

# U.S. orders staff to leave Iraq Embassy

Trump administration says it has intelligence that Iranian activity puts facilities and personnel at risk

EDWARD WONG  
WASHINGTON

The State Department ordered a partial evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on Wednesday, responding to what the Trump administration said was a threat linked to Iran, one that has led to an accelerated movement of U.S. ships and bombers into the Gulf.

The department ordered “non-emergency U.S. government employees”, at both the Embassy in Baghdad and the Consulate in Irbil, to leave the country. The order applies primarily to full-time diplomats posted to Iraq by State Department headquarters in Washington, and an Embassy statement said that visa services in Iraq would be suspended as a result. Contractors who provide security, food and other services will remain in place for now.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week that the administration had received intelligence related to “Iranian activity” that put U.S. facilities and service personnel at “substantial risk”. Other American officials have said the same piece of intelligence points to potential attacks by Shia Arab militias tied to Iran against U.S. troops in Iraq or Syria.



**Risk assessment:** The U.S. flag being raised during a ceremony to mark the opening of the Embassy in Baghdad in 2009. •AP

Iraqi officials have voiced scepticism about the threat described by the Americans, and on Tuesday, so did the British deputy commander of the U.S.-led coalition fighting the Islamic State (IS).

**No increased threat** “No, there’s been no increased threat from Iranian-backed forces in Iraq and Syria,” Maj. Gen. Chris Ghika, speaking from Baghdad, told reporters at the Pentagon by video link. There are threats in the region to U.S. and coalition forces, he said, referring to “non-compliant actors” among the militias, but “there always have been”.

The Pentagon’s Central Command released a statement saying General Ghika’s comments “run counter to the identified credible threats available to intelligence from the U.S. and allies regarding Iranian backed forces in the region,” and that as a result, U.S. forces in Iraq were “now at a high level of alert”.

Mr. Pompeo made a surprise visit to Baghdad on May 7 to brief Iraqi leaders about the threat.

On May 5, John Bolton, the National Security Adviser, issued a statement warning against any attack by the Iranian military or a “proxy” against U.S. interests or allies. Mr. Bolton said the U.S. was sending the *USS Abraham Lincoln* carrier strike group and bombers to the Gulf. Other officials later said the strike group’s movement to that area had been previously scheduled and was merely being sped up.

**Rising tensions** On Friday, the Pentagon said it was sending another ship and a Patriot anti-missile battery to West Asia.

The order for a partial evacuation of the Baghdad Embassy, which at the height of the Iraq War was the largest in the U.S. diplomatic system, adds to the rising tensions between the U.S. and Iran. It is unclear when the employees being evacuated will be told they can return. In September, Mr. Pompeo ordered a full withdrawal from the American Consulate in Basra, in southern Iraq, after a few rockets landed around the grounds of the city’s airport, where the consulate is. The rockets did not cause any injuries.

The Trump administration blamed Shia militias tied to Iran for the rocket attacks in Basra. NY TIMES

# Facebook to curb livestreaming

Company to ban users who share extremist content

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
PARIS

Facebook said on Wednesday that it would tighten access to its livestreaming feature as New Zealand’s Premier Jacinda Ardern and French leader Emmanuel Macron launched the ‘Christchurch Call’ initiative to tackle the spread of extremism online.

Facebook boss Mark Zuckerberg has been under intense pressure since March, when a white supremacist gunman used Facebook Live to stream his rampage at two mosques in the New Zealand city of Christchurch, which left 51 people dead.

The California-based platform said it would ban Facebook Live users who shared extremist content and seek to reinforce its own internal controls to stop the spread of offensive videos.

**New Zealand attacks** “Following the horrific recent terrorist attacks in New Zealand, we’ve been reviewing what more we can do to limit our services from being used to cause harm or spread hate,” Facebook vice-president of integrity Guy Rosen said in a statement.



Facebook was under intense pressure after Christchurch attacks. •REUTERS

In Wednesday’s statement, Facebook acknowledged the inadequacy of its own systems. “One of the challenges we faced in the days after the attack was a proliferation of many different variants of the video of the attack,” Mr. Rosen said.

