

Pompeo: ‘Only’ Civilians on Plane at Risk in ‘Rembrandt’ Soleimani’s Killing

Former secretary of state's new book says Gulf Arab partners were informed of impending strike and he continues to expect Iranian retaliation against him

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Former [US](#) Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has compared [Qassem Soleimani](#) to a Rembrandt painting and said the “only” civilians endangered by the US drone strike on the [Iranian](#) general were those also travelling on his commercial aircraft.

Soleimani, head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard’s elite Quds Force and longtime US foe, was killed by a Reaper drone as he left Baghdad airport in the early hours of 3 January 2020.

In his memoir *Never Give an Inch: Fighting for the America I Love*, released on Tuesday, Pompeo says the Trump administration expected Soleimani to be quickly replaced with the next best option, but claims no one could match the general’s “combination of authority, brains, brutality, and public appeal inside Iran”.

“Trying to replace him would be like trying to replace an original Rembrandt. Good luck with that, as there is simply no good substitute,” he writes.

Pompeo, who was head of the CIA before becoming Donald Trump’s secretary of state in 2018, is dismissive of the risk to civilian lives the operation posed. He describes raising the complications surrounding a strike on an international airport “almost as an afterthought”.

“I was comfortable with the risk, as we had a plan for controlling the airspace for the most important five minutes,” Pompeo recalls.

“The only civilians potentially in harm’s way would be those on Soleimani’s commercial aircraft.”

[Middle East Eye reported](#) at the time that Soleimani arrived at Baghdad airport on a Cham

Wings flight from Damascus after visiting Beirut. His baggage and travel documents were handled by national security officials.

Soleimani was hit by a Hellfire missile as his convoy left the airport. The strike killed the general and nine others, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the godfather of Iraq's Iranian-backed paramilitaries.

“Hellfire missiles came screaming down. American power, American technology, and American justice slammed into his vehicle,” Pompeo writes.

An [Iraqi paramilitary leader](#) told MEE at the time that two cars passed Soleimani's convoy before the strike, briefly jeopardising the operation.

Pompeo describes sending messages to Iran and “the ayatollah”, presumably meaning Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. One said: “This was not an attempt to decapitate the regime.”

He also says the United States' allies in the Middle East were aware of the impending strike.

“The Israelis also were ready, knowing that Iran could choose to retaliate against them. In the same way, we had worked with our Gulf Arab partners, giving them a heads-up without revealing our specific plans,” he says.

Pompeo, who is expected to declare his intention to be a Republican candidate in the 2024 US presidential election, says he expects retaliation from Iran to this day.

“We know Iran has the capabilities to operate inside the United States, so a year and a half after leaving public service, I still retain a security detail,” he writes.

“Trip to the grocery store? Diplomatic security will shadow me while I evaluate which eggplant looks the ripest. Susan's going to get her hair done? Let's hope Hezbollah sleeper agents aren't casing the salon. Son's getting married? Agents will need to send an advance team to the church.”

“I will probably never drive my own car again or enjoy the level of privacy that I once had,” he adds.

Soleimani's killing, which was preceded by escalating violence between the United States and Iran and its allies, prompted Tehran to fire a barrage of missiles at US targets in Iraq in retaliation, wounding several American soldiers.

Expecting a US attack following the missile strike, Iranian forces mistakenly shot down a Ukrainian passenger jet, killing all 176 passengers and crew.

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Featured image: The Baghdad murders of anti-ISIS commanders Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al Muhandes triggered an unprecedented Iranian ballistic missile attack on US military bases in Iraq.

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