



Iraq 2016 Crime & Safety Report: Basrah

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Religious Terrorism; Kidnapping; Theft; Stolen items; Murder; Drug Trafficking; Improvised Explosive Device; VBIEDs; Anti-American sentiment; Riots/Civil Unrest; Religious Violence; Extreme heat/drought; Winter weather

Near East > Iraq; Near East > Iraq > Basrah

3/10/2016

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The security situation remains fluid in light of the ongoing Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) insurgency afflicting the central and northern regions of Iraq. As of January 2016, ISIL insurgents continue to control large swaths of territory in northern and central Iraq and carry out effective attacks that cause casualties, hinder free movement, and influence public opinion regarding safety and security.

Post Crime Rating: Critical

Crime Threats

ISIL has had a direct impact on the crime situation in Basrah. Security forces in southern Iraq were redeployed northward to combat ISIL, leaving a security vacuum that has been taken advantage of by criminal gangs. In late 2014, an Iraqi military division of about 8,000 soldiers, along with a police battalion of approximately 500 police officers, were redeployed to fight

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against ISIL forces. This left nine incomplete police battalions and one army battalion for the entire province of Basrah, which has a population of around three million. With the re-tasking of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), criminal activity (especially kidnapping for ransom) and violence has increased in the southern region of Iraq throughout 2015. The lack of law enforcement and security force presence has also been blamed for the dramatic rise in the theft, armed robberies, kidnappings, murder, and drug trafficking. Political infighting amongst government authorities and the growing influence of Shi'a militias have also contributed to the lack of security in Basrah.

Crime statistics and/or crime reporting mechanisms are incomplete and inconsistent. However, a Provincial Council member reported in mid-January 2016 to a local newspaper, al-Mada, that police had registered 1,200 criminal cases from October 2015 onward.

Some of the more significant crimes with potential impact on the business community have involved a significant increase in kidnapping for ransom and robberies targeting businesses, especially high value targets such as jewelry stores and currency exchanges. There have also been several high profile robberies of company payrolls.

In October 2015, approximately US\$500,000 was stolen from the state-run South Oil Company by armed gunmen.

In November 2015, a gang robbed employees of a local security company who were transporting nearly US\$1 million in cash for company payroll. While police arrested several individuals involved in the November incident, only half of the money was recovered.

Recent actions by the ISF point to efforts to attempt to stem the wave of criminality. On December 24, the Basrah Governor announced the arrests of 731 suspects. Subsequent statements by the Basrah Governor mentioned 800 arrests in less than a month. The

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Governor attributed the arrests to operations by the Hawks Intelligence/Crisis Cell (an Iraqi Task Force Group). In mid-January 2016, the Basrah Chief of Police reported that approximately 2,900 arrests had been made since the beginning of October 2015. However, those arrested are only referred to as “gang members” in the press. One article mentioned that tribes have disassociated themselves from the alleged criminals. According to the statements on national television of some of those arrested, the criminal subjects claimed to have been working for an unidentified political party. The extent to which this means that militias, as a whole, are not involved in this recent increase in crime is unclear.

Other Areas of Concern

Individuals associated with the U.S. Consulate General in Basrah are required to travel with a Protective Security Detail (PSD), limiting potential criminal threats against Consulate personnel. The Consulate recommends that individuals who are required to live/travel in Iraq utilize PSDs to limit potential terrorist and criminal threats.

Celebratory gunfire is a culturally accepted practice. Common occasions for celebratory gunfire include: holidays, weddings, funerals, and other social events. Death and injury could result from stray bullets. The risk of property damage also exists.

Throughout Basrah province, the use of small-yield improvised explosive devices (IED) are used as an intimidation tactic. Known locally as “sound bombs,” these devices normally result in minor property damage and have been placed under vehicles, outside offices, and near homes. While these tactics appear intended to send a message, risk of death/injury remain for individuals within proximity to a detonation.

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Consulate direct-hire American personnel are restricted from using the Basrah International Airport.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Road conditions throughout Iraq are generally good, and roads are well constructed. Urban roads are usually constructed with asphalt, while rural roads are usually unpaved and constructed with dirt and gravel. Unpaved roads, including in urban areas, are subject to flooding during winter rains that can render the roads unpassable.

Vehicle security checkpoints and dense urban populations often cause significant vehicle congestion. The U.S. Consulate General in Basrah recommends that individuals employ additional security measures, such as avoidance of predictable patterns of behavior, variance of routes and times, and the use of PSDs when traveling.

