

Thousands mourn Soleimani in Iraq

Political leaders, clerics attend mass ceremony to honour slain Iranian commander

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BAGHDAD
Tens of thousands of Iraqis, many chanting “Death to America”, on Saturday mourned a top Iranian commander and others killed in a U.S. drone attack that sparked fears of a regional proxy war between Washington and Tehran.

The killing of Iran’s Major General Qassem Soleimani on Friday was the most dramatic escalation yet in spiralling tensions between Iran and the United States, which pledged to send thousands more troops to the region.

Iraqi political leaders and clerics attended the mass ceremony to honour Soleimani and the other nine victims of the pre-dawn attack on Baghdad international airport.



Raging fire: A demonstration in Karbala, Iraq, on Saturday against the U.S. airstrike that killed Qassem Soleimani. • AP

Mortars hit U.S. embassy compound

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BAGHDAD
Two mortar rounds hit the Iraqi capital’s Green Zone on Saturday and two rockets slammed into a base housing U.S. troops, security sources said, a day after a deadly American strike that killed Iran’s Commander-General Qassem Soleimani.

The precision drone strike outside the Baghdad airport on Friday killed Iranian commander Soleimani, top Iraqi paramilitary chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and a

clutch of other Iranian and Iraqi figures. In Baghdad, mortar rounds on Saturday evening hit the Green Zone, the high-security enclave where the U.S. embassy is based, security sources said.

The Iraqi military said that one projectile hit inside the zone, while another landed close to the enclave. Sirens rang out at the U.S. compound, sources there said.

A pair of Katyusha rockets then hit the Balad airbase north of Baghdad, where American troops are

based, security sources and the Iraqi military said. Security sources there reported blaring sirens and said surveillance drones were sent above the base to locate the source of the rockets.

The Iraqi military confirmed the missile attacks in Baghdad and on Balad base and said there were no casualties.

U.S. troops and diplomats had been bracing themselves for more rocket attacks following the precision drone strike that killed Soleimani.

to Soleimani. Mass ceremonies started in Baghdad on Saturday for the dead, with Iraq’s caretaker Premier Adel Abdel Mahdi and top pro-Iran figures in large crowds accompanying the coffins. They were first brought to a revered Shia shrine in northern Baghdad, where thousands of mourners chanted “Death to America!”

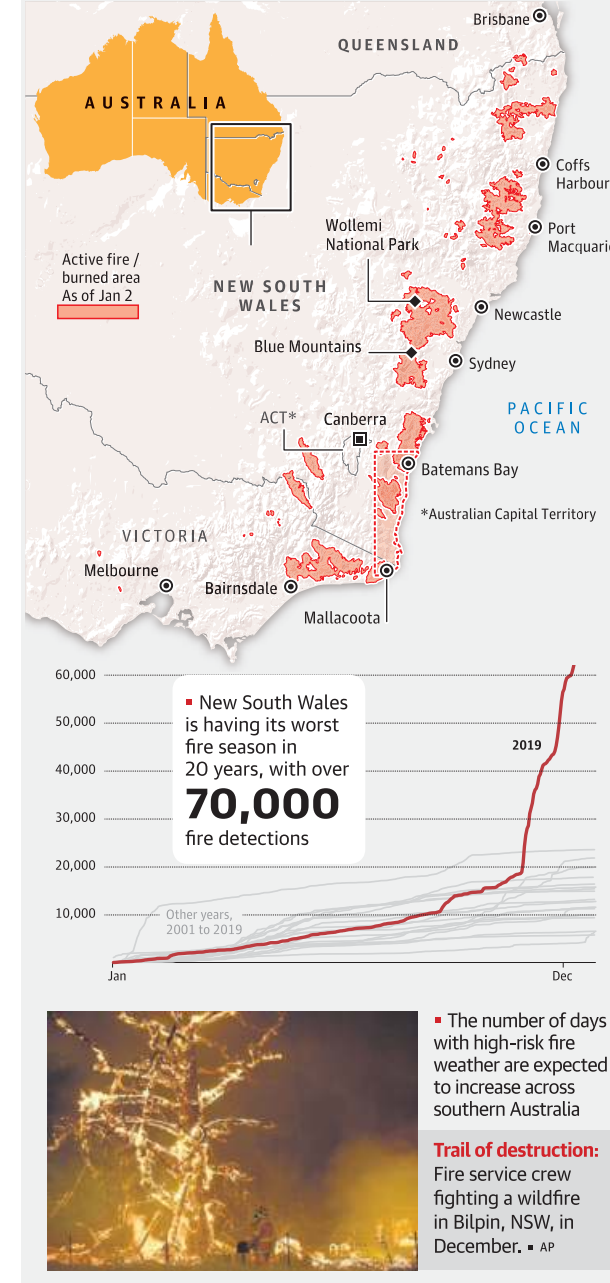
Call for revenge

Dressed in black, they waved white Hashed flags and massive portraits of Iranian and Iraqi leaders, furiously calling for “revenge”. The remains were then moved to the shrine city of Karbala and would ultimately end up in Najaf, where the Iraqis will be buried. The Guards’ remains would be flown to Iran, which has declared three days of mourning and religious rituals.

