

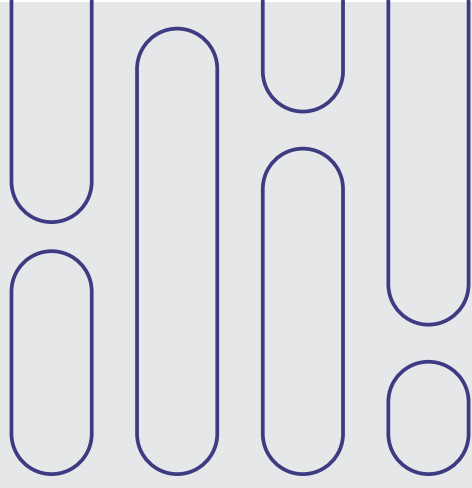
— Position Paper —

The US Threat to Shut Down Its Diplomatic Mission in Iraq: Motives, Ramifications and Scenarios

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المحتويات

I- Motives Behind the US Threat to Shut Down Its Embassy	3
II- Iraqi Efforts to Manage the Crisis	5
III-The Potential Consequences for Iraq in Case the US Embassy is Shut Down.....	7
IV- Evolving Developments in the Iraqi Arena	10

The developments in the Iraqi arena have taken a new turn as the United States threatened the Iraqi government in September 2020 with the closure of its embassy if the Iraqi government failed to stop Iran-aligned armed militias attacking US and foreign diplomatic missions, the logistical teams supportive of the missions, the Global Coalition Against ISIS in Iraq and petroleum companies in the country's oil-rich provinces.

However, the significance of Iraq to the US strategy, owing to political, economic and geographical considerations, raises questions such as: What are the motives of the United States and how serious is it in moving ahead with its threat to shut down its embassy in Baghdad? What are the potential ramifications of carrying out this threat on the security, economic and political circumstances in Iraq? Which of the parties to the conflict will be the biggest winner, or loser, in case the US embassy is closed in Iraq? What can be expected to happen in the Iraqi arena in the coming period? And what are the foreseeable scenarios for the US position?

I- Motives Behind the US Threat to Shut Down Its Embassy

Some motives behind the US threat to close one of its biggest embassies in the world are overt and others are covert. The overt motives are connected to the ongoing rise in the rate and scope of the attacks carried out by armed militias aligned with Iran since early 2020. The attacks targeted US forces, convoys and missions as well as the forces, convoys and installations of the Global Coalition Against ISIS. In addition, Arab and European foreign missions, convoys and facilities, the offices of the United Nations and the World Food Program as well as the convoys of oil companies in multiple geographic locations across Iraq were all targeted.

The number of attacks using Katyusha rockets and unmanned aircraft in the first quarter of 2020 against US, foreign and UN targets

reached 11. The attacks during the second quarter of 2020 nearly doubled, specifically reaching 19 attacks. In the third quarter of 2020, the attacks surged to 27.

Moreover, the attacks using IEDs on US and UN convoys and trucks rose from 14 attacks in the first quarter of the year to nearly 27 attacks in the second quarter of 2020. In August and September 2020 alone – only two months – the attacks rose to 49 (24 attacks in August and 25 attacks in September 2020), [according to a report by the Washington Institute](#).

As for the covert motives, they are connected to the views of experts in the Trump administration. They fear a Benghazi type scenario repeating itself, when the US consulate was attacked in 2012. This is in addition to the famous 1980s hostage crisis situation repeating itself, which was among the reasons behind Jimmy Carter's failure to win a second presidential term, which was won by his rival Ronald Reagan.

Iran could incite its proxies in Iraq to seize the US embassy and take hostages to diminish Trump's chances in the coming elections and boost the chances of the Democratic candidate Joe Biden. Iran hopes to return to the nuclear deal and find a solution to the tough sanctions imposed on it which have caused Iran to lose, according to the remarks of President Hassan Rouhani, [nearly \\$150 billion](#).

Therefore, it seems that the Trump administration wanted to act proactively to thwart any scheme against the US mission in Iraq and to protect it by threatening to shut down the embassy.

However, several Iranian columnists believe that, to the contrary, Iran is not interested in provoking the US administration on the Iraqi scene. It does not want the US administration to have an excuse to carry out military strikes against Tehran and its proxies, giving Trump an electoral triumph over his Democratic rival Joe Biden in the coming

presidential elections.

II- Iraqi Efforts to Manage the Crisis

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi's government undertook several actions to prevent Iraq transforming into an arena of direct conflict between the United States and Iran and to prevent the Iraqi scene from returning to square one. He held a quartet meeting with the president of the republic, the Parliament speaker and the Supreme Judiciary Council, the outcome of which reiterated the necessity of moving ahead on the path of transitioning towards the phase where weapons would be limited to the state, and the presence of armed militias in key locations in Iraq would be reduced. He called for the government's efforts to safeguard Iraqi security and stability and statehood to be supported.

