

Iran Flexes Its Muscles After the Kurdish Referendum

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Oct 10, 2017

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Brief Analysis

Given its recent military movements and high-level contacts with Turkey and Baghdad, Iran may be looking to exact an intolerable cost on the KRG.

In the aftermath of the September 25 Kurdish independence referendum, Iran has deployed additional military forces and equipment to the border with northern Iraq, deliberately moving them through Iranian Kurdish towns in broad daylight as a show of force to audiences at home and abroad. The deployments are in keeping with [Tehran's hardline posture leading up the vote \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-military-options-against-kurdish-independence\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-military-options-against-kurdish-independence), with the political leadership and military branches explicitly signaling that the outcome is unacceptable. Iran also appears to be soliciting Baghdad and Turkey's help in preparing for potential escalation against the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

MESSAGING THROUGH MILITARY DRILLS

In recent weeks, Iran's national armed forces (Artesh) and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps "quick response" units participated in separate military maneuvers and live-fire exercises near or along the KRG border, spurring authorities in Erbil to complain that artillery rounds were landing on their side of the frontier. Under the operational control of the Hamzeh Sayyed al-Shohada headquarters in Urmia, the IRGC deployed T-72 tanks, drones, and Gvozdika self-propelled howitzers with a maximum range of 21 kilometers to the mountainous Oshnavieh district near the KRG's northeastern corner.

Meanwhile, about 280 kilometers to the south at the Parviz Khan border crossing, the Artesh deployed aging armor units with limited artillery, helicopter, and drone support. To compensate for the equipment deficiencies in these units, they also deployed elements of the 65th and 35th Special Forces Brigades from Tehran and Kermanshah, respectively. These forces are well suited to fighting unconventional wars deep in mountainous enemy territory. Also

participating in the IRGC and Artesh maneuvers were elite personnel from Iraq's U.S.-trained Counter-Terrorism Service, which played a major role in taking Mosul back from the Islamic State this summer.

These joint maneuvers by no means indicate an imminent decision to invade the KRG, but their timing is clearly purposeful, and they will increase the preparedness of Iranian and Iraqi forces if the order comes. Considering that most of the deployed Artesh units are understrength and ill equipped, the IRGC would likely shoulder the bulk of any such operation, with Artesh playing a support role by mounting diversionary attacks south of the main thrust, a common practice during the latter stages of the Iran-Iraq War.

In addition, Iran's Khatam al-Anbia Air Defense Headquarters has placed more surface-to-air missile systems on the KRG's border. Apart from a limited number of helicopters, Erbil has no air forces to speak of, so these Iranian deployments could eventually contribute to a no-fly-zone over the entire KRG. On September 24, Iran closed off its airspace to all outbound aircraft originating from the KRG; Turkey and Baghdad followed suit days later, although Iraq still permits some domestic KRG flights. No inbound foreign flights are permitted, apart from military and diplomatic aircraft.

IRAN ON A COALITION-BUILDING MISSION

In the wake of the vote, Iran has conducted high-level liaisons with Baghdad and Ankara at an unprecedented pace. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid a rare visit to Tehran on October 4, meeting with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani. During the visit, Khamenei called the referendum a "treason against the whole region," warning of long-term consequences that would have to be addressed using "all possible means." He also called on the Iraqi government to act "more forcefully" in tackling the problem. His chief military advisor, Maj. Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi, apparently persuaded Baghdad to take an especially hard stance on the disputed city of Kirkuk, where the majority of KRG oil production is concentrated.

Similarly, Iran's new defense minister called for "active deterrence" against those who have targeted "regional coherence," saying that their "plots" should be destroyed "at their source." And Armed Forces General Staff chairman Mohammad Bagheri, the official spearheading the recent military maneuvers, was one of the referendum's most vocal critics, calling it an Israeli plot. Throughout September, he held multiple bilateral phone calls and meetings with Iraqi armed forces chief of staff Gen. Othman al-Ghanimi and his Turkish counterpart Gen. Hulusi Akar; in one of these conversations, Bagheri condemned the "emergence of an illegitimate entity in the region."

On September 28, a delegation of Iranian and Iraqi officers visited Iran's four border crossings with the KRG in preparation for the deployment of Iraqi forces there, and perhaps along the Kurdish region's entire northern and eastern frontiers. While mainly symbolic in comparison to Iran's own deployments, such forces could ultimately include capable Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Units or even seasoned fighters from Lebanese Hezbollah, whose leader condemned the referendum as a traitorous project instigated by enemies of "the resistance." It also bears mentioning that any decision to permanently station Iraqi forces at Iranian border crossings would be in breach of Article 146 of the Islamic Republic's constitution, which prohibits any form of foreign basing on Iranian territory even for peaceful purposes.

IRAN'S DOMESTIC CONCERNS

The ultimate cause of Iran's alarm over the referendum centers on its own Kurdish population, which numbers around seven million people concentrated in the western provinces of West Azerbaijan, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, and Ilam. Iranian Kurds have had periods of troublesome relations with the central government, which they accuse of discriminatory policies and economic deprivation. The fact that most Iranian Kurds are Sunni only exacerbates their marginalization in the country's Shia-dominated political scene.

Immediately after the referendum, social media videos showed large crowds in Iranian Kurdish towns celebrating in the streets and waving Kurdish flags, prompting Tehran to deploy plainclothes IRGC personnel and "Special Unit" riot-control police there the following day. The latter units, which are equivalent to Western SWAT teams, currently consist of nine regiments in Tehran and other large cities, along with twenty-seven battalions in the smaller provinces, including Kurdistan. Any number of these units can be deployed to trouble spots in Kurdish provinces on fairly short notice, boosted by provincial IRGC and Basij forces.

If Iranian leaders maintain their hard stance against the referendum's results, they risk creating an influence vacuum with the Kurds over the long term, which might be filled by countries such as Israel, Azerbaijan, or even Syria. Although Bashar al-Assad dismissed the vote during an October 5 meeting with an Iranian parliamentary delegation, his reaction has otherwise been relatively muted. Given his uneasy but viable partnership with Syrian Kurds, he may be leaving the door open for future economic arrangements with the KRG, perhaps guaranteed by Russia. Moscow is already investing heavily in the Iraqi Kurdish oil and gas sector; if Erbil can secure Russian diplomatic support along with backing from Assad and the Syrian Kurds, it might be able to circumvent the Turkish-Iranian-Iraqi axis in the long term. For example, KRG leaders could conceivably route a new Mediterranean gas export pipeline through postwar Syria. This would hurt the Turks if they stop KRG oil exports through their territory, as threatened by Erdogan. Iraqi Kurdish gas exports to Europe could also undercut Tehran's ambitions to gain a share of the European market, not to mention decrease its influence on Syria.

For now, Iran, Turkey, and Iraq seem determined to gradually tighten the economic noose around the KRG, perhaps culminating in an embargo or blockade. Military options are on the table as well, ranging from large-scale intervention in Kirkuk to joint "counterterrorist operations" in KRG territory against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and related groups. If a diplomatic solution is not found sooner rather than later, the building pressure may soon lead to events with dire humanitarian consequences for Kurdish civilians, as well as serious political repercussions for the United States and its regional interests.

Farzin Nadimi is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region. ❖

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