

Allies fear US-Iran tensions could spark accidental conflict

Author:

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WASHINGTON: International worries that the Trump administration is sliding toward war with Iran flared into the open amid skepticism about its claims that the Islamic republic poses a growing threat to the US and its allies in the Arabian Gulf and beyond.

The US military on Tuesday rebutted doubts expressed by a British general about such a threat. President Donald Trump denied a report that the administration has updated plans to send up to 120,000 troops to counter Iran if necessary. But Trump then stirred the controversy further by saying: "Would I do that? Absolutely."

Underscoring what the US says is heightened risk to US personnel, the US Embassy in Baghdad on Wednesday ordered all non-essential, non-emergency government staff to leave Iraq immediately.

Still, the general's remarks exposed international skepticism over the American military buildup in the Middle East, a legacy of the 2003 invasion of Iraq that was predicated on false intelligence. US officials have not publicly provided any evidence to back up claims of an increased Iranian threat amid other signs of allied unease.

As tensions in the region started to surge, British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt said his nation was worried about the risk of accidental conflict "with an escalation that is unintended really on either side."

On Tuesday, Spain temporarily pulled one of its frigates from the US-led combat fleet heading toward the Strait of Hormuz. That was followed by the unusual public challenge to the Trump administration by the general.

"No, there's been no increased threat from Iranian-backed forces in Iraq and Syria," said Maj. Gen. Chris Ghika, a senior officer in the US-backed coalition fighting Daesh.

Ghika, speaking in a video conference from coalition headquarters in Baghdad, told reporters at the Pentagon that the coalition monitors the presence of Iranian-backed forces "along with a whole range of others because that's the environment we're in."

But he added: "There are a substantial number of militia groups in Iraq and Syria, and we don't see any increased threat from any of them at this stage."

Late in the day, in a rare public rebuttal of an allied military officer, US Central Command said Ghika's remarks "run counter to the identified credible threats" from Iranian-backed forces in the Mideast.

In a statement, Central Command said the coalition in Baghdad has increased the alert level for all service members in Iraq and Syria.

“As a result, (the coalition) is now at a high level of alert as we continue to closely monitor credible and possibly imminent threats to US forces in Iraq,” the statement said.

Trump, who has repeatedly argued for avoiding long-term conflicts in the Mideast, discounted a New York Times report that the US has updated plans that could send up to 120,000 troops to counter Iran if it attacked American forces.

“Would I do that? Absolutely,” he told reporters Tuesday at the White House. “But we have not planned for that. Hopefully we’re not going to have to plan for that. If we did that, we’d send a hell of a lot more troops than that.”

Reinforcing Trump’s denial, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said at a joint news conference in Sochi with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov: “We fundamentally do not seek war with Iran.”

A Trump administration official said a recent small meeting of national security officials was not focused on a military response to Iran, but instead concentrated on a range of other policy options, including diplomacy and economic sanctions. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Lavrov said Pompeo told him that a potential deployment of 120,000 US troops to the Mideast was only a “rumor.”

Lavrov said the international community needs to focus on diplomacy with Iran, including on the potentially explosive issue of Iran’s nuclear program, which is constrained by a US-brokered deal in 2015 that Trump has abandoned.

US Iran envoy Brian Hook told reporters traveling with Pompeo in Brussels that the secretary of state shared intelligence on Iran with allies since “Europe shares our concerns about stability in the Gulf and the Middle East.” What the Europeans do not share, however, is Washington’s more aggressive approach to Iran.

“We are very worried about the risk of a conflict happening by accident, with an escalation that is unintended really on either side but ends with some kind of conflict,” British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt told reporters in Brussels.

“What we need is a period of calm to make sure that everyone understands what the other side is thinking,” Hunt said.

Last week, US officials said they had detected signs of Iranian preparations for potential attacks on US forces and interests in the Mideast, but Washington has not spelled out that threat.

The US has about 5,000 troops in Iraq and about 2,000 in Syria as part of the coalition campaign to defeat the Daesh group there. It also has long had a

variety of air and naval forces stationed in Bahrain, Qatar and elsewhere in the Gulf, partly to support military operations against IS and partly as a counter to Iranian influence.

Gen. Ghika's comments came amid dramatically heightened tensions in the Middle East. The US in recent days has ordered the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier strike group to the Gulf region, plus four B-52 bombers. It also is moving a Patriot air-defense missile battery to an undisclosed country in the area. As of Tuesday, the Lincoln and its strike group had passed through the Bab El-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea, but officials would not disclose their exact location.