Public Transportation Conditions

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There is no reliable public transportation system in Iraq. Buses run irregularly and frequently change routes. Poorly-maintained city transit vehicles often are involved in accidents. Long-distance buses are available but are often in poor condition and drive at unsafe speeds. Train infrastructure is largely inadequate.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

The Basrah International Airport (BSR) is located adjacent to the U.S. Consulate General Basrah and approximately 10 miles from the city center. The security and management practices at this airport are not on par with US airports.

The U.S. Department of State Travel Warning for Iraq (<https://www.osac.gov/Pages/ContentReportDetails.aspx?cid=18672>) states:

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has determined that U.S. civil aviation flying in Iraqi airspace is at risk from ongoing combat operations involving military forces (military aerial combat operations and other militarily-related activity) and militant groups. As a result, the FAA currently prohibits U.S. civil aviation from operating in or overflying Iraqi airspace with very limited exceptions. Foreign airlines operating in Iraq may cancel their operations without warning due to the security environment or other factors. Travelers should remain vigilant and reconfirm all flight schedules with their airline prior to commencing any travel. For further background information regarding FAA prohibitions on U.S. civil aviation, U.S. citizens should consult the Federal Aviation Administration's Prohibitions, Restrictions and Notices website.

Terrorism Threat

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Post Terrorism Rating: Critical

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

Since the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraqi cities began in 2009, indigenous terrorist groups have conducted attacks against targets associated with the Iraqi government, with the intention of discrediting it. Within the southern region of Iraq, Muqtada al-Sadr's "Peace" Brigades (Saraya Salaam), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), and Kata'ib Hizballah (KH) are considered indigenous organizations, although all receive significant monetary and logistical support from international sources. Since the withdrawal of U.S. Forces-Iraq (USF-I) in December 2011, Shi'a based groups, AAH, KH, and the Peace Brigades have ceased mass-casualty attacks and not attacked U.S. interests but continued to pursue political ambitions. However, their calculus has shifted in the response to increased deployments of U.S. military forces in Iraq to assist with confronting the growing ISIL threat. These organizations maintain the operational, organizational and logistical capability to attack U.S. targets with little notice. Ultimately, the threat of kidnapping, rocket and improvised explosive device attacks, and small arms fire incidents against U.S. interests remains high and is subject to the influence of domestic, political, regional, and international developments.

During the height of the insurgency in 2006-2008, al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) and Iraq's various indigenous insurgent groups shared resources, expertise, and personnel. As the insurgency matured, AQI's fundamentalist ideology began to alienate large segments of the local fighter base, particularly in Anbar province. AQI attempted to reinvigorate its local base of support in 2006 by creating the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), an umbrella organization that was intended to place an Iraqi face on the insurgency, but these outreach initiatives were largely unsuccessful.

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Although many of the Sunni groups work together at the local level, AQI does not officially have a relationship with Shi'a groups and publicly has called them apostates.

The conflict in Syria is providing opportunities for both Shi'a and Sunni militia and terrorist organizations to contribute financially and with personnel and gain operational experience. In April 2013, the group changed its name to the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (ISIL) to reflect its involvement in the Syrian civil war. In December 2013, Iraqi government forces dispersed a protest camp in Ramadi and arrested a Sunni MP, starting a chain of retaliatory attacks against government forces and officials that resulted in ISIL controlling large sections of Anbar province, including Ramadi and Fallujah. Shi'a civilians and government personnel and assets remain the preferred targets of ISIL due to the group's longstanding objective of overthrowing the democratically-elected government and replacing it with a Sunni-led Islamic caliphate.

As of June 2014, government forces were overrun in Mosul and lost control of large swaths of northern and central regions of Iraq. Many of the ISF from Basrah province have deployed to Anbar and northern Iraq to combat ISIL terrorists and the spreading insurgency. As of August 2014, U.S. and Coalition air strikes halted ISIL advances on Irbil and Baghdad, providing the ISF and the newly-elected government operational breathing space to regroup and plan offensive operations to combat ISIL. By the end of December 2015, Iraqi forces advanced into the center of Ramadi, declaring it. Ongoing clearing operations continue in parts of Ramadi, as Iraqi forces remove the last remnants of ISIL fighters.

Groups such as ISIL and AQI lack operational maneuvering space in the Basrah Consular District; however, they maintain the intent and capability to conduct "one-off" attacks. Foreign and indigenous terrorist groups remain capable of conducting deadly attacks throughout the country.

