

Washington Should Reverse Its Retreat in Basra

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Brief Analysis

The shuttering of a vital U.S. diplomatic outpost in Iraq sends all the wrong signals about America's resolve to push back against Iran's malign activities.

On September 28, the State Department ordered the temporary closure of its consulate in the oil-rich southern Iraqi province of Basra after the complex was targeted by rocket fire. The move was puzzling given that Consulate General Basra was specifically designed to resist such attacks. More troubling, it sends exactly the wrong message to both Iran and U.S. allies about the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran, suggesting that Washington may not be willing to weather even minimal Iranian retaliation. In addition to discouraging allies, such a message invites further attacks, potentially compounding America's frequent failure to respond when Iran or its proxies target U.S. facilities.

ATTACKS ON U.S. DIPLOMATIC FACILITIES

On September 7, Iraqi youths looted and burned down Tehran's consulate in Basra and the local offices of the Iranian-supported Shia militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq. Since then, Tehran's militia proxies have harassed and threatened U.S. diplomats with a string of rocket attacks:

- On September 7-8, three 107 mm rockets and one 122 mm rocket were fired from east Baghdad toward the capital's U.S. embassy facilities. The rockets landed well short of the large complex, an unusual lack of accuracy that suggests they were meant as a warning.
- On September 8, two salvos of 107 mm rockets were fired at the consulate in Basra, located adjacent to the international airport. Both of them landed long of the airport, again indicating a warning shot.
- On September 28, three more 107 mm rockets were fired toward the Basra consulate. Two of them struck the

consulate's property, albeit causing no damage or casualties.

Just hours after the last strike, Washington announced its intention to temporarily suspend operations in Basra and withdraw its diplomatic staff. The State Department also updated its travel advisory for Iraq, urging Americans not to go there and reiterating its warning that "U.S. citizens in Iraq are at high risk for violence and kidnapping."

REWARDS OF STAYING IN BASRA OUTWEIGH RISKS

The closure of Consulate General Basra was no doubt spurred by an understandable abundance of caution about protecting U.S. personnel. Iranian-backed militias are growing stronger in the area every day, heightening the risk of kidnapping and making it more difficult for consular staff to engage with Iraqi stakeholders. The risk of regular rocket strikes or even assaults by militia-backed protestors is also real. Iraqi security forces may prove unwilling to defend the consulate against the latter threat, much as they allowed rioters to overrun Iran's Basra consulate on June 7 and Turkey's Mosul consulate in 2014, among other such incidents.

Yet none of these risks seems like sufficient reason to shutter the Basra consulate, since each of them can be mitigated or eliminated. Kidnappings can be prevented by temporarily locking the consulate down and holding events inside it or nearby—for instance, elsewhere inside the airport complex, which has its own perimeter defenses and access controls. Unlike the overrun Iranian and Turkish consulates, the U.S. facility in Basra is located well outside the city, and within an airport complex whose defenses can be temporarily bolstered by elite Iraqi forces (e.g., the Counter-Terrorism Service, or quick-reaction troops from the Basra Operations Command). Testing the Iraqi government's willingness to offer such protection would seem more appropriate than ordering the withdrawal of all U.S. personnel. Evacuation should only be considered if the environment is wildly unstable and the host government is completely unable or unwilling to afford enhanced security, which does not appear to be the case at present.

Furthermore, although rocket attacks are obviously unsettling, the Basra consulate was specifically designed—at huge cost to U.S. taxpayers—to continue operating under such harassing fire. American and British personnel were stationed near Basra airport for over ten years, weathering periods when up to forty projectiles per night were landing on or near them. They held the Basra post through thick and thin to show that Iraq's coalition partners would not be intimidated into abandoning the city to militias. Now, however, five rockets in a month have sent America packing.

Even if one discounts the weighty symbolic implications, continued closure of the consulate will have serious operational consequences, ultimately costing the United States—and U.S. businesses—dearly in lost political and economic opportunities at a vital moment. Last month, Iraqis in Basra showed their anger at Iran by attacking its prominent downtown consulate, long a symbol of the Islamic Republic's brashness in a city that suffered the brunt of the Iran-Iraq War. Yet instead of demonstrating commitment to the poor, angry people of Basra, Washington is allowing itself to be bullied into withdrawal. U.S. diplomacy was just beginning to gain traction there under the energetic and highly effective consul general, Timmy Davis. If the consulate is not reopened soon, Washington will essentially be helping Tehran strengthen its hand in one of the world's most hydrocarbon-rich locales, making Basra the perfect incubator for oil-siphoning Iranian militias bent on exerting their wealth and power.

The Basra consulate is also vital to growing U.S. energy investment in southern Iraq. After a slow start, companies such as Chevron, ExxonMobil, GE, and Orion Gas are scaling up their interest in winning billions of dollars' worth of local business, and representatives from the consulate are expected to attend a major Basra investment conference in Istanbul on October 9-10. Surrendering these opportunities to Chinese, Iranian, and Russian companies would be terrible given the \$1.5 trillion America spent in Iraq prior to its 2011 military withdrawal. Yet that is exactly what might happen if U.S. diplomats are evacuated at the first whiff of trouble. In contrast, returning the Basra consulate

to full operation would send a powerful message of reassurance to U.S. businesses who are already wary about investing in Iraq.

Moreover, American firms are leading the effort to redirect the massive amount of natural gas Iraq wastes via flaring. Apart from helping Baghdad meet peak summer power demands, using this gas would reduce the \$100 million per month that Iraq spends on Iranian gas—payments that have been diverted (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-irgc-may-try-to-divert-iraqs-electricity-payments>) to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah in the past.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The State Department should work quickly to extract firm guarantees from the newly formed Iraqi government on additional security for the Basra consulate, the airport, and the eastern marsh areas frequently used for launching rockets. It should also engage outgoing prime minister Haider al-Abadi and incoming prime minister Adil Abdulmahdi on efforts to ensure that American personnel will be safe from kidnapping. With these guarantees in hand, Washington should quickly announce the return of its diplomats to Basra.

If the U.S. government has broader concerns about the cost-effectiveness of its presence in Basra, that issue should be separated from how it reacts to Iranian-backed intimidation. A lighter or otherwise altered footprint may be justified, but this is not the time to withdraw. If necessary, consular staff can operate temporarily as a skeleton crew, maintaining a lower profile on the ground while conducting a loud public relations effort to underline American commitment to Basra. The United States spends over \$250 million per year on this strategic, under-utilized consulate, but the cost could be earned back tenfold if a U.S. energy company wins even a single midsize infrastructure project.

More important, a whole-of-government American presence in Basra would deny Iran a propaganda victory there, counter its local influence, and reduce the money it reaps from gas exports to Iraq. If Washington is serious about pressuring Tehran, it needs to show that the United States can weather retaliation. Otherwise it will send a clear signal to Iraqis, Iranians, and other Middle Easterners—hostile and sympathetic actors alike—that America is vulnerable to intimidation.

Michael Knights, a senior fellow with The Washington Institute, has spent extended periods at the Basra airport complex and worked in the province for over a decade. ❖

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