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U.S.-IRAN ESCALATION POSES DEADLY THREAT TO IRAQ'S CIVILIANS
EPIC advocates for economic recovery, security, and democratic reforms for Iraq

WASHINGTON, DC – The Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC) issued the following statement that can be attributed to Erik Gustafson, a U.S. Army Veteran and Executive Director of EPIC since 1995.

EPIC continues closely monitoring the troubling military escalation between the United States and Iran on Iraqi soil. EPIC believes the recent U.S. military actions in Iraq are destabilizing and dangerous. Iraq's nearly 40 million people need economic stability, security, and democratic reforms – not escalating violence.

Last night, U.S. military drones fired missiles at a convoy near Baghdad International Airport, killing senior Iranian commander Qasim Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Jamal Jafar Ibrahim (aka Abul Mahdi al-Muhandis). The U.S. considered both men to be terrorists. Within Iraq, many blamed the two men for enforcing Iranian influence through political corruption and carrying out severe human rights abuses, including the torture and killing of pro-democracy activists and the violent repression of protests. At the same time, many Iraqis also respect the two men for defending Iraq against ISIS after the fall of Mosul in 2014.

The U.S. airstrike follows the Trump administration's decision to abandon the Iran nuclear agreement (or JCPOA) and a long exchange of hostilities between the U.S. and Iran. Recent hostilities included the Dec. 28 rocket attack on an Iraqi base in Kirkuk, in which a U.S. contractor was killed, and the Dec. 30 retaliatory U.S. strikes targeting Kataib Hezbollah, the militia commanded by Soleimani and Muhandis believed behind the Dec. 28 rocket attack.

The people of Iraq and the future of their country are in grave peril.

First, the U.S. escalation undermines continued U.S.-Iraq security cooperation and the U.S.-led Coalition's military and intelligence support, all of which are essential to the enduring defeat of ISIS. Iraqi leaders, whether out of conviction or under pressure, have strongly condemned U.S. actions. A call by the Iraqi government for expulsion of U.S. forces will likely follow, threatening to further disrupt U.S.-Iraq cooperation vital to prevent a return of ISIS.

Second, the expansion of U.S. hostilities threatens to derail efforts to fundamentally reform Iraq's government and organize free and fair elections, following months of pro-democracy protests and unprecedented violence by Iraqi security forces and militias. Since Oct. 1, more than 500 protesters were killed and more than 20,000 were injured.

Third, innocent Iraqi lives are at stake. Because militias operate and store weapons in populated areas, further military attacks by any actor risks casualties among civilians and damage to essential infrastructure such as water, sewer, and electricity. There are also serious fears that the U.S. and Iran will wage war on or above Iraq, drawing Iraqi soldiers and civilians into an escalating regional war.

Considering these risks, EPIC is extremely concerned about the possibility of more hostilities and their impact on Iraqis, especially on vulnerable civilian communities still recovering from the war with ISIS. EPIC hopes that all sides show immediate restraint, respect Iraq's sovereignty, avoid putting millions of Iraqis in harm's way, and allow Iraqis to determine their own future.

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Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC) works one-on-one with civil society leaders in Iraq to provide relief to vulnerable populations, monitor the crisis to better inform public policy, and enhance understanding of Iraq's story. EPIC was founded in 1998 by veterans of the Gulf War who believe that a human security approach can make Iraq safe and prosperous again.

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