Tensions rose another notch with reports o Sunday that four commercial vessels anchored off the UAE had been damaged by sabotage.

A US military team was sent to the UAE to investigate, and one US official said the initial assessment is that each ship has a 5- to 10-foot hole in it, near or just below the water line. The official, who was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the investigation, said the early interpretation is that the holes were caused by explosive charges.

An initial assessment is that the damage was done by Iranian or Iranian-backed proxies, but they are still going through the evidence and have not yet reached a final conclusion, the official said.



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US and European countries scale back presence in Iraq amid Iran tensionsUS, Iran argue over inspections at nuclear watchdog meeting

[UAE court jails six for setting up Hezbollah-linked terror cell](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-05-15 21:11

DUBAI: Four men were sentenced to life in prison on Wednesday for setting up a terrorist cell with links to Hezbollah.

The Federal Court of Appeal sentenced another two men to 10 years each in jail and acquitted five others, the state news agency WAM reported.

The men, described as Arab, were convicted on charges of planning to commit terrorist crimes and acts of vandalism against vital installations in the

country.

The 11 defendants, all of whom have lived and worked in the UAE for more than 15 years, were arrested in late 2017 and early 2018.

They were charged in February with establishing a cell linked to the Iran-backed Hezbollah group.

The court ordered them to be deported from the country after their sentences end, confiscated all their communications equipment, computers and mobile phones and charged them with all the judicial expenses.

The UAE, along with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, classified Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in 2016 and warned its citizens and resident expatriates against any links to it.



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[UAE slams Iranian aggression but calls for calm amid oil tanker attack investigation](#)

Wed, 2019-05-15 20:28

DUBAI: The UAE is “very committed to de-escalation” after the sabotage of four oil tankers off the coast of Fujairah on Sunday, a senior minister said

Wednesday.

An investigation is underway and due to be completed within days, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash said, refusing to state who was responsible. But speaking in Dubai, he added that "Iranian behavior" was at the center of regional problems.

Though declining to name a suspect in the sabotage, Gargash says "Iranian behavior" is at the center of regional problems.

"We need to emphasize caution and good judgment. It is easy to throw accusations but it is a difficult situation, there are serious issues and among them is Iranian behavior," he said. "We have been bullied by Iran, we have seen aggressive Iranian action in the region."

He added that the UAE has handed a letter to the security council on the sabotage of the oil tankers.

Gargash also talked about the threat from Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, where the UAE is part of a coalition supporting the government against the militants.

On Tuesday, drones attacked two pumping stations on a pipeline running between the country's east and west coasts.

"We will also retaliate and retaliate hard when we see the Houthis hit civilian targets within Saudi Arabia," Gargash said.

His comments come as tensions escalate in the region, with the US deploying an aircraft carrier and B-52 bombers in response to Iran-related threats. The US and other European countries on Wednesday announced they were scaling back their presence in Iraq where powerful Iran-backed armed groups hold sway.

Ratcheting up the rhetoric, the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Major Gen. Hossein Salami, said on Wednesday they were "on the cusp of a full-scale confrontation with the enemy."



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Saudi Aramco resumes pumping oil through pipeline hit by drone attack Attacks on Saudi Arabia, UAE energy facilities likely coordinated, analysts say

[UN confirms Hodeidah truce is holding](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-05-15 00:57

HODEIDAH: The Houthis in Yemen have handed over security of key Red Sea ports to the coast guard but work remains to remove military equipment, the UN said on Tuesday.

The Iran-backed militia's withdrawal is part of a hard-won truce agreement in Sweden in December between the Houthis and the legitimate government, supported by a Saudi-led coalition.

The UN has been monitoring the Houthi pullout from Hodeidah, Saleef and Ras Isa ports and a UN team was there on Tuesday to verify the redeployment.

Its head, Gen. Michael Lollesgaard, welcomed the handover "of the security of the ports to the coast guard," the UN said.

"There is still a lot of work to be done ... but cooperation has been very good.

"UN teams will continue to monitor these initial steps in an impartial and transparent manner."

Hodeidah port is a lifeline for the import of food, medicines and other vital humanitarian supplies for millions in Yemen, but the Houthis also use it to smuggle arms and ammunition from Iran.



