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By Robert Stevens
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Britain backs US war drive against Iran

The assassination of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani at Baghdad Airport by the Trump administration last Friday has brought Boris Johnson's UK Conservative government face to face with the real cost of aligning their post-Brexit strategy with Washington.

Whatever the qualms and concerns in British ruling circles as to its grave implications of war in the Middle East, the UK is already involved—as the closest ally of the US—in a potential war against Iran.

Despite echoing statements from European leaders on the need to “de-escalate” the situation, UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has confirmed that the UK will march in lockstep with Trump's war drive. Raab confirmed to *Sky News* Sunday that he would be meeting personally with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in Washington this week. When asked if he would be taking a “tough message” in opposition to Iran, he replied, “We're on the same page with our American partners; we'll continue to talk to them.”

“Let's be very clear: he [Soleimani] was a regional menace, and we understand the position that the Americans found themselves in, and they have a right to exercise self-defence. They have explained the basis on which that was done, and we are sympathetic to the situation they found themselves in,” he added.

Britain has signed up to support the US in its latest reckless military adventure despite not even being consulted beforehand that the US was about to assassinate Soleimani.

The US State Department issued a statement Friday saying that Pompeo had phoned Raab and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to discuss the "defensive action to eliminate" Soleimani. He thanked them for their "recent statements" recognizing the continuing aggressive threat from Iran and its Quds force that Soleimani commanded.

However, Pompeo's subsequent tweet confirmed that Raab was only told after the event, saying he had "discussed with @DominicRaab the *recent decision* to take defensive action to eliminate Qassem Soleimani." [emphasis added]

Johnson has spent the last 12 days on vacation in Mustique and was not told about Trump's plans. The *Sunday Mirror* reported, "Britain was given no advance notice of the attack—and reportedly only became aware it was underway because British troops are stationed alongside US forces in Baghdad."

It added that "Boris Johnson reportedly uttered an abrupt, four-letter response when he was told of Donald Trump's drone strike on a top Iranian general: 'F***.'"

In Johnson's absence, the government has held three meetings of its emergency Cobra Committee, with warships and soldiers, including special forces, and other military resources being sent to the region and readied for war.

Defence secretary Ben Wallace authorised two Royal Navy warships already located in the Persian Gulf—destroyer HMS Defender and frigate HMS Montrose—to begin "close escort" of oil tankers and other vessels in the Strait of Hormuz. The *Times* reported that upon the prime minister's arrival back in the UK Sunday, "Defence chiefs will ask Johnson to decide whether to deploy up to eight RAF Typhoon jets based in Cyprus, a Sentinel spy plane and drones used over Syria to protect Britons from retaliatory attacks."

Newspapers noted that among the UK's military arsenal permanently stationed in the region is a Royal Navy nuclear-powered submarine armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles.

Johnson "will be presented with plans to send the soldiers heavier weapons and move them to secure the British embassy in Baghdad—amid fears that Iranian proxies could storm the enclave to kill or abduct British citizens," the *Sunday Times* wrote.

Already 400 UK soldiers involved in training the Iraqi army have been moved into "force protection" mode, with intelligence officers warning Johnson that Britain could be soon dragged into an "accidental war."

The *Times* cited a "senior figure" who said "We have a plan A and a plan B and a 'break the glass' plan if it all kicks off. Our forces in the region have been told to reorientate

towards force protection. The troops could be asked to secure the embassy or the green zone in Baghdad.”

It revealed that “Soldiers from the Cyprus garrison of the Mercian Regiment and the Princess of Wales’s Royal Regiment are on standby for emergency operations across the Middle East.”

The *Mirror* reported Saturday, “It is understood around 50 members of the Special Air Service and the Navy’s Special Boat Service along with the Special Forces Support Group will be sent to Iraq to help any possible evacuation of Britons in the region.”

It noted, “There are at least 1,400 military and UK government civilian personnel in Iraq as part of Operation Shader which is the UK mission to help train Iraqi and Kurdish forces defeat Islamic State.”

Raab’s expression of support for the US came after Pompeo said on Saturday of Washington’s allies in the Middle East “They’ve all been fantastic. And then talking to our partners in other places that haven’t been quite as good... Frankly, the Europeans haven’t been as helpful as I wish that they could be. The Brits, the French, the Germans all need to understand that what we did, what the Americans did, saved lives in Europe as well.”

French President Emmanuel Macron went as far as telephoning Iraq’s acting prime minister to state his support for its sovereignty—a de facto statement opposing the US action that took place without Iraq’s government being informed.

Pompeo’s was whipping into line figures within ruling circles in Britain and the media who urged “de-escalation” following the assassination.

Among these was Tory MP and former chairman of the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Tugendhat, who said there was a “pattern” in the US administration not sharing information with its allies. Stating this was a “matter of concern,” he added, “I have long believed the purpose of having allies is so we can surprise our enemies, not each other.”

Tugendhat expresses the fear that Britain’s substantial interests in the Middle East are threatened by the US war plans. In Baghdad and the southern Iraqi city Basra, UK firms with substantial interests include the energy conglomerates BP and Shell, security company G4S and professional services operation Ernst & Young.

The divisions in the British ruling class was glaring in the conflicting editorials in the *Financial Times*, *Mail on Sunday* and the *Sunday Telegraph*—the latter a pro-Tory

newspaper that advocated leaving the European Union and closer economic and military ties to the US post-Brexit.

The FT commented, “The drumbeat of conflict between the US and Iran has become suddenly deafening... Tehran will see it [the assassination] not just as a military body blow but tantamount to a declaration of war. America’s allies are disconcerted. Every move on the Middle East chessboard will now carry with it the serious risk of triggering a broader conflagration.”

The *Mail on Sunday* warned, “Americans—and not just Americans—are weary of being bogged down in blood and sand in Afghanistan and Iraq, for little obvious gain. Must we now prepare for a new confrontation in Iraq, or even in Iran itself? Could this conflict, in which Russia is very much on the other side, spill into Europe?”

In contrast, the *Telegraph*, for which Johnson was a columnist before becoming prime minister, wrote, “Britain should use the assassination of Qassim Soleimani—Iran’s terrorist-in-chief—to break away from EU foreign policy and cease legitimising this corrupt regime.” Trump should have acted sooner and taken “tough action last year when the Iranians downed a US drone.”

Unlike the EU, “An independent Britain, by contrast, will be free to fly the flag for democracy and be a constructive partner [with the US] in holding the line against Iranian terrorism.”

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