



## U.S. Officials Defend Decision to Kill Iranian General

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White House officials on Sunday defended the U.S. killing of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, while acknowledging potential gaps in their assertion that four U.S. embassies had become imminent targets of Iranian attack.

“Look, it’s always difficult, even with the exquisite intelligence that we have, to know exactly what the targets are,” White House national security adviser Robert O’Brien said on “Fox News Sunday.” “We know there were threats to American facilities, now whether they were bases, embassies—you know it’s always hard until the attack happens.”

The administration’s Jan. 3 decision to kill Gen. Soleimani, the country’s top military leader, was condemned by Iran and provoked missile strikes by Iran on U.S. targets in Iraq. The killing also preceded the accidental downing by Iran of a Ukrainian airliner in Tehran last week.

Democrats and some Republicans have criticized the administration, saying the president overstated the imminence and scope of planned Iranian attacks. Members of Congress said a threat against four embassies wasn’t mentioned in a classified briefing last week.

President Trump said in a Fox News interview on Friday that Tehran might have been targeting four American embassies in the Middle East.

“I can reveal that I believe it probably would’ve been four embassies,” Mr. Trump said, without offering any explanation, details or evidence.

On Sunday, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said he didn’t see specific evidence Iranians planned to target four embassies.

“The president didn’t cite a specific piece of evidence. What he said was he believed,” Mr. Esper said on CBS’s “Face the Nation.” “I didn’t see one with regard to four embassies. What I’m saying is that I shared the president’s view that probably—my expectation was they were going to go after our embassies. The embassy is the most prominent display of American presence in a country.”

Later, on CNN’s “State of the Union,” Mr. Esper said the intelligence indicated Iran was planning a broader, imminent attack against multiple U.S. sites in the region, targeting at least the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. “Taking him off the battlefield—a legitimate military target—was the right thing to do,” he said, referring to Gen. Soleimani.

Officials declined to release details behind their assessment, with Mr. O'Brien saying on NBC's "Meet the Press" that could jeopardize a "valuable stream" of information.

Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a U.S. drone strike on Jan. 3, was the commander of Iran's Quds Force. WSJ explains how this arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was formed and the role it has played in the U.S.-Iran conflict.

Analysts said it appeared the president had overstated evidence for the targeted killing because other members of the administration seem uncomfortable affirming the Iranians were likely targeting four embassies.

"Any person can speculate that U.S. embassies are attractive targets, but that's just speculation" said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. "That's a far cry from credible evidence of imminent danger."

Rep. Adam Schiff, a California Democrat who heads the House Intelligence Committee, has disputed the administration's assertions about the plots against the U.S.

"The quality and specificity of the intelligence did not meet the threshold necessary to engage in such a provocative targeted killing of a top Iranian official," said Mr. Schiff, who is among the congressional "Gang of Eight" members who receive the most detailed intelligence briefings. "So I found the justification insufficient," he said in an interview Friday.