Iraqis worry the U.S. strike could unleash a new wave of destabilisation for Iraq.

Amid the tensions, the Pentagon said up to 3,500 additional U.S. troops would be dispatched to Iraq’s neighbour Kuwait, to boost some 14,000 reinforcements already deployed to the region last year. About 5,200 U.S. troops are stationed across Iraq to help fight the IS. As a result of the tensions, NATO said it was suspending its training activities in Iraq and a U.S. defence official said that American-led coalition forces would “limit” operations. U.S. citizens were meanwhile urged to leave Iraq immediately and American staff were evacuated from oil fields in the south.

Iraq’s pro-Iran factions have seized on Soleimani’s death to push Parliament, which convenes on Sunday, to revoke the security agreement allowing U.S. forces on Iraqi soil.



Hot and dry Down Under

Australia is experiencing an unprecedented, drought-fuelled bushfire crisis that has burnt swathes of land across the continent over the last few months

6 million hectares burnt across the country

23 people killed, 17 in New South Wales (NSW)

Entire towns in NSW and Victoria were destroyed on New Year’s Eve

1,500 homes impacted

3,000 military reservists called up for rescue efforts

1 degree Celsius – rise in Australia’s temperature since 1910

2019 was the country’s hottest and driest year

Source: Graphic News, NYT Graphic Service

Australia PM criticised for bushfire ad

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SYDNEY

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison faced renewed criticism on Saturday, after sharing bushfire themed party campaign ads that opponents condemned as “disgusting” and a respected defence association said was “milking” the crisis.

Facing sustained anger for his handling of the months-long crisis, Mr. Morrison sought to get on the

front foot on Saturday, announcing increased military assistance to beleaguered volunteer firefighters.

In a string of media appearances, he vowed every resource would be provided to help ease a disaster that has killed 23 people and burned swathes of the country, announcing more funding for water-bombing planes. But he found himself in fresh scandal late on Saturday after tweeting a video

heralding his announcements about the military, and his Liberal Party made a similar post linking to the party website.

The non-partisan Australia Defence Association, a public-interest watchdog, said the Liberal Party advert was a “clear breach” of conventions keeping the military out of politics and accused the party of “milking ADF support to civil agencies fighting bushfires”.

China replaces top envoy in Hong Kong

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIJING

China has replaced its top envoy to Hong Kong, state media reported on Saturday, the most significant personnel change by Beijing since pro-democracy protests erupted in the city nearly seven months ago.

The removal of the head of the Liaison Office, which represents the Central government in semi-autonomous Hong Kong, comes as the city grapples with its biggest political crisis in decades. “Wang Zhimin has been dismissed from his position as head of the Liaison Office” and replaced by Luo Huining, state broadcaster CCTV said, without giving details.

Indian-origin MP to bid for Labour leadership

Party needs to change course: Nandy

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
LONDON

Indian -origin British MP Lisa Nandy has formally launched her bid to replace Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, urging the party members to “change course” to avoid becoming “irrelevant” in the wake of the party’s worst defeat in over 70 years in last month’s general election.

In articles written in *The Guardian* and the *Wigan Post*, the Ms. Nandy, 40, said she wanted to “bring Labour home” to voters that have abandoned the party in its traditional strongholds. Ms. Nandy has become the fourth Labour hopeful to throw her hat in



Lisa Nandy. • WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the ring after Clive Lewis, Jess Phillips and Emily Thornberry.

In a stark warning to party members, Ms. Nandy, who has championed the needs of Britain’s towns, said “unless we change course, we will become irrelevant”.

Lebanon banks close over clients’ demands

Since September, there has been a cap on the money that can be withdrawn

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BEIRUT

Banks in a region of northern Lebanon were closed until further notice on Saturday, the National News Agency said, after lenders balked at customer anger over a liquidity crisis.

Since September, banks have arbitrarily capped the amount of dollars that can be withdrawn or transferred abroad, sparking fury among customers who accuse lenders of holding their money hostage. There is also a limit on Lebanese pound withdrawals.

Clients wanting dollars often have to stand in queues for hours to make withdrawals, only to be told bills have run out once they reach the counter.



Being adversarial: Protesters shouting slogans against the Lebanese political class in Beirut, on December 30. • AP

On Saturday, all banks in the northern region of Akkar were closed, the NNA said, following a call from the Association of Banks for them to shut their doors “until further notice”.

On Friday, citizens en-

tered a bank branch in the town of Halba to protest about customers being unable to withdraw enough dollars or their salaries in Lebanese pounds in full, NNA reported.

They said they would not

leave until a customer – who suffered an unspecified health complaint while waiting – was given a guarantee that he would be paid in full. The 10-hour standoff – which included security forces firing tear-gas inside the building – ended with the man being taken to hospital and management promising to pay him in full.

The Association of Banks the same day called for lenders in the area to close over the incident, which it described as an “attack” and “a threat to the lives and safety of employees”. Unprecedented anti-government protests have gripped Lebanon since October 17, in part to decry a lack of action over the deepening economic crisis.

