

US Defense Secretary Esper: US seeks diplomacy with Iran, but must de-escalate first

Tue, 2020-01-07 22:09

WASHINGTON: US Defense Secretary Mark Esper told CNN on Tuesday that the US wants to de-escalate the current tensions with Iran, but the country is ready to finish any war that could be started.

"We are not looking to start a war with Iran but we are prepared to finish one," he said. "What we'd like to see is the situation de-escalated."

Esper defended the intelligence signaling an "imminent threat" from Soleimani that he and other senior US officials have cited to justify the strike, saying it was persuasive.

"The threat was being orchestrated by Soleimani," Esper said. "I think it was only a matter of days, certainly no more than weeks" before an attack.

Esper suggested on Monday that the US military would not violate the laws of armed conflict by striking Iranian cultural sites, a move threatened by President Donald Trump.

Asked about the issue again on Tuesday, Esper said he was confident that Trump "will only give us legal orders.

"We do not violate the laws of armed conflict," Esper said.

Targeting cultural sites with military action is considered a war crime under international law, including a UN Security Council resolution supported by the Trump administration in 2017 and the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property.



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Trump says US withdrawal would be 'worst thing' for Iraq
Britain says war with Iran would strengthen militants

[NATO taking 'some personnel' out of Iraq](#)

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Tue, 2020-01-07 17:51

BRUSSELS: NATO said Tuesday it would take "some personnel" out of Iraq because of the increased danger there after the US killing of an Iranian general triggered revenge threats.

The withdrawal is temporary but "the safety of our personnel is paramount," a NATO official said in a statement.

US and allied foreign troops in Iraq are concerned they might be targeted by Iran or allied Iraqi militias in retaliation for Friday's killing in Baghdad of Revolutionary Guards General Qasem Soleimani, who commanded Iran's operations across the Middle East.

NATO announced on Saturday that it had suspended its training mission in Iraq, which fields 500 instructors.

The NATO official said other mission personnel were being moved to other parts of Iraq, and emphasised that "NATO maintains a presence."

The alliance plans to resume its training there "when the situation permits." He declined to give details on how many personnel were being moved or to where.

"The temporary repositioning of some personnel" was "to different locations both inside and outside of Iraq.

"To protect the safety of our personnel on the ground, we cannot go into operational details," he added.

Romania's defense ministry said separately that its 14 soldiers taking part in the NATO deployment "will be temporarily relocated to another coalition base."

Hungary's defense minister Tibor Benko said Hungarian soldiers in Iraq were ready for evacuation "if necessary," the official MTI agency reported.

Benko added that unless Hungary's soldiers were asked to withdraw, they would continue their mission.

Around 200 Hungarian soldiers are stationed in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil, both as part of NATO's training mission and the broader coalition against the Islamic State organization.

The NATO training mission in Iraq is separate to the far bigger foreign military deployment in the country led by the US, which has 5,200 soldiers stationed in Iraqi bases.

The US general in charge of that force has sent a letter to Iraqi authorities saying the American troops were preparing to leave.

But he and US officials in Washington later said the "draft" letter had been mistakenly sent and that the troops are staying.

Soleimani was killed by a US drone on orders of President Donald Trump, who has warned Iran not to strike back.

NATO's chief, Jens Stoltenberg, on Monday warned Tehran to avoid "further violence and provocations."

Iran's leaders have sworn to avenge Soleimani's death at a time and place of their choosing.

They are also intent on solidifying their hold on Iraq and Syria, which they view as part of an "axis of resistance" stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea.

The head of the Revolutionary Guards, Major General Hossein Salami, said "we will take our revenge" and added that the process of "expelling the United States from the region has begun."



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NATO Iraq mission not disrupted by Iran tension: commanderNo US troops pullout from Iraq, Pentagon chief says

[EU ministers condemn 'outside interference' in Libya](#)

Tue, 2020-01-07 18:36

BRUSSELS: The EU's diplomatic chief on Tuesday condemned Turkish "interference" in Libya after Ankara sent troops to support the UN-backed Tripoli government, warning this complicates the crisis in the oil-rich state.

After emergency talks on the situation with the foreign ministers of France, Britain, Germany and Italy, Josep Borrell said the Turkish intervention was "something that we reject and which increases our worries about the situation in Libya".



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Yemen's Taiz National Museum Reopens After Four Years of Closure

[Palestinians face mounting barriers to peaceful protest](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-01-07 01:31

RAMALLAH: Abdullah Abu Rahma has been arrested by Israeli soldiers eight times in the last 15 years, spending weeks or months in prison and paying tens of thousands of dollars in fines for organizing protests.