Among the most notable security initiatives was the order to close down the offices of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) at Baghdad International Airport. Kazemi also dismissed two heavyweight PMU commanders affiliated with Al-Khorasani Brigades: Hamed al-Jazaeri and Wa'ad al-Qado. They were accused of killing dozens of protesters, and the latter was placed on the US terrorism blacklist. This removal was an attempt to change the despised PMU figures, and to ease tensions with the United States.

Kazemi also issued orders to the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) to carry out inspections across the capital Baghdad to arrest those firing rockets towards the Green Zone. The move aimed to prevent armed attacks and to provide a security umbrella to foreign missions. Kazemi also intensified security measures in the Green Zone and instructed Iraq's security agencies to tackle armed militias.

Kazemi did not limit himself to these domestic actions to prevent the escalation of militia attacks targeting US interests. Moreover, he dispatched Iraqi Foreign Minister Fouad Hossein on September 26,

2020 to Iran. The visit, according to observers, was conducted to convince Iran to pressure its armed militias to stop the attacks targeting foreign diplomatic missions, as Iran is the number one financier and sponsor of the armed militias targeting US interests.

In addition, Iraqi President Barham Salih held a [meeting](#) with the leaders of the Shiite blocs and parties to inform them of the US threats. They include: First: the closure of the US embassy in case US targets come under armed attack. This could turn Iraq into a country that is hostile to the United States. Also 12 other embassies decided to shut down their headquarters in solidarity with the United States. This could lead to Iraq's total international isolation, according to the remarks of Salih.

Second: to assassinate Shiite leaders and commanders of Shiite factions, as was the case with Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Third: to carry out airstrikes on the positions of armed militias until they are destroyed.

In this context, some media sources revealed that Washington informed Baghdad that it would [attack 120 positions](#) in case US targets come under further armed attack and US nationals are killed.

Fourth: to end the revenue streams of some politicians engaged or involved in the attacks undertaken by armed militias targeting US interests and to sue them abroad.

In the aftermath of Salih's meeting and his warning of US threats, including a military response, some sudden changes were made within the ranks of the Iran-aligned militias and alliances in Iraq. They did not wait too long to announce that they reject any attacks on diplomatic missions, fearing for their political future in Iraq. Hadi al-Amiri, Nouri al-Maliki and Falih al-Fayyadh, [in a joint press conference](#), condemned the attacks on foreign missions using unprecedented rheto-

ric for the Iraqi street. This was a surprising move as experts and specialists had concluded that the Iraqi public would only hear hostile language against the United States from Iran-backed militia leaders, with mounting accusations levelled against Washington on the Iraqi scene.

Furthermore, the Hezbollah Brigades and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, working under the umbrella of the PMU, once glamorized armed attacks against US targets in Iraq.

But the changes mentioned in the ranks of the militias and alliances aligned with Iran did not happen independently of Iraq's eastern neighbor. Tehran controls the positions and movements of militias and their commanders in Iraq, asking them to move or freeze whenever it wants. No position can be announced without coordinating with the commanders of the Revolutionary Guards. The militias are ideologically linked and aligned with the Qom seminary. The IRGC has condemned the attacks on [diplomatic missions](#) in Iraq and called on the Kazemi government to intensify measures to prevent such attacks being repeated.

III- The Potential Consequences for Iraq in Case the US Embassy is Shut Down

Despite the benefits of the US threat in terms of pressuring the Iraqi government to step up measures to limit weapons to the state, it poses several disastrous dangers and challenges for the Iraqi government as follows:

1- **Instigating conflict:** the US threat to close the embassy poses a huge challenge to Kazemi. He wants to limit arms to the state and curb armed militias without a military operation which could trigger street and sectarian conflict which could destroy Iraq. If Kazemi undertook the military option to curb the militias, they would likely respond harshly to the operation on Iranian orders. This could be

detrimental to Iraq's security and lead to the collapse of the Kazemi government, which took bold and unprecedented steps in this respect. Also, time is not Kazemi's side as there are calls from political activists to take to the streets again.

2- Thwarting attempts to transition toward statehood: when the US embassy is shut down, Iran and its regional proxies, via their media platforms, will proclaim that it has achieved a huge political and propaganda victory by forcing the United States to shut down its diplomatic headquarters in Iraq. This shall undermine the efforts undertaken by Kazemi to tighten the noose around armed militias, transition towards statehood and end the stateless phase. The might, clout and control of armed militias would become stronger over state apparatuses, steering the government's decision-making at home and abroad.

If the US embassy closes, it will be a disastrous decision for Iraq, the scope and impact will be greater than Barack Obama's decision in 2011 to withdraw troops from Iraq. That decision led to the rise of ISIS, the resurgence of several other terrorist organizations and operations, and the creation of more pro-Iran armed militias on the Iraqi scene. The militias took control of large swathes of Iraq, which strengthened Iranian influence in Iraq and Syria.

Yet, this threat will also make Kazemi feel that the United States has not recognized the achievements of the Iraqi government.

