warned of a "severe" response to any violation by the "opposing camp."

Erdogan and Putin had called for a cease-fire at a meeting on Wednesday in Istanbul, and Turkey on Saturday asked Russia to convince Haftar to respect it. Haftar had initially vowed to fight on.

Europe and North Africa have launched a diplomatic offensive to try to prevent Libya, with the increased involvement of international players in its conflict, from turning into a "second Syria."

Artillery fire was heard a little after midnight from the center of Tripoli, seat of the GNA, before quiet settled over the southern Tripoli suburb where pro-GNA forces have been resisting Haftar's offensive launched April 4, 2019. Ankara deployed military support to the GNA in January, while Russia, despite denials, is strongly suspected of supporting pro-Haftar forces, which are also backed by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

The North African state has seen an escalation of the turmoil that erupted after a NATO-backed uprising killed dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.



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Libyan forces loyal to commander Khalifa Haftar have declared
ceasefireLibya's Haftar rejects Ankara, Moscow's call for cease-fire