

Weeping, Iran supreme leader prays over remains of General Qassem Soleimani

06/01/2020 20:00 by admin

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Mourners attend a funeral ceremony for Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani and his comrades at the Enqelab-e-Eslami (Islamic Revolution) Square in Tehran, Iran, Monday. (AP Photo)

Tehran: Weeping amid wails from a crowd of hundreds of thousands of mourners, Iran's supreme leader on Monday prayed over the remains of a top Iranian general killed in a US airstrike in Baghdad, an attack that drastically raised tensions between Tehran and Washington.

The assault killing Iranian Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani already has seen his replacement vow to take revenge as Tehran has abandoned the remaining limits of its 2015 nuclear deal with world powers in response to the slaying. Separately, Iraq's parliament has called for the expulsion of all American troops from Iraqi soil.

The three developments could bring Iran closer to building an atomic bomb, set off a proxy or military attack launched by Tehran against America and enable the Islamic State group to stage a comeback in Iraq, making the Middle East a far more dangerous and unstable place.

Adding to the tensions, President Donald Trump threatened to demand billions of dollars in compensation from Iraq or impose sanctions like they've never seen before if it goes through with expelling US troops.

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, center, leads a prayer over the coffins of Gen. Qassem Soleimani and his comrades at the Tehran University campus, in Tehran, Iran. (AP)

Soleimani's daughter, Zeinab, directly threatened an attack on the US military in the Mideast while speaking to a crowd of hundreds of thousands in Tehran that stretched as far as the eye could see.

"The families of US soldiers in the Middle East will spend their days waiting for death of their children," she said to cheers.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself prayed over the caskets of Soleimani and others slain in the attack. Khamenei, who had a close relationship with Soleimani, Khamenei wept at one point during the traditional Muslim prayers for the dead. The crowd and others wailed.

Ghaani stood near Khamenei's side, as did Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and other top leaders in the Islamic Republic. While Iran recently faced nationwide protests over government-set gasoline prices that reportedly killed over 300 people, Soleimani's mass processions has seen politicians and leaders across the Islamic Republic's political spectrum take part, temporarily silencing that anger.

Ghaani meanwhile made his threat in an interview with Iranian state television aired Monday. "God the almighty has promised to get his revenge, and God is the main avenger. Certainly actions will be taken," he said.

Ghaani now serves as the head of the Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force, an expeditionary arm of the paramilitary organization answerable only to Khamenei. As Soleimani's longtime deputy, Ghaani has been sanctioned by the US since 2012 for his work funding its operations around the world, including its work with proxies in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.

Those proxies likely will be involved in any operation targeting US interests in the Mideast or elsewhere in the world.

Already, the US Embassy in Saudi Arabia warned Americans of the heightened risk of missile and drone attacks. In Lebanon, the leader of the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah said Soleimani's killing made US military bases, warships and service members across the region fair game for attacks. A former Iranian Revolutionary Guard leader suggested the Israeli city of Haifa and others could be targeted should the US attack Iran.

"We promise to continue down martyr Soleimani's path as firmly as before with help of God, and in return for his martyrdom we aim to get rid of America from the region," Ghaani said.

On the nuclear deal, Iranian state television cited Sunday a statement by President Hassan Rouhani's administration saying the country would not observe the nuclear deal's restrictions on fuel enrichment, on the size of its enriched uranium stockpile and on its research and development activities.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran no longer faces any limitations in operations," a state TV broadcaster said.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson specifically urged Iran to "withdraw all measures not in line with the 2015 agreement that was intended to stop Tehran from pursuing its atomic weapons program."

Iran insisted that it remains open to negotiations with European partners over its nuclear program. And it did not back off from earlier promises that it wouldn't seek a nuclear weapon.

However, the announcement represents the clearest nuclear proliferation threat yet made by Iran since Trump unilaterally withdrew from the accord in 2018 and reimposed sanctions. It further raises regional tensions, as Iran's longtime foe Israel has promised never to allow Iran to produce an atomic bomb.

Iran did not elaborate on what levels it would immediately reach in its program. Tehran has already broken some of the deal's limits as part of a step-by-step pressure campaign to get sanctions relief. It already has increased its production, begun enriching uranium to 5% and restarted enrichment at an underground facility.

While it does not possess uranium enriched to weapons-grade levels of 90%, any push forward narrows the estimated one-year "breakout time" needed for it to have enough material to build a nuclear weapon if it chose to do so.

The International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations watchdog observing Iran's program, did not respond to a request for comment. However, Iran said that its cooperation with the IAEA "will continue as before."

Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi earlier told journalists that Soleimani's killing would prompt Iranian officials to take a bigger step away from the nuclear deal.

"In the world of politics, all developments are interconnected," Mousavi said.

Soleimani's killing has escalated the crisis between Tehran and Washington after months of back-and-forth attacks

and threats that have put the wider Middle East on edge. Iran has promised "harsh revenge" for the US attack, while Trump has vowed on Twitter that the US will strike back at 52 targets "VERY FAST AND VERY HARD."

He doubled down on that threat Sunday, dismissing warnings that targeting cultural sites could be a war crime under international law.

"They're allowed to kill our people. They're allowed to torture and maim our people. They're allowed to use roadside bombs and blow up our people. And we're not allowed to touch their cultural sites? It doesn't work that way," Trump told reporters.

On Sunday, hundreds of thousands of mourners accompanied the coffin carrying Soleimani's remains in the Iranian cities of Ahvaz and Mashhad. A similar procession was expected in Qom and Tehran on Monday. Tens of thousands already filled the streets of the Iranian capital early Monday morning.

Mourners wearing black beat their chests and carried posters with Soleimani's portrait. Demonstrators also unfurled red Shiite flags, which traditionally symbolize both the spilled blood of someone unjustly killed and a call for vengeance.

The processions mark the first time Iran honored a single man with a multi-city ceremony. Not even Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who founded the Islamic Republic, received such a procession with his death in 1989. Soleimani on Monday will lie in state at Tehran's famed Musalla mosque as the revolutionary leader did before him.

He will be buried in his hometown of Kerman.

- AP