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Attacks that continue to threaten personnel include, but are not limited to, kidnapping, IEDs, Vehicle-Borne IEDs (VBIEDs), rocket/mortar attacks, complex attacks involving several mechanisms of assault, suicide vest attacks, and small-arms fire. The proliferation of attacks indicates the willingness and effectiveness of the groups to use terrorism for political gain. Attacks have been directed primarily against Iraqi government facilities and security personnel and “soft targets” (market places, crowds of religious pilgrims, large public gatherings).

On October 5, a VBIED detonated in a market in Al-Zubayr, southwest of Basrah City; 10 people were killed and 52 were injured in the attack. Multiple media outlets reported that ISIL claimed responsibility in its social media, stating that the intended targets were the Shi’a population in southern Iraq.

On December 16, a group of unidentified gunmen abducted at least 27 Qatari nationals on a hunting expedition in Muthanna province. Reports vary on the number of attackers but estimates were between 70 and 100 with approximately 50 four-wheel drive vehicles used to conduct the operation. Some reports indicated members of the Qatari ruling family, including a prince, were among those kidnapped. Two Iraqi security officers providing security for the hunting team were taken but were later released. The whereabouts of the abductees remain unknown, and efforts continue to locate them.

Based on open source reporting, the number of total attacks in Basrah Consular District (Basrah, Dhi Qar, Maysan, Muthanna) increased slightly over the past year. Although the threat of attacks is constant, particularly during major holidays, the majority of attacks occur in Baghdad, Anbar, and other major urban centers.

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The call for self-radicalization, whether disseminated on extremist forums, or via the broader approach via social media continues to be a global concern. It is difficult to determine which message will inspire a violent extremist.

Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

Many southern Iraqis believe the U.S. supports ISIL. This viewpoint has been furthered by media, including social media, sources affiliated with particular political parties, religious leaders, and militia groups. Many Iraqis see U.S. actions and policy in Iraq as contributing to the break-up of Iraq along sectarian and ethnic lines. While the U.S. Consulate General has not seen evidence that these opinions have resulted in any hostile act against U.S. or Western interests, they do pose a challenge for U.S. and Western interests in the area.

With the increase of U.S. military forces in Iraq to assist with confronting the growing ISIL threat, Shi'a militias and Iranian-backed groups continually express their dissatisfaction with this increase and desire to launch attacks against U.S. targets and maintain the military capability to do so. As a result, the security situation remains fluid, volatile and potentially very dangerous.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

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Post Political Violence Rating: Critical

Civil Unrest

Civil unrest can occur at any time in Iraq. Religious and political events often attract hundreds to thousands of participants.

Protests are typically peaceful and are usually the result of frustration with internal economic factors, not from outside influences (inflammatory films/cartoons, Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which ignited demonstrations in other countries in the region). The number of demonstrations throughout southern Iraq dramatically increased in 2015, especially during the summer. Employment-related demonstrations are common throughout southern Iraq, with protestors demanding greater employment opportunities and payment of salaries/other benefits. Demonstrations are also commonly held calling for public services, electricity, clean water, government reform, end to corruption, and actions to stem criminal activity.

From mid-December 2015 onward, there have been numerous demonstrations in Basrah calling for authorities to provide a security response to the rise in the number of crimes, in particular the increase in violent crime. The first demonstration, on December 17, involved protestors marching from the Basrah Provincial Council building to the Basrah Police Headquarters. Additional demonstrations have seen protestors, including family members of victims, calling for the death penalty to be implemented against criminal gang members involved in committing murders and robberies. Basrah activists have launched a campaign called "Stop the Killing" to bring attention to the violence.

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Religious/Ethnic Violence

The U.S. Consulate General noted a dramatic increase throughout December 2015 of tribal violence in north Basrah province and Dhi Qar province. From mid-December, incidents of tribal violence in north Basrah province reached such a level that political and security officials convened special meetings to develop a security plan to address the tribal conflicts.

On December 13, a tribal dispute led to an exchange of gunfire in the area of al Tamimiyah in Basrah province. The conflict lasted 30 minutes before ISF arrived and secured the area. This tribal violence left as many as 11 people dead; however, specific information on the number of injured and killed could not be confirmed. Additional significant skirmishes occurred in Qarmat Ali and al Hartha (both in Basrah province).

Tribal violence in the Qarmat Ali area was reported from December 16-19.

Al Hartha was also the center of ongoing violence that erupted on several occasions.

On December 22, tribal fighting occurred in a village less than a mile from the U.S. Consulate General situated just across the canal that runs beside the Consulate compound and the airport. Small-arms fire was observed by the Consulate, although none of the small-arms fire was directed at the Consulate.