He's among a growing number of Palestinians who have embraced non-violent means of protesting Israel's military rule and expanding settlements, and who are increasingly finding those avenues of dissent blocked.

More than 50 years after occupying the West Bank, Israel is still

systematically denying Palestinians civil rights, including the right to gather, Human Rights Watch said in a report released last month.

Israel has also stepped up its campaign against the Palestinian-led international boycott movement, and the US and other countries have adopted legislation to suppress it.

Omar Shakir, the Israel and Palestine director for Human Rights Watch, said Israel has “all but declared Palestinian opposition to the systematic discrimination they face illegitimate.”

Shakir himself was deported from Israel in November over his alleged support for the boycott movement.

If it succeeds in banning forms of peaceful advocacy, he says, Israel will have “effectively left Palestinians no choice but submission to a regime of systematic repression, or violence.”

For decades, the Palestinians were branded terrorists because of their armed struggle against Israel. At the height of the Second Intifada, the violent uprising in the early 2000s, and for years afterward, observers wondered why there was no “Palestinian Gandhi.”

One candidate for such a title might be Abu Rahma, who for several years organized weekly protests in the West Bank village of Bilin.

Abu Rahma said he never threw stones and told others not to do so, partly out of concern they would hurt other protesters.

That didn't keep him from being arrested.

Over the years he was charged with entering a closed military zone – referring to land outside the village – and hindering the work of soldiers, who were overseeing the construction of the fence.

“I don't go to them, they come to us,” he said.

In 2009 he was charged with stockpiling weapons after he collected spent tear gas canisters fired by Israeli soldiers and put them on display. He later served a 16-month prison term after a military court convicted him of incitement and participation in illegal protests.

“There have been various, multiple charges of this kind, but not once have they accused me of striking a soldier or throwing a stone,” he said. In 2009, he was acquitted on the weapons possession charge and a charge of throwing stones.

Issa Amro, another prominent activist who has organized protests against Israeli settlements in the West Bank city of Hebron, faces 16 charges, including calling for disobedience and disrupting Israeli life – the lives of settlers.

He says he has been detained on 10 occasions this year alone, usually after

being beaten by settlers.

“The soldiers never did anything to stop the attackers, but they arrested me every time a settler said I attacked him,” he said. As a Palestinian, he is governed by Israeli military law, while the Jewish settlers in Hebron enjoy full rights as Israeli citizens.

“Israeli authorities ban any political expression in the Palestinian territories,” Amro said.

“They want us basically to accept the occupation, the discrimination, the land grab, the restrictions, and not to speak up against it.”

Human Rights Watch said Israel relies on sweeping military orders, many of which date back to the 1967 Mideast war, when it seized the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza, territories the Palestinians want for their future state.

Civilians can be jailed for up to 10 years for attending political gatherings of more than 10 people or for displaying flags or political symbols without army approval, Human Rights Watch said. Military orders ban 411 organizations, including every major political movement, it added.

“After 52 years, Israel’s sweeping restrictions of the basic rights of Palestinians can no longer be justified by the exigencies of military occupation,” Shakir said.

“Palestinians are entitled at minimum to the same rights Israel provides its own citizens.”

In response to questions about the Human Rights Watch report and the restrictions on protests, Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the Palestinian leadership of seeking to “attack Israel in the international arena” rather than trying to end the conflict through negotiations.

Peace talks broke down after Netanyahu was elected in 2009. In September, he vowed to annex large parts of the West Bank, a move that would almost certainly extinguish any remaining hope of creating a Palestinian state.

The Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Islamic militant group Hamas, which rules Gaza, have also cracked down on dissent in recent years. The PA has detained hundreds of people, including Amro, who was jailed for a week in 2017 over a Facebook post. Hamas violently dispersed protests last March, arresting dozens of people.

In addition to protesting, many Palestinians have also rallied behind the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, or BDS, a nonviolent campaign that claims to be modeled on the struggle against South African Apartheid.

The campaign has sparked a major backlash by Israeli authorities, who say its true aim is to delegitimize the state and eventually wipe it off the map.

BDS endorses the Palestinian claim of a right of return for the descendants of refugees who fled or were driven out of Israel in the 1948 war that

attended its creation. If fully realized, that would spell the end of Israel as a Jewish-majority state. Critics have also seized on statements from prominent BDS supporters to brand it as anti-Semitic, something organizers vehemently deny.

