

UPDATE 1 -- U.S. issues worldwide travel alert due to al-Qaeda terror threat

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USPA News - Al-Qaeda and affiliated organizations are plotting to carry out terrorist attacks in the coming weeks, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, the U.S. government warned Friday as it issued a worldwide travel alert for U.S. citizens abroad and instructed embassies to close on Sunday. The U.S. State Department said the threat focuses particularly on the Middle East and North Africa, and may be emanating from the Arabian Peninsula.

"Current information suggests that al-Qaeda and affiliated organizations continue to plan terrorist attacks both in the region and beyond, and that they may focus efforts to conduct attacks in the period between now and the end of August," it said. The department issued a Worldwide Travel Alert to caution U.S. citizens abroad about the terror plot, urging them to take every precaution to be aware of their surroundings and to adopt appropriate safety measures to protect themselves while traveling. It said terrorists may elect to use "a variety of means and weapons" to target both official and private interests, including public transportation systems and other tourist infrastructure. "We continue to work closely with other nations on the threat from international terrorism, including from al-Qaeda," the State Department said in the unusual Travel Alert, which expires on August 31. "Information is routinely shared between the U.S. and our key partners in order to disrupt terrorist plotting, identify and take action against potential operatives, and strengthen our defenses against potential threats." On late Thursday, U.S. State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf said the department had instructed U.S. embassies and consulates to remain closed or to suspend operations on Sunday due to security concerns. "The Department has been apprised of information that, out of an abundance of caution and care for our employees and others who may be visiting our installations, that indicates we should institute these precautionary steps," she said. Harf could not say which and how many embassies and consulates would be closed, but Sunday is a business day in mostly the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. At least fourteen embassies and consulates, almost all of them in the Middle East, had announced their Sunday closure by Friday afternoon. U.S. Representative Ed Royce, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in an interview with CNN on Friday morning that lawmakers met with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden on Wednesday to discuss the terror threat. "When we do have an indication of a threat, we take that seriously, if we have an indication of when that threat will manifest itself," he said. Royce, who spoke before the U.S. government issued its travel alert to provide more details about the threat, said the embassy closures were ordered to protect American personnel. "It's my understanding that it is al-Qaeda linked," he told CNN. "And the threat emanates in the Middle East and in Central Asia." Earlier, unnamed sources told CBS News that U.S. intelligence agencies have picked up signs that al-Qaeda is plotting an attack against U.S. diplomatic posts in the Middle East or other Muslim countries. But CNN, quoting an unidentified U.S. official, said the threat targets "American targets overseas" and may not be confined to diplomatic facilities. CBS News correspondent David Martin said the intelligence did not mention a specific location, which is why a large number of embassies and consulates were ordered to close. He said, citing unnamed officials, that the intelligence suggests it is "a real plot in the making" and not just chatter among terrorists. Harf said the security concerns revolve around August 4 specifically, but she indicated that embassies could remain closed for a longer period of time. "It is possible we may have additional days of closure as well," she said. "Depending on our analysis, individual U.S. embassies and consulates will announce whether or not they are open and whether they are implementing restrictions or other measures." U.S. diplomatic posts which announced they would be closed on Sunday include the U.S. embassies in the Jordanian capital of Amman, the Egyptian capital of Cairo, Kuwait, the Libyan capital of Tripoli, the Israeli city of Tel Aviv, the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, the Qatari capital of Doha, the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi, the Yemeni capital of Sana'a, the Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh, and the Bangladeshi capital of Dhaka. Also closed will be the U.S. Consulate-General in the Iraqi city of Barah, the U.S. Consulate-General in the Iraqi city of Erbil, and the U.S. Consulate-General in the Emirati city of Dubai. The embassy's American Center in Dhaka, which houses the Foreign Agriculture Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Archer K. Blood Library, will also be closed. The Obama administration has endured a storm of criticism over the past year for its handling of the September 11 attack on the U.S. consulate in the Libyan port city of Benghazi. The attack resulted in the deaths of four Americans, including U.S. Ambassador John Christopher Stevens.

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