On December 27, tribal violence erupted in the al Majidia area, north of Basrah city. The conflict started when two men from the al-Halaf tribe were killed in al-Garma city center; their tribe accused the al-Gramsha tribe of the murders. In apparent retaliation, on December 28, the al-Halaf tribe attacked Al-Gramsha tribe area in al-Majidia. Armed skirmishes with medium size weapons was reported. Official sources confirmed the use of mortar fire between the tribes. There was no further information on any injuries. Social media accounts claimed three

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power generators and one mobile telephone tower were damaged.

On December 29, the Basrah Security Committee called on the Basrah Provincial Council and security leaders to take action to limit tribal conflicts, particularly in the northern areas of the province. The head of the Security Committee, Jabbar al-Saadi, was critical of the deterrent measures, calling them extremely weak. One complaint was that the security services were not arresting anyone from among the tribes for the violence. The Security Committee pointed out that the tribal conflicts disrupted the work of government institutions and everyday life and that the security services do not have adequate capability to stop the tribal conflicts, especially in the al Hartha area.

The President of the Basrah Security Committee, Governor Majid al-Nasrawi, said during a meeting on December 31 that in order to resolve these tribal conflicts, six tribal clans were going to be disarmed and that security forces and the Popular Mobilization Forces (i.e. militia groups) would provide security. Nasrawi said after the meeting with the President of the Provincial Council, the head of the security committee leaders, and judges in the province, that tribal members who do not adhere to the resolutions would be arrested and forcibly removed from their land. He said that the meeting came in response to a major dispute between two tribal clans in northern Basrah province.

Beginning in January 2016, efforts have been made to stem the tribal violence in Basrah province. ISF have conducted operations to arrest those responsible for the tribal conflicts and to disarm the tribes of medium and heavy weapons. This coincided with a visit, on January 12, by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to Basrah during which he announced that a strike force from Baghdad would arrive in Basrah province to impose security and stability. Prime Minister Abadi noted that fighting among tribes was unacceptable, adding "as we achieve victories against ISIL, we see struggle and disputes lead to security breaches in other areas of Iraqi."

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A few days after the Prime Minister's visit to Basrah, the Basrah Operations Command (BaOC) announced the arrival of the ninth armored brigade in Basrah province. The BaOC said this would be a sufficient force to strengthen security, especially against tribal conflicts. The BaOC Commander, Major General Samir Abdel Karim, said that the brigade arrived from Baghdad under orders issued by the General Command of the Armed Forces. BaOC is developing plans to control the security situation in Basrah that entails confiscating all heavy and medium size weapons from tribal clans in northern Basrah province. General Karim also pointed out that he will redeploy police forces to Basrah focusing on border points and entrances to the province. However, one week after the deployment, half of the deployed forces of the ninth armored brigade were sent back to Baghdad.

Political and religious marches and rallies are a popular target for AQI and other indigenous militant groups. During the Shi'a religious pilgrimages of Ashura and Arba'een, pilgrims were attacked with VBIEDs, suicide vests, and improvised explosive devices. Religious celebrations are commonly marked by IED and suicide bombers, resulting in individuals killed and wounded. Vehicular movements on highways and road networks can be restricted due to religious pilgrims blocking routes.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards

Iraq's environment is harsh. Iraq's environment can change quickly, and American citizens

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should plan accordingly.

Temperatures can range from 20 degrees Fahrenheit or colder in the winter to 120 degrees Fahrenheit or warmer during the summer.

Dust storms and heavy fog, both of which can reduce visibility and impede aircraft operations, occur frequently during the spring.

Kidnapping Threat

Kidnappings for political or monetary gain are common throughout the Basrah Consular District and increased significantly in 2015. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) (a Shi'a militia) has disavowed three of their members who were responsible for a number of kidnappings and said that the kidnappings were not sanctioned by the militia.

Police Response

While ISF maintains a presence in most major urban areas to limit potential terrorist, insurgent, and militia activity, the departure of significant numbers of southern-based ISF to fight ISIL in the north has left what many contacts are calling a "security vacuum" in Basrah.

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The Iraqi police and army routinely set up temporary checkpoints without notice. American citizens should be sure to have proper identification at all times to avoid harassment and delays at checkpoints. Checkpoints and security stations are manned at all times, and police and military units generally respond to incidents. However, the ability to respond to rapidly evolving security situations remains limited due to lack of decentralized command structures and response resources.