The government has taken a number of strong and unprecedented measures since it took office against Iran's proxies in Iraq, such as arresting Hezbollah affiliates, sacking Falih al-Fayyadh as a national security adviser, tightening control over the Iraqi-Iranian borders and issuing orders obliging all foreign military officials and diplomats to enter Iraq with visas, a decision which mainly targeted Iranian military officials.

3- Isolating Iraq internationally: the closure of the US embassy will not be limited to US diplomatic and military operations ending in Iraq. But several countries are likely to take similar steps. This was plainly [stated](#) by Kazemi in a cabinet meeting on September 29, 2020, saying that ongoing attacks targeting foreign diplomatic missions prompted them to consider closing their offices, on top of them comes the United States and the European Union.

On September 18, 2020, 18 European and Western countries expressed concern about the series of attacks waged by militias targeting foreign interests and targets in Iraq.

It is also expected that all the operations of the international coalition would stop and several foreign powers would take steps similar to the United States in case it happens, as these powers centrally depend on the US presence in Iraq, except Russia and China.

This would impact the security and economic situation in Iraq as it would end the economic cooperation between Iraq and these countries considering the delicate circumstances which the country is facing as it needs foreign support.

If the US does close its embassy, this move will reduce the chances of ensuring Iraq reaches a safe position, and will not help the United States at the strategic or the tactical level.

4- The possibility of triggering conflict between the United States and Iraq on Iraqi soil: the US threat makes Iraq susceptible to facing a potentially disastrous scenario if the move is a prelude to a series of intensified US airstrikes targeting the positions of armed militias in the country. This could turn Iraq into a genuine battleground to settle scores between the United States and Iran since the United States could seize the opportunity to secure sweeping victories against Iran before the coming elections to make up for the setbacks it has suffered in other files such as managing the coronavirus crisis, racism

and the standoff with China. However, Iran is aware of this and wants to deprive the US administration of this opportunity.

IV- Evolving Developments in the Iraqi Arena

The foregoing paints a clear picture about the level and gravity of the threats posed by Iran-backed militias to US targets. This comes at an extremely sensitive time for the US administration ahead of the presidential elections, where the US administration does not want Iran to repeat the scenario of besieging the US embassy in Baghdad.

There are two possible scenarios that could evolve on the Iraqi scene in the coming period which will see the US presidential elections being held in November 2020 and Iraqi movements to hold early polls in 2021:

The first scenario: moving ahead with the threat to close the US embassy to avoid a hostage situation being repeated. This scenario is unlikely because the decision to close down the US embassy could mark, after the decision to reduce the number of US troops in Iraq from 5,500 to 3,000, the start of a disastrous scenario and lead to the US settling scores with Iran on the Iraqi scene.

But both Washington and Tehran understand a war in Iraq will not be a picnic. They cannot determine which party will benefit, nor can they determine its timeframe. A war will also be costly for all parties.

Yet, the US embassy in Iraq is considered to be a massive military base which includes thousands of marines, hosts many Patriot batteries, an airport and radars covering not only Baghdad but also large parts of the Iraqi state. Hence, there is no US benefit to close the embassy given the fact that Iran will be the winner as it knows well how to take control of empty spaces where there is no influence. Therefore, the US threat could be a maneuver to test the seriousness of Iraq when it comes to the issue of driving out US troops as well as limiting weapons to the state.

In addition, the firing of six rockets at Erbil Airport on September 30 by armed militias aligned with Iran sends a message to Washington that the Katyusha rockets can hit US targets anywhere on Iraqi soil. This prompted the US administration to back down from the idea of moving the US embassy to another location on Iraqi soil.

The second scenario: keeping the US embassy open or closing its doors temporarily until security measures in the Green Zone and its vicinity are strengthened to repel any future attacks. This is in addition to carrying out limited-scale strikes targeting pro-Iran armed militias. This is a likely scenario as the United States administration is aware of the dangers of leaving a vacuum for its arch-foe and does not want to give a strong lever to the Democrats. This is because it is likely that the Democrats will promote the move as a US failure under the Trump administration to curb Iran, possibly throwing their country into a war in which it will not make any strategic gains. This has resulted in the US administration strongly supporting the government of Kazemi in order to counter the out-of-control militias.

In the end, it seems that for Iraq the dangers posed by the threat surpass the benefits as the country shall be the biggest loser if this move happens. With all its capabilities and opportunities available, the Kazemi government has been endeavoring to restore Iraq's sovereign statehood. Though the Kazemi government has not achieved much in curbing Iran-backed militias in Iraq, Washington should reconsider the threat to shut down the embassy and stand by Iraq to render the efforts of Kazemi successful, especially since Washington possesses a protection umbrella capable of protecting its embassy, as was the case when the embassy was besieged by pro-Iran elements in September 2019.

Meanwhile, we believe that the US decision to close its embassy in Baghdad will not bring any benefit to Iraq. But the Iraqi govern-

ment should seize the opportunity and swiftly move to display its seriousness when it comes to limiting arms to the state and curbing the militias that are undermining the security and sovereignty of Iraq. At the same time, it is not easy to expect good results to be achieved in relation to these issues in the foreseeable future due to Iran's considerable influence within Iraq.



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