
'HONEST MISTAKE': PENTAGON DENIES PLANS TO WITHDRAW TROOPS FROM IRAQ

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AP

The U.S. letter that seemed to announce the withdrawal of troops from Iraq was an "honest mistake," General Mark Milley, chairman of the joint Chiefs of Staff told reporters on Monday. For a few tense hours, the U.S. appeared to have announced that it would withdraw its troops after nearly 17 years of military presence.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper tried to clear up a knot of miscommunication on Monday, saying that a letter from a senior military officer that appeared to suggest a withdrawal was underway.

The U.S. is not pulling troops out of Iraq, Esper told reporters.

"Here's the bottom line. This was a mistake."

The bungled message started when a draft letter from Marine Brig. Gen. William Seely began circulating on social media. Addressed to an official at the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, the letter said U.S. troops would be repositioning forces" to prepare for onward movement."

Seely added, We respect your sovereign decision to order our departure.

The order" Seely mentioned was a reference to the Iraqi parliament's vote over the weekend to expel U.S. troops after an American drone attack killed a top Iranian general in Baghdad.

A flurry of news reports followed Seely's letter, saying the United States was ending its military presence in Iraq.

But after a few hours of denials and frantic phone calls, top Pentagon leaders tried to do damage control, stating flatly that the U.S. had no plans to leave and saying the letter was a poorly worded draft that never should have gone out.

Nobody's leaving," Milley said. There's no onward movement. Honest mistake."

It's not entirely clear who leaked the letter. According to Milley, the draft was circulated to key Iraqi officials as part of a coordination process to let them know about the increased helicopter movements. Officials say it was first posted on the website of an Iranian-backed militia group.

Now it's a kerfuffle," Milley lamented.

Repositioning of troops because of security threats

Esper said the U.S. has been re-positioning troops, largely due to increased security threats from Iran. The letter was meant to coordinate with the Iraqi military on an increase in U.S. helicopter and troop movements as they shift positions around the country, Esper and Milley said.

There's been no decision whatsoever to leave Iraq," he said. There's no decision to leave, nor did we issue any plans to leave or prepare to leave.

He said the U.S. remains committed to the campaign to defeat the Islamic State group in Iraq and the region.

Trump threatens Iraq with sanctions

Earlier on Monday, President Donald Trump warned that the U.S. would levy harsh sanctions if Iraq expels American troops in retaliation for a U.S. strike in Baghdad that killed Soleimani.

Trump's comments Sunday came amid escalating tensions in the Middle East following the killing of Soleimani. Iran has vowed to retaliate and Iraq's parliament responded by voting Sunday to oust U.S. troops based in the country.

Iraq's parliamentary vote is non-binding and has yet to be ratified by the government.

Trump said the U.S. wouldn't leave without being paid for its military investments in Iraq over the years. He added that if troops do have to withdraw, he would hit Baghdad with economic penalties.

We will charge them sanctions like they've never seen before ever. It'll make Iranian sanctions look somewhat tame," he said. If there's any hostility, that they do anything we think is inappropriate, we are going to put sanctions on Iraq, very big sanctions on Iraq."

He added: We're not leaving until they pay us back for it."

The administration has scrambled to contend with the backlash to the killing of Soleimani. Though he was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Americans, the targeted American strike marked a stark escalation in tensions between Washington and Tehran.

Iraq seeks UN Security Council condemnation of US actions

Iraq is condemning the U.S. airstrike that killed Iran's top military commander as a flagrant violation of the terms of the American forces presence in the country and a dangerous escalation that might ignite a devastating war in Iraq, the region and the world.

Iraq's U.N. Ambassador Mohammed Hussein Bahr Aluloom called on the U.N. Security Council to condemn the U.S. airstrike and assassination that killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani and a

senior Iraqi militia commander.

He urged the council in a letter Monday to hold accountable those who have committed such violations.

Bahr Aluloom also called on the Security Council to ensure that Iraq is not dragged into international and regional crises, and to prevent the law of the jungle from prevailing.

Any Security Council action sought by Iraq against the Trump administration, however, is virtually certain to be vetoed by the U.S..

The targeted killing of Soleimani sparked outrage in the Middle East, including in Iraq, where more than 5,000 American troops are still on the ground 17 years after the U.S. invasion. Iraq's parliament voted Sunday in favour of a nonbinding resolution calling for the expulsion of the American forces.

<https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/06/us-president-trump-threatens-iraq-with-crippling-sanctions>

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