American citizens should cooperate and follow instructions if approached by Iraqi security personnel. Ultimately, all foreigners are subject to Iraqi law. Americans should avoid unauthorized photography, especially of ISF, which is strictly prohibited. Military personnel may confiscate equipment and temporarily detain individuals taking unauthorized photographs. Persons have been detained for taking photographs of buildings, monuments, or other sites, especially in the International Zone in Baghdad, where photography is forbidden. For more information, please review OSAC's Report "Picture This: Dos and Don'ts for Photography."

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

The U.S. Consulate's ability to assist American citizens in the event of police detention or harassment is very limited.

Crime Victim Assistance

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Victims of crime should notify the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad by contacting the American Citizen Services via e-mail at baghdadacs@state.gov or via phone at 0770-443-1286 (from Iraq) or 011-964-770-443-1286 (from the U.S.).

Medical Emergencies

Iraqi hospitals and emergency medical services are limited. Local hospitals have sub-standard staffing and equipment. Individuals associated with private businesses are responsible for arranging their own medical care. Hospitals should be utilized only as a contingency for life or death emergencies.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

A list of doctors and hospitals can be obtained from American Citizen Services by e-mailing baghdadacs@state.gov. For security reasons, names of organizations and individuals are not posted to a website.

Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

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For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at:
http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/iraq?s_cid=ncezid-dgmq-travel-double-001.

OSAC Country Council Information

The point of contact for all Overseas Security Advisory Council related matters in Basrah is the Consulate General's Regional Security Office (basrahosac@state.gov). To reach OSAC's Near East team, please email OSACNEA@state.gov.

U.S. Consulate Location and Contact Information

Consulate Address and Hours of Operation

The U.S. Consulate General Basrah is located adjacent to the Basrah International Airport.

Consulate Contact Numbers

Consular Affairs (American Citizen Services 24-Hour Emergency Line): 0770-443-1286 (from

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Iraq) or 011-964-770-443-1286 (from the U.S.), or baghdadacs@state.gov.

Website: <http://basrah.usconsulate.gov/>

Nearby Posts

Embassy Baghdad: <http://iraq.usembassy.gov>

Consulate Erbil: <http://erbil.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Kirkuk: <http://kirkuk.usconsulate.gov/>

Consulate Guidance

The U.S. Embassy and Consulates General in Iraq have an extremely limited ability to assist American citizens in the event of an emergency. The ability of the U.S. Embassy to provide consular services to U.S. citizens throughout Iraq, including Baghdad, is very limited given the security environment and absence of a Consular Officer at Consulate Basrah. Consulate General Basrah does not have a Consular Officer to assist American citizens with routine services (passport applications, notary services, Consular Reports of Birth Abroad). U.S. citizens in need of these services must make an appointment online with the Embassy in Baghdad. Many services that had existed in the past, such as U.S. military-provided medevac, transportation, convoy support, lodging, quick reaction force response to incidents, and monitoring of personnel security details, are not available through the U.S. Embassy or Consulates General.

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U.S. citizens who choose to visit or reside in Iraq despite the Travel Warning are urged to take responsibility for their own personal security and belongings (including their U.S. passports) and should be aware that Iraqi authorities have arrested or detained U.S. citizens whose purpose of travel is not readily apparent. Individuals or companies operating or contemplating operations within Iraq should exercise care and appropriate due-diligence in planning for all potential day-to-day life support and security logistics as well as emergency contingencies when considering travel or work within Iraq.

See the State Department's travel website for the Worldwide Caution, Travel Warning for Iraq, Travel Alerts, and Country Specific Information for Iraq. It is strongly recommended that all American citizen travelers enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) in order to receive messages from the Embassy about safety and security. Travelers can enroll through by visiting <http://step.state.gov>. Contact the U.S. Embassy in Iraq, located in the International Zone, Baghdad, via email, or by accessing U.S. Embassy Baghdad's website. The after-hours emergency numbers are 011-964-770-443-1286 or 011-964-770-030-4888 (from the U.S.) or 0770-443-1286 or 0770-030-4888 (within Iraq). As cell phone service is unreliable in Iraq, emergency calls may also be placed through the Department of State at 1-888-407-4747 toll-free in the U.S. and Canada or 1-202-501-4444 from other countries.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Situational Awareness Best Practices

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Travelers should utilize all available security assets to minimize any potential terrorist or criminal risks. Individuals should vary routes and times of travel, as well as locations and arrival times to avoid any travel patterns. If PSD teams are available, they should be utilized to maximize safety. If possible, use a minimum of two PSD personnel to decrease the potential for abductions. PSD personnel can also be used to render assistance in the event of an emergency. Travelers should not travel alone.

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