

# Defence Secretary Oral Statement: Update on security situation in the Middle East

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the security situation in the Middle East.

Mr Speaker, I have deep regard for the nation of Iran and I chaired the All Party Parliamentary Group group for Iran in this House for eight years and visited the country a number of times. Indeed the last time I visited, I visited with the leader of the opposition and we went together to visit the Iranian government and the people.

It is a wonderful place with a dynamic population. The world owes a great deal to its culture and its history.

But, in recent times, Iran has felt its intentions are best served through the nefarious use of proxies and the use of subversion as a foreign policy tool.

It has provided practical military support to the murderous Assad regime in Syria. Stoked conflict in Yemen. Armed militia groups in Iraq and has repeatedly harassed international shipping, including UK shipping, in the Strait of Hormuz.

It has also shown a total disregard for human rights. Holding dual nationals in prison and causing unimaginable suffering. Not just to those in jail, but to their families at home.

Such behaviour does nothing to enhance Iran's reputation with its neighbours and has had a seriously destabilising impact in the region.

Mr Speaker, one of the foremost architects of Iran's malign activity was the Quds force of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps.

One of its commanders and leading enablers was General Qasem Soleimani who on 2 January was killed by a US drone strike.

Mr Speaker, General Soleimani was no friend of the UK or our allies in the region. He was not an advocate of a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. His clandestine operations saw him supply weaponry to proxy forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. He encouraged proxies to develop weapons such as improvised explosive devices that killed and maimed UK soldiers and other western forces. And nor should we forget how he fomented instability in places like Basra where British Forces were stationed.

The United States government has asserted that Soleimani organised the strike on 27 December by militia group Kata'ib Hizballah which targeted a US military base in Kirkuk, Iraq, and killed a US civilian contractor and the US

is confident that General Soleimani came to Baghdad to co-ordinate imminent attacks on American diplomats and military personnel.

The UK will always defend the right of countries to defend themselves. The House will want to know that since October 2019 Coalition bases, which contain both United States and United Kingdom personnel and the Baghdad International Zone have been attacked 14 times. One attack on K-1 base involved 32 rockets. Our challenge now is, however, to deal with the situation we find ourselves in.

The US consistently showed restraint through all those previous attacks, even when their right to self-defence was well established.

Since the early hours of Friday morning the Government has responded to these events. Further conflict is in no one's interest. The only beneficiaries would be the terrorists and extremists – seeking to use the chaos as cover to advance their abhorrent objectives. So we are urging all people, all parties to de-escalate as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the safety and security of British citizens and our interests in the region are of paramount concern. The FCO has strengthened its travel advice to both Iran and Iraq and will keep it under constant review. We urge British nationals in the region, or those intending to travel, to regularly check Gov.UK for further updates.

We have taken other urgent measures to protect British nationals and interests. The Department for Transport are reviewing the threat state and advice to Red Ensign shipping on a daily basis. Supported by the Ministry of Defence, we will issue guidance imminently. At the same time, Defence are changing the readiness of our forces in the region – including helicopters and ships on stand-by to assist if the need arises.

To ensure the safety and security of our personnel we have also re-located non-essential personnel from Baghdad to Taji. Coalition forces in Iraq, including British forces, have suspended all training activities. And, as part of prudent planning, a small team has been sent to the region to provide additional situational awareness, and contingency planning assistance.

Mr Speaker, on 5 January, Iraq's Council of Representatives voted to end permission for Coalition activities in Iraq. As the vote is only one part of the process, we are in discussions of what those implications mean with our Iraqi interlocutors.

Today I would simply remind this House that the Coalition is in Iraq, at the request of the Iraqi government, to help protect Iraqis and others against the very real threat from Daesh. Our commitment to Iraq's stability and sovereignty is unwavering and we urge the Iraqi Government to ensure the coalition is able to continue our vital work countering this shared threat.

Mr Speaker, the main focus of the UK Government is to de-escalate this issue. None of us wants conflict. None of us wants our citizens, our friends and our allies to be put at risk.

My Rt Hon Friend the Prime Minister, from the outset, has spoken to President Trump, President Macron, Chancellor Merkel and President Erdogan and will continue to engage with other world leaders.

The Foreign Secretary and I have been talking to our counterparts. Only this morning I met with His Royal Highness the Saudi vice minister for Defence and in tandem we are working with the E3 to reboot the JcPOA – the nuclear deal we believe it is a vital step to achieving a more stable Iran.

And in the coming days we will be doing all we can to encourage Iran to take a different path.

No-one should be under any illusion that, long before the death of General Soleimani, Iran had stepped up its destabilising activities in the region. Whether it was targeting dissidents in Europe or hijacking civilian ships this aggressive behaviour was never going to go unchallenged. HMG urges Iran to return to the normal behaviour of the country it aspires to be and resist the urge to retaliate.