

# Iraqis and the Closure of the American Embassy: A Race Against Time

by [Munqith Dagher \(/experts/munqith-dagher\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Munqith Dagher \(/experts/munqith-dagher\)](#)

Dr. Munqith Dagher is MENA director and a board member of Gallup International. Dr. Dagher is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



## Brief Analysis

Whether or not the decision is made to actually close the embassy, what is certain is that the American administration with its warning that it may do so has sent a strong message to the Iraqi government and the forces of the political process in Iraq. It alerts Iraqis that Americans' patience has run out regarding the continued strikes against the embassy and other American and Western interests in Iraq, and that Americans are no longer willing to refrain from responding. The evening of September 27 was a dry run to test Iraqi political and popular reactions to the American escalation attempt signaled by the administration over the past few days.

Iraqi media sites and platforms lit up with reports of the departure of the ambassador to Baghdad and the closure of the embassy. Speculation reached the point that some anticipated an announcement by President Trump—in his extraordinary press briefing on the evening of Sunday, September 27—of a concrete decision to close the embassy, attack the Iran-backed militias, or even impose sanctions on Iraq like those imposed on Iran.

Although Trump's press conference ended without even a mention of Iraq, political elites and grassroots activists in Iraq remain very concerned about the possible closure of the embassy and the consequences, which may not be limited to attacking sites and leaders of the Shia militias but could also extend to placing Iraq under U.S. sanctions. This reminds Iraqis of what may have been the worst nightmare they have experienced in the modern era: the economic embargo that consumed the twelve years prior to the fall of the former Saddam regime.

The mere hint of this possibility has created a massive wave of panic in Iraq even though this option would not be in America's interest, because it would basically entail America permanently giving up on Iraq. This would certainly mean the loss of everything America has invested in Iraq over the previous decades. Thus, the reason for Iraqis' panic over this possibility is the brutal economic and political sanctions they experienced in all aspects of life.

This is particularly true, knowing that Iraq is no longer like it was in the 1990s, when it had a manufacturing and agricultural base that doubtless enabled the country to adapt somewhat to the consequences of the embargo. Iraq is now much weaker economically than it was in the 1990s. Likewise, Iraqis concerned about Iran's dominance over Iraq's fate fear that such a decision by the United States would equate Iraq with Iran and end any hope they have of

improving their situation and reclaiming their sovereignty, which is largely controlled by the latter. This is another nightmare no less terrifying than the nightmare of the economic and political embargo of the 1990s.

Just as the 1980s and 1990s led to the first wave of Iraqi immigration, and the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century created a wave of displacement and a second massive exodus, the possible imposition of new American sanctions on Iraq will doubtless lead to a third wave of Iraqi immigration that may equal that caused by ISIS's occupation of Sunni regions in 2014. This, along with the probability of political and social chaos caused by the deterioration of the economic and political situation, may lead to the secession of certain parts of Iraq, most notably Kurdistan, followed by the Sunni areas.

According to information coming from Washington, the American decision to close the embassy, if not yet actually taken, is ready. The most likely possibility is that this decision will lead to the withdrawal of all American diplomats and contractors from Baghdad and all areas under militia control so as to minimize possible losses if the United States decides to attack those militias. It appears that the Americans assume that such attacks launched by American forces will be privately welcomed by certain Iraqi parties and overlooked by others, including official Iraqi parties. And after the recent missile attack on the Harir base in Erbil—which was intended to deliver a message that the Americans will not be safe from militia fire even if they leave Baghdad—removing the Americans present in Iraq from any potential danger will be a top priority before the U.S. army takes military action.

The easiest and best solution to avoid this scenario now appears to be for the government of Iraq to assert control over the militias and their weapons and to stop attacks on American interests. Although this may seem difficult in light of the limited capabilities available to Kadhimi in eliminating these militias, the following factors may greatly benefit him in his confrontation with the militias if he is serious about it:

1. The religious authority in Najaf supports this approach, especially with the statement issued by Sistani's office a few weeks ago after his meeting with Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Iraq.
2. Kadhimi continues to enjoy strong popularity, with the most recent opinion poll indicating that about 80% of Iraqis, including 70% of Shia, have a very favorable opinion of him. At the same time, polls show major weakness in the popularity of those militias in the Shia areas.
3. America and the international community support the need to eliminate the influence of the militias in Iraq, especially after their attacks have extended to striking diplomatic missions and other non-American interests. If the current U.S. administration switches, Kadhimi faces an unknown new administration, further complicating current efforts to build American support.

The time factor favors the militias over Kadhimi and his government, and any delay in making a crucial decision vis-à-vis these militias may cause the Americans to move militarily to take the initiative. If this happens, the likelihood of the political and economic chaos in Iraq is very high, and it will be difficult to stop its dangerous repercussions.

Moreover, reality indicates that if this possibility occurs, it will lead to Iran activating all its media, political, and military levers within Iraq, thus putting Kadhimi between the American hammer and the Iranian anvil—making it difficult for him to support or ignore the American attacks. If he is forced to repudiate these attacks and demand they stop, Kadhimi runs the risk of angering the Trump administration and causing it to place Iraq in the same basket with Iran.

What may make matters worse is the possible response of the militias and their military supporters to the American attacks, which may compel the United States to send more troops, thus creating major complications for a potential incoming Democratic White House. Consequently, the prospects for fixing the situation with America after Biden's victory (for which the Iranians and their proxies in Iraq hope) will be very complex and difficult in practice, which

heralds the prospect of a long military and political confrontation between America and Iran on Iraqi soil; Iraq will enter a long, dark tunnel. ❖

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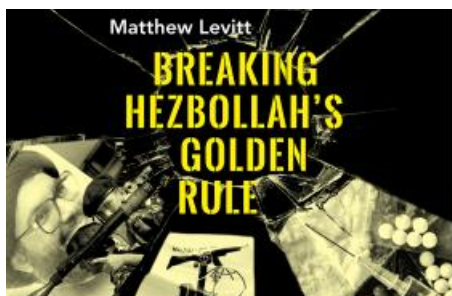
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