A 2017 law bars entry to foreigners who have called for economic boycotts of Israel or its settlements. Israel invoked the law when it deported Shakir and when it refused entry to US congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib earlier this year.

In May, German lawmakers passed a resolution that denounced the boycott movement and described its methods as anti-Semitic. The US House of Representatives passed a resolution opposing the boycott movement in July.

At least 25 US states have enacted laws aimed at suppressing the BDS movement, including Texas, which passed a law forcing state contractors to sign a pledge that they do not support the campaign. A federal judge blocked enforcement of the law in April, saying boycotts are a form of protected free speech.

Gerald Steinberg, who heads a pro-Israel group called NGO Monitor that campaigns against BDS, said its "demonization paints Israelis as blood-thirsty war criminals, land-thieves and child killers."

"These accusations contribute to or are used to justify attacks against students and speakers on university campuses, harassment in other venues and in some cases, violent terror," he said.

Abu Rahma and other activists reject such characterizations, saying their struggle is not against Israelis but against the occupation.

"I see how the occupation is an obstacle to everything," he said. "The path that I am on, I have to continue. I have to struggle. It's not easy."



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Israel approves more than 1,900 new settler homes: NGOIsrael to withhold \$43 million of Palestinian tax funds

[Palestinian factions argue over role of Soleimani](#)

Tue, 2020-01-07 01:23

GAZA CITY: Palestinian factions backed by Iran sparked controversy yesterday as they not only issued statements of condolence for the death of Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian general killed in a US drone strike in Baghdad last week, but even opened a funeral tent for him in the Gaza Strip.

Soleimani, according to Palestinian sources, had direct contact with Palestinian factions in Gaza and provided them with Iranian aid and expertise, which has raised questions about the impact his death will have on Palestinian forces.

But his role in the deaths of Sunnis in Syria and Iraq made him a controversial figure for several inside Palestinian organizations, even those

that accepted Iranian assistance.

Hossam Al-Dajni, a professor of political science at the Ummah University affiliated with Hamas in Gaza, said that statements made by Hamas and other forces in Gaza regarding expressing dismay at Soleimani's demise were unacceptable to some members, and that internal debates about Soleimani had intensified following his death.

"There is a peculiarity to the Palestinian situation, given the presence of the Israeli occupation, and the need for the resistance forces to support and develop their capabilities in facing the occupation," Al-Dajani told Arab News.

Hamas' opposition to the Iranian-backed Houthi militia group in Yemen, as well as its position on the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, often put it at odds with authorities in Tehran. That said, the Iranian regime still viewed groups in Gaza as important proxies to oppose their mutual enemy, Israel.

Al-Dajani said that Soleimani's personal relations with the leaders of Palestinian resistance groups had been positive, but that Iranian support was a state policy, not an individual position, and that even with his death, it was likely to continue.

Hassan Abdou, a political analyst close to the group Islamic Jihad, agreed that Iranian support for Palestinian factions was an official strategy, saying: "Soleimani was implementing state policy, and he had great experiences and strong relations with the resistance forces. Soleimani's successor, through the leadership of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force, would maintain operational supply lines for the resistance forces in Gaza."

Under Soleimani, Iranian support for the Palestinian factions expanded to include left-wing forces as well as Islamic forces, Abdou said. "Soleimani was an international leader who was not ruled by a doctrine or religion in his confrontation of American imperialism or the Israeli occupation," he added.

Islamic Jihad is known to be the most stable Palestinian faction in its historical relationship with Iran, a relationship not affected by the developments in the region in the past few years.

Abdou believes the group relies on what he described as "constructive ambiguity" regarding its position on actual engagement with Iran in the event of a broad military confrontation with the US.

Regarding the controversy over the opening of a funeral tent for the Iranian general in Gaza, Abdou said those who rejected it were "extremists" with a "sectarian stance," who hated Soleimani for his role in the defeat of Daesh and other extremists in Iraq and Syria.

Military analyst Wasif Erekat claimed the killing of Soleimani would have "a direct impact" on Palestinian forces, but one that would not last long.

He told Arab News that the assassination was: “A great loss for the Palestinian factions because of his experience, capabilities and personal characteristics.

“Iran’s support for Palestine and the resistance factions aims to legitimize its own regional presence. The resistance factions in Gaza are not for Iran, but (served as) functional groups in Iran’s major regional strategy.

“What we are seeing now (the internal disagreement) exceeds all of this, and its price may be high in terms of people’s solidarity and standing with us.”



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Soleimani strike threatens UK ‘lives and interests’ How Iranian, Qatari media glorified Qassem Soleimani