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Houthis start withdrawal from Hodeidah port, Yemeni minister dismisses pullout as a 'show'

[Palestinian refugees: The state of statelessness](#)

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DUBAI: Nakba Day is meant to remind the world of the tragedy of 1948, when more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were uprooted from their homes by the war that accompanied the Israeli declaration of independence and triggered a refugee crisis that is still not resolved.

Seventy-one years on, for millions of Palestinians, every checkpoint and

every airport is a reminder of the time their families fled or were evicted from their ancestral lands in historical Palestine, leaving their properties and belongings behind.

"They were issued a Palestinian wathiqah (travel document), which by the way is not supposed to be a permanent thing. A travel document should be temporary," Osama Sarhan, a Palestinian refugee with a Lebanese travel document, told Arab News.

Amid the chaos in 1948, Palestinians in Tarshiha were learning from newspapers and neighbors they needed to leave the place for about two weeks. So Sarhan's family left the village before it was captured by Israeli troops during the war.

After spending two months in Lebanon, they had not heard anything about when they could return to Tarshiha. This is when the Lebanese government issued the refugees travel documents, which do not have the cachet of a passport. Passports are an official document issued by a government, certifying the holder's identity and citizenship and entitling them to travel under its protection to and from foreign countries.

Egypt and Syria were two other Arab countries that issued travel documents to Palestinian refugees. For its part, Iraq issued Palestinians who fled the war in 1948 a one-year travel document. In September 1956, the Arab League came up with the Casablanca Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab States, which laid down clear guidelines for host countries. The travel documents were meant to preserve the Palestinian identity of the refugees while granting them the same rights as the local population.

"A travel document connotes you live in a certain area, that you are resident of that area, but does not necessarily give you rights to citizenship or nationality," Oroub El-Abed, a postdoctoral research fellow at the British Academy, told Arab News.

The living conditions, requirements and rights differ for Palestinians from country to country. For instance, Palestinians in Lebanon, like other non-citizens, are unable to buy property. In Egypt, there are five different types of residency permits. How often a Palestinian needs to renew the document depends on the permit type. For instance, some Palestinian travel document holders are required to either return to Egypt every six months or submit proof of employment or student status abroad to be allowed to re-enter the country.

"In the host Arab countries, they were not treated well. Syria was the only country that agreed to give Palestinian refugees social and economic rights," Palestinian academic Abbas Shiblak told Arab News.

Arab News approached the Lebanese, Syrian and Egyptian embassies for clarity on the matter, but failed to elicit any responses. A major handicap of travel documents is that they make traveling outside of host countries hard. "Most countries need a visa. I got asked a couple of times by airport officials what passport I held. Most did not understand when I tried to explain the nature of my travel documents," Sarhan told Arab News.

El-Abed said this happens because Palestinian refugees have "no official proof of citizenship." Another form of travel document that some Palestinians possess is the Jordanian temporary passport. The document was mostly given to Palestinian refugees after the Six Day War of 1967. Before that, Jordan used to grant Palestinians citizenship. A Palestinian in Jordan receives an ID card, which determines the status of the passport as well.

"The ID card is needed when one is crossing over the borders between Palestine and Jordan. If it is green, this means the Jordanian passport is a temporary one. If the card is yellow, then the passport is the permanent kind," Haya Nasrallah told Arab News.

Nasrallah's parents moved from Palestine to Jordan to receive their bachelor's degrees, and applied for temporary Jordanian passports. "People do that because it's a bit easier to get a visa using this passport compared with the Palestinian one," she told Arab News. Nasrallah is able to travel back to Palestine because she has the Palestinian ID card, which she uses at the borders. However, not everyone is able to obtain it.

"In order to allow your kids to get it, you need to travel to Palestine when they are younger than 16 years and register their names in your ID. But to avoid problems with the Israelis, people try to register their kids way before they turn 16," she said.

After the Oslo Accords of 1993, the Palestinian Authority (PA) began issuing a passport-like document to residents of the Palestinian territories. Trouble was, only individuals who were physically present in those territories during a census conducted by Israel in 1967 used to create the Palestinian Population Registry.

Still, the PA wanted the document to be given a status almost equal to a passport instead of just a travel document. However, the Israelis vetoed the plan. "It was the only document that could be described as a passport and a travel document," Shiblak told Arab News. Today, anyone who was unavailable in Palestine during the Israeli census of 1967 cannot "enter or live in the West Bank or Gaza," he told Arab News.

Despite the daunting problems millions of Palestinians face due to their stateless status, some embrace the wathiqa they possess as part of their identity. "There is still proof that I am Palestinian" Sarhan told Arab News.



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