The announcement came as leaders of Britain, Canada, Ireland, Senegal, Indonesia and Norway met in Paris as part of the backers of the ‘Christchurch Call’.

# Xi Jinping rejects ‘clash of civilisations’ theory

Chinese President says a global community with a shared future is possible

ATUL ANEJA  
BEIJING

China’s President Xi Jinping on Wednesday debunked the “clash of civilisations” theory, and appealed for harmonious dialogue and coexistence between civilisations.

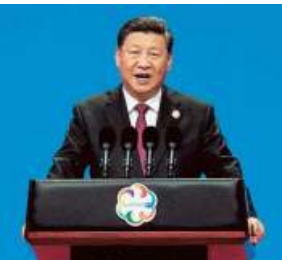
Without naming the U.S., President Xi, in his address at the maiden conference on Asian Civilizations Dialogue, advocated equality, and rejected superiority of the U.S.-led West.

“If someone thinks their own race and civilisation is superior and insists on remoulding or replacing other civilisations, it would be a stupid idea and disastrous

act,” Mr. Xi said. “We should hold up equality and respect, abandon pride and prejudice, deepen our knowledge about the differences between our own and other civilisations, and promote harmonious dialogue and coexistence between civilisations.”

Rejecting isolationism, Mr. Xi stressed that, “If countries retreat to secluded islands, human civilisation will die out because of a lack of exchanges.”

**Rebuttal to U.S.** The Chinese President’s remarks roundly rebutted recent assertions by some U.S. officials who have stressed



Chinese President Xi Jinping. •AFP

the emergence of a deep civilisational and race-based rift between China and the U.S. A fortnight ago, State Department director of policy planning Kiron Skinner called the U.S.-China competition as “a fight with a really different civilisation and a different ideology”.

Ms. Skinner spotlighted that, for the first time, the U.S. had faced a “great power competitor that is not Caucasian”. The back-and-forth between China and the U.S. adds a layer of cultural rivalry, to the escalating trade between the world’s largest and second largest economy. “Various civilisations are not destined to clash,” Mr. Xi observed.

He pointed out that a global “community with a shared future” is possible based on inter-civilisational exchanges. But he stressed that these exchanges should neither be compulsory, forced, or one-directional.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MIAMI

The Alabama Senate has passed the most restrictive abortion Bill in the U.S., which places a near-total ban on the termination of pregnancy – even in cases of rape and incest – and could punish doctors who perform the procedure with life in prison.

The text passed by the Republican-led Senate on Tuesday has been sent to Governor Kay Ivey’s desk for signature into law and, if approved, is expected to trigger a legal battle. Under the Bill, performing an abortion is a crime that could land doctors who perform it in

prison for 10 to 99 years. Abortions would only be legal if the life of the mother is in danger or the foetus has a fatal condition. The largest human rights defence organisation in the United States, the ACLU, promised to file a lawsuit to block its implementation.

The Republican-led Senate approved the measure by 25 votes to six on Tuesday. Governor Ivey has not yet said whether she will sign the Bill.

Unlike the doctors carrying out the procedures, women who undergo abortions would not be prosecuted. Attempts to introduce an amendment providing ex-



A pro-abortion demonstration in Washington in January. •AFP

ceptions for pregnancies conceived due to rape or incest were shut down by the State Senate. The Bill’s backers have expressly said they

want to bring the case to the Supreme Court. Now that the top U.S. court has a conservative majority in the wake of President Donald Trump’s election, some Republicans want to overturn the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* ruling that recognised women’s right to abortion.

Several other conservative States are weighing or have recently implemented harsh anti-abortion laws.

The Governor of the U.S. State of Georgia last week signed into law a ban on abortion from the moment a foetal heartbeat is detected, becoming the sixth U.S. State to outlaw abortion after six weeks of gestation.

