

Iran's Expanding Military Role in Iraq

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Brief Analysis

Despite the loss of a close ally in outgoing prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) appears ready to move on by offering substantial military support to his successor in Baghdad.

As incoming Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi goes about the business of forming a new government, Iran seems intent on expanding direct military assistance to its neighbor. Tehran made a major military commitment to Baghdad while Maliki was still clinging to power, and the political and military steps it has reportedly taken since then indicate determined support for a nascent government that remains dominated by Maliki's Shiite faction, the Islamic Dawa Party.

MALIKI'S FALL

Iran was deeply suspicious when the Obama administration threw its whole weight behind widespread calls for Maliki to step down this summer, and while Washington did not push for any particular candidate to succeed him, its quick endorsement of Abadi's nomination nevertheless raised eyebrows in Tehran. Once it became clear that Abadi would be the new prime minister, Iran switched sides and began to support him -- but only after the Dawa Party leadership voted ten to one for a change, a move that was itself spurred by a letter from Iraqi Shiite leader Ayatollah Ali Sistani insisting that they pick a consensus figure to lead the country.

Interestingly, Iran's shift occurred after one of its senior officials visited Iraq in mid-July -- namely, Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani, a native Khuzestani Arab and fluent Arabic speaker who appears to be playing a more active role on Iraqi policy for the Rouhani administration. His ascendance may have come at the expense of IRGC-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani, who is believed to have strongly backed another term for Maliki.

Whatever the case, it is yet to be seen whether Iran's backing of Abadi is a short-term tactical move (based on

previous remarks by Iranian officials who blamed a multinational conspiracy for trying to topple Maliki and regain control of Iraq) or part of a "proactive and smart" Iranian diplomatic initiative aimed at defusing U.S. regional influence through a "new world order," as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei outlined for his diplomatic corps in an August 13 speech. To date, no IRGC commander has publicly endorsed Abadi as prime minister, and no such endorsement seems likely unless he commits -- presumably in private -- to actively supporting Qods Force involvement in both Iraq and Syria.

Tehran is no doubt concerned by recent U.S. promises of increased security aid to the new Iraqi government, and by talk of potential NATO assistance in defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which now calls itself simply "the Islamic State." From the IRGC's perspective, any expansion of NATO's role in the region could be interpreted as yet another step toward encircling Iran militarily.

To be sure, Western help could also indirectly facilitate the IRGC's objectives by easing pressure on the Qods Force, which has been strained financially and logistically by its involvement in the Syrian war. Yet the IRGC is traditionally reluctant to be on the same page as the United States, so it is unlikely to join local Shiite militias (e.g., Asaib Ahl al-Haqq) in publicly endorsing a U.S. role in Iraq.

As for Iran's domestic scene, officials have made very little comment regarding their latest military adventures in Iraq, as the regime rarely acknowledges its foreign interventions in public. Yet Khamenei cannot have been pleased by Sistani's decision to vocally support new leadership in Baghdad while Iran was still grappling with the question of who should lead Iraq. Sistani's action effectively challenged Khamenei's self-declared position as the leader of the Muslim world, including Iraq's Shiites.

IRANIAN MILITARY AID

Although Iran fell short of declaring an official armed intervention to keep Maliki in power, the IRGC did send Qods Force personnel, ground attack aircraft, and a variety of drones to Iraq amid growing calls for his resignation. The practical purpose of these deployments was to protect key Iraqi Shiite communities and holy sites from ISIS takeover. With Qods Force teams now located at Samarra, Baghdad, Karbala, and the former Camp Speicher (al-Sahra Air Base) near Tikrit, Iran is uniquely placed to attend to any emergencies arising in northern, central, and southern Iraq. These units have also been central to Iran's plan for organizing local Shiite militias that work with Iraqi government forces but are closely aligned with Tehran, on the model of popular militia units in Syria.

To provide additional support to the Maliki government, Iran also reportedly deployed up to seven Su-25 Frogfoot jets. These ground attack aircraft are among the IRGC's most prized assets, playing a key role in operations out of the strategic Persian Gulf island of Abu Musa. Their deployment shows the degree to which Iran -- or at least the hardline faction represented by the IRGC -- was prepared to keep Maliki's party in power.

The circumstances surrounding the Su-25 deployment remain unconfirmed, but according to informed sources, the jets were flown to al-Rashid on June 30 and July 1, and later relocated to al-Muthanna Air Base near Baghdad International Airport, from which they operated with hybrid Iranian/Iraqi air and ground crews previously trained in Iran. Those planes were supplemented with a handful of similar aircraft delivered to Iraq directly from Russia. The new assets enabled Baghdad to provide more effective air support to the Kurdish peshmerga and Shiite militia forces battling ISIS in early August; they have reportedly been employed in combat successfully since then with no confirmed losses.

It appears that some or all of the Su-25s were the same planes sent to Iran by Saddam Hussein during the 1991 Gulf War. The IRGC has reportedly transferred ownership of them back to Iraq as part of a deal that will see Russia deliver a similar number of jet fighters to Iran at a later time, probably via Iraq. Such an arrangement would not be a surprise given the important tactical role such aircraft could still play for the IRGC.

Iran has also deployed reconnaissance and possibly strike drones. Online jihadist video footage showed an Iranian Mohajer-4 drone with Iraqi markings shot down near Samarra on July 5. On the same day, IRGC pilot Shojaat Alamdari was killed in Samarra proper; he had been assigned to the Qods Force and was probably working as a forward air controller at the time. Another drone, the missile-armed Shahed-129, could play a similarly significant role in Iraq given its successful track record in Syria. With a twenty-four-hour endurance capability, the system can provide persistent overhead reconnaissance for the Qods Force and Shiite militias while giving the IRGC a chance to hone its skills in using armed drones.

NEXT IRANIAN STEPS

In conjunction with ongoing political maneuvering, Iran and especially the IRGC may be tempted to increase their presence in Iraq. This may come in the form of more organized military deployments, and if ISIS makes further strides in the south, Tehran could even decide to send light mechanized special forces and self-propelled artillery and MLRS rocket launchers. With such capabilities in place, the Iranians could seek to steal the show from Washington in delivering a blow to ISIS while strengthening their own credibility in Iraq.

Finally, there is no guarantee that the formation of a new government will lead to calmer relations between Baghdad and the Iraqi