ELSEWHERE



Greta marks 17th birthday with protest

STOCKHOLM
“I’m not the kind of person who celebrates birthdays,” Greta Thunberg said as she turned 17 on Friday, marking the occasion with a seven-hour protest outside the Swedish Parliament. The climate activist braved winter conditions in Stockholm to continue the weekly ‘Friday School Strike for the Climate’ campaign that helped catapult her to fame. REUTERS

53 killed in Indonesia floods, landslides

JAKARTA
Nearly 1,75,000 people remain displaced in Jakarta and nearby towns, after flash floods and landslides killed at least 53 people, amid some of the heaviest rain since records began, authorities said on Saturday. “The death toll has risen to 53 people, with one person missing,” disaster agency spokesman Agus Wibowo said. REUTERS

Neutral pronoun ‘they’ is word of the decade

NEW YORK
The neutral pronoun “they” has been voted word of the decade by U.S. language experts, beating out other contenders that included “climate” and “meme”. “They” is used in English by a growing number of non-binary individuals, people who do not identify as either male or female. They prefer the plural neutral pronoun to bypass the traditionally male “he” or female “she”. AFP

2 foreigners involved in Ghosn flight: Turkey

ISTANBUL
Turkey on Saturday said two foreigners were involved in businessman Carlos Ghosn’s transit through Istanbul as he fled Japan on his way to Lebanon. “There are two foreigners involved in the transit,” Turkish Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul told CNN’s Turk broadcaster during an interview. AFP

SUDOKU

	4	7		2			1	
	6					7	5	
9		5						
	1			7	2	9		5
			9		4			
6		9	5	3			8	
					2		6	
	2	1				7		
9			5		8	4		

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to yesterday’s Sudoku

5	8	9	4	6	2	3	7	1
6	1	4	3	7	5	9	8	2
2	3	7	1	9	8	4	5	6
7	9	3	5	2	1	8	6	4
4	6	5	8	7	9	2	1	7
1	2	8	7	4	6	5	3	9
8	4	6	9	1	3	7	2	5
3	7	2	6	5	4	1	9	8
9	5	1	2	8	7	6	4	3

Targeted for mocking Saudi royals through satire

Ghanem al-Masarir’s videos have been viewed more than 300 million times on YouTube

DAVID SEGAL
LONDON

No one has skewered the Saudi royal family as gleefully as Ghanem al-Masarir.

In hundreds of videos posted to YouTube – which have been viewed more than 300 million times – Mr. al-Masarir sits at a desk, usually at his home in North London, offers a jovial greeting in Arabic, then launches into a series of embarrassing Saudi-related stories. The tone is sharply satirical, the delivery a bit hammy.

One of his favourite targets is Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi Crown Prince, whom he long ago tagged with a nickname, now widely used by detractors, that translates to “the bear that has gone astray.” As mild as this may sound to Western ears, calling someone a bear in West Asia is tantamount to calling him fat and ugly, and “astray” in this context means immoral, corrupt, essentially a gangster.



Living dangerously: Ghanem al-Masarir, a Saudi dissident satirist and YouTube star, in London. • NYT

In October 2018, Mr. al-Masarir says, the British police visited his home to deliver an official warning about a threat to his life. They left him with a “panic button” system, attached through his phone line, that summons the authorities when activated, but they offered no specifics about the source of the threat.

To Mr. al-Masarir, it’s no mystery. Years ago, he says,

he was quietly alerted to an apparent Saudi plan to kidnap him, a heads-up that came from an unlikely source: the Saudi intelligence agent later accused of masterminding the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, *The Washington Post* op-ed columnist killed in 2018 in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.

And the Saudi regime has spent years trying to intimidate Mr. al-Masarir, he says,

through cyberattacks on his social media platforms.

Campaign by Riyadh

A few months before the police showed up at his door, Mr. al-Masarir says, the campaign against him escalated. His smartphones had turned unaccountably sluggish, and at the behest of a friend – familiar with the side effects of covertly installed spyware – he asked a cybersecurity watchdog group to figure out why.

After examining his smartphones, Citizen Lab, a non-profit organization based in Toronto, told him that they had been infected with Pegasus, a virus created by an Israeli tech company, NSO Group. It turns smartphones into all-purpose surveillance tools, hoovering up texts and emails, eavesdropping on calls and tracking locations.

Citizen Lab found digital footprints on Mr. al-Masarir’s smartphones leading directly to Saudi Arabia. That dis-

covery, and the police visit, prompted Mr. al-Masarir to take an unusual step: He sued the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, demanding an apology and unspecified damages, for ruining his phones and causing personal distress and anxiety. “You’re dealing essentially with the mafia,” Mr. al-Masarir said, during a meeting at the offices of Leigh Day, a law firm that is representing him on a “no win, no fee” basis. “Except they have diplomatic passports and a lot of money.”

Mr. al-Masarir came to Britain 16 years ago, seeking both an education and a way to denounce his native country from afar. Along the way, he discovered his inner performer and YouTube, an on-line platform that provided both a steady flow of income and a prominence he had never imagined. A 2018 list of thought leaders in the Arab world compiled by Global Influence ranked him No. 17. NY TIMES