

Roll Call



U.S. military won't leave Iraq anytime soon, Trump says amid tensions

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January 7, 2020

President Donald Trump said Tuesday he will not order the withdrawal of all American military forces from Iraq despite calls from officials there to expel U.S. troops following the White House's killing of a top Iranian figure outside Baghdad's airport.

"At some point we want to get out but this isn't the right point," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office days after Iraq's parliament voted to force him to get American troops off its soil. "It's the worst thing that could happen to Iraq."

The president and his secretaries of State and Defense have been dogged since the brazen strike on Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force, about whether it complied with U.S. and international laws. House Democrats have teed up a floor vote on a measure designed to limit Trump's powers to go to war with Iran.

The president and his top aides have said he possessed ample legal authority to take out what they have collectively dubbed a "terrorist ringleader" and a "terrorist mastermind."

"In our case it was retaliation," Trump said in the Oval Office alongside his Greek counterpart. "He was a monster. And he's no longer a monster. He's dead."

Asked what evidence he used to order the drone strike, the president again called Soleimani a "terrorist."

"Well, number one, I knew the past. His past was horrible. He was a terrorist," he said. "He was traveling with the head of Hezbollah. They weren't there to discuss a vacation. They weren't there to go to a nice resort in Baghdad.

"They were there to discuss their business. And we saved a lot of lives by terminating his life, a lot of lives were saved," Trump said. "They were planning something and you're going to be hearing about it or at least various people in Congress are going to be hearing about it tomorrow."

The Trump team also contends that the president would have legal cover if he chooses to launch additional military operations against Iranian targets.

"We are totally prepared" to respond if the Iranian government retaliates, the commander in chief said.

Regional experts and members of both parties — echoed by administration officials — long have warned about Iran’s influence inside its neighbor. Congressional Democrats and that party’s leading presidential candidates say Trump’s decision to take out Soleimani show he is reckless and lacks a Middle East strategy.

“President Trump had promised to keep the United States out of endless wars in the Middle East. The president’s actions, however, have seemingly increased the risk that we could be dragged into exactly such a war,” Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer said Monday.

“It’s indicative of President Trump’s foreign policy record, which is riddled by chaotic, uninformed, erratic, and impulsive decision-making without adequate consideration for the consequences,” he said. “In just about every foreign policy area President Trump touches, we’re worse off than we were before he started with it.”

At several points on the campaign trail, former Vice President Joe Biden has said some version of this assessment of Trump: “Dangerously incompetent and incapable, in my view, of world leadership.”

Earlier Tuesday, he said the volatile standoff with Tehran shows “Donald Trump has proven that comment beyond dispute.”

Some nonpartisan foreign policy experts say Trump’s targeted killing of the Iranian general has made the Middle East less safe.

“Trump, who has hinted at his desire to end endless wars, even as he has presided over a dramatic expansion of nearly all of the conflicts that he inherited, now seems poised to add an enormous new one into the mix,” said Christopher Preble of the CATO Institute.

“Because, let’s be clear, while the United States and Iran have been locked in a cycle of confrontation for four decades, neither side has been prepared to engage in full-scale and direct conflict with the other,” Preble said. “And yet that is a step that may very well follow from these actions — if cooler heads don’t quickly prevail.”