

US pulls nonessential staff from Iraq

By **JON GAMBRELL**
and **PHILIP ISSA**
Associated Press

BAGHDAD — The U.S. on Wednesday ordered all nonessential government staff to leave Iraq, and Germany and the Netherlands both suspended their military assistance programs in the country in the latest sign of tensions sweeping the Persian Gulf region over still-unspecified threats that the Trump administration says are linked to Iran.

Recent days have seen allegations of sabotage targeting oil tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, a drone attack by Yemen’s Iranian-allied Houthi rebels, and the dispatch of U.S. warships and bombers to the region.

At the root of this appears to be President Donald Trump’s decision a year ago to pull the U.S. from Iran’s nuclear deal with world powers, embarking on a maximalist sanctions campaign against Tehran. In response, Iran’s supreme leader issued a veiled threat Tuesday, saying it wouldn’t be difficult for the Islamic Republic to enrich uranium to weapons-grade levels.

The movement of diplomatic personnel is often done in times of conflict, but what is driving the decisions from the White House remains unclear. A high-ranking British general said there was no new threat from Iran or its regional proxies, something immediately rebutted by the U.S. military’s Central Command, which said its troops were on high alert, without elaborating.

Last week, U.S. officials said they had detected signs of Iranian preparations for potential attacks on U.S. forces and interests in the Middle East, but Washington has not spelled out that threat.

An alert on the website of



Darion Chanelle Triplett/U.S. Navy

The Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group transits the Suez Canal in Egypt last week on its way to the Persian Gulf.

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad said all nonessential, nonemergency U.S. government staff were ordered to leave Iraq right away under State Department orders. That includes those working at the U.S. Consulate in Irbil. The U.S. Consulate in Basra has been closed since September following a rocket attack blamed on Iranian-backed militias.

The U.S. in recent days has ordered the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier strike group to the Gulf region, plus four B-52 bombers.

Germany’s military said it was suspending training of Iraqi soldiers due to the tensions, although there was no specific threat to its own troops in Iraq. Defense Ministry spokesman Jens Flossdorff said Germany was “orienting itself toward our partner countries” though there are “no concrete warnings of attacks against German targets.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s spokeswoman Ulrike Demmer expressed concern over the tensions and said it wel-

comes “any measure that is aimed at a peaceful solution.” Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Adebahr said the German government has not reduced its embassy staff in Iraq or Iran.

In the Netherlands, state broadcaster NOS said its 50-person military mission in Iraq was halted “until further orders,” quoting a Defense Ministry spokesman as saying he couldn’t elaborate on the threats. It said the Dutch forces primarily train Kurdish forces fighting the Islamic State militants.

The remarks about Iran’s nuclear program by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei came Tuesday night in Tehran at an iftar, the traditional dinner Muslims have when breaking their daily fast during Ramadan.

Tehran is threatening to resume higher enrichment on July 7 if no new nuclear deal is in place, beyond the 3.67% permitted by the current deal between Tehran and world powers.

Iranian officials have said that they could reach 20% enrichment within four

days. Though Iran maintains its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, scientists say the time needed to reach the 90% threshold for weapons-grade uranium is halved once uranium is enriched to around 20%.

“Achieving 20% enrichment is the most difficult part,” Khamenei said, according to the newspaper. “The next steps are easier than this step.”

It was a telling remark from the supreme leader — Iran is not known to have enriched beyond 20% previously and it’s unclear how far Tehran is willing to go in this process. Khamenei has final say on all matters of state in Iran.

On Tuesday, Yemen’s Iran-aligned Houthi rebels launched a coordinated drone attack on a critical oil pipeline in Saudi Arabia, Tehran’s biggest rival in the region. It was the latest incident to shake global energy markets, as authorities allege oil tankers anchored off the coast of the United Arab Emirates were targeted by sabotage.

Yemen’s Houthi rebels, who are at war with Saudi Arabia and are believed by the West to receive weapons from Iran, said they launched seven drones targeting vital

Saudi installations. That included two pumping stations along its critical East-West Pipeline, which can carry nearly 5 million barrels of crude a day to the Red Sea.

Anwar Gargash, the minister of foreign affairs for the United Arab Emirates, told reporters in Dubai that the Saudi-led coalition will “retaliate hard” for attacks on civilian targets, without elaborating.

Saudi Aramco, the government-controlled oil company, said it temporarily shut down the pipeline and contained a fire, which caused minor damage to one pumping station. It added that Saudi Aramco’s oil and gas supplies were unaffected.

Gargash said an investigation into the alleged ship sabotage would be completed in the coming days, with assistance from American and French investigators. He declined to directly blame Iran for the attack, though he repeatedly criticized Iran.

OBITUARY

James Ernest Petersen

Portland

Nov. 21, 1944 — March 18, 2019

Jim Petersen passed away peacefully at 7:35 a.m. Monday, March 18, 2019, at Providence Medical Center in Portland, Oregon.

He is survived by his sisters, Judy, of Lake Havasu, Arizona, and Joan, of Juneau, Alaska. He was preceded in death by his brother, Joseph.

Jim grew up in Astoria, and his friends knew him as “Big Pete.” During his time at Astoria High School (Class of 1962), he played football and also played trombone in the band.



James Petersen

Football kept his interest all of his life; he was a huge fan of both the Oregon Ducks and the Seattle Seahawks. When he wasn’t cheering on his teams, or jabbing at his buddies’ teams, Big Pete ran a successful delivery and repair business in the Portland area.

For friends and family who wish to say goodbye to him, please meet at noon on Saturday, June 22, at the Pilot Boat Peacock in front of the Columbia River Maritime Museum, 1792 Marine Drive in Astoria, Oregon.

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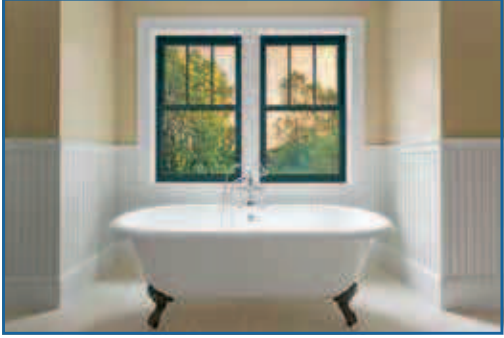


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