## ELSEWHERE



### Sri Lanka lifts travel ban on British husband

COLOMBO Britisher Khilan Chandaria, whose Indian-origin bride Usheila Patel died while they were on their honeymoon in Sri Lanka, was allowed to return home after a court lifted a travel ban on Wednesday. The inquest into the death will resume in August, officials said. •AFP

### Xi agreed to meet Dalai Lama in New Delhi: book

BEIJING Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed to meet the Dalai Lama during a 2014 visit to India but a “cautious” New Delhi did not allow it to happen, a new book claimed. “...President Xi Jinping agreed, but the Indian government was cautious... so it didn’t happen,” according to excerpts from a book by author Sonia Singh published on Wednesday. •AFP

# China to assist Sri Lanka in its anti-terror efforts

Xi, Sirisena discuss ‘security cooperation’

MEERA SRINIVASAN  
COLOMBO

Chinese President Xi Jinping has promised “all possible assistance” to Sri Lanka – from defence cooperation to intelligence sharing – for the island’s efforts to “strengthen national security by wiping out terrorism”, according to sources here.

President Maithripala Sirisena, currently in Beijing for an international conference, met Mr. Xi on Tuesday. “He [Mr. Xi] said that China is always ready to go hand in hand with Sri Lanka, which is recovering after effectively facing the challenge of terrorism, adding that the Chinese government will provide any assistance to Sri Lanka at any time,” the Presidential Media Division said.

As requested by Mr. Sirisena, China will provide a



Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena. •AP

grant of LKR 2,600 million towards strengthening Sri Lankan Security Forces, besides providing 100 jeeps and other equipment costing LKR 1,500 million to Sri Lanka Police.

Further, responding to Mr. Sirisena’s concern over Sri Lanka “lacking technological expertise and equipment to trace the individuals who fan the flames of terrorism”, Mr. Xi has offered to send a Chinese technical team to Sri Lanka soon to assist authorities.

# Night curfew reimposed in some areas

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka’s police arrested over 100 suspects and reimposed night curfew in violence-prone areas on Wednesday after anti-Muslim riots left one man dead and caused damage to homes and businesses.

Police spokesman Ruwan Gunasekera said 78 people arrested in the worst-affected North-Western Province were remanded in custody on Wednesday, while the rest were detained after a manhunt in other areas.

Mr. Gunasekera said a night curfew was being reimposed in the North-Western Province, just north of the capital, as well as the adjoining Gampaha district, which shares a border with Colombo, as a measure to “maintain peace”.

# Brexit Bill to be tabled before MPs in June

As things stand, the legislation looks set to be defeated in Parliament, again

VIDYA RAM  
LONDON

British Prime Minister Theresa May is set for a new political showdown in Parliament as MPs across the political spectrum expressed their intention to oppose her Brexit plans, when she attempts to gain their support through legislation set to be put to MPs in early June.

On Tuesday evening, following the latest instalment of cross-party talks with the Labour Party, Ms. May said she plans to bring forward the Withdrawal Agreement Bill in the week commencing June 3, thereby setting a tangible deadline for the talks that have continued with little outcome so far.

The date of early June has been set to enable the U.K. to leave the European Union



British Prime Minister Theresa May. •AFP

(EU) before the start of the summer recess were the legislation to pass.

It is a high-risk strategy: should the Bill be rejected at the second reading, the legislation could not be put to MPs again within the current Parliament. As things currently stand, the legislation looks set to be defeated. Opposition comes from across the parties. The Labour Party insists that for the legislation to be acceptable, it must include its demands for customs union membership and strong guarantees around environmental protections and workers’ rights.

Pro-‘Remain’ parties such as the Scottish National Party (SNP), Change UK, Liberal Democrats and Greens wouldn’t back anything unless it included a specific promise for a second referendum. There is also pressure on Labour to insist on a second referendum.

### Cross-party talks

While the government has sought to put a positive spin on the cross-party talks, Labour’s take on them has been far more sceptical, with

senior figures repeatedly expressing their concerns that the government isn’t willing to compromise. They are also concerned that should Ms. May be replaced, her successor might not live up to the commitments made.

At the other end of the spectrum are Conservative and Democratic Unionist Party MPs unhappy with the backstop arrangements to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland.

Losing again could prove disastrous for Ms. May, already under heavy pressure to step down and make way for a successor. She is set to meet with the 1922 Committee of backbench Conservative MPs on Thursday, where the issue of succession and her date of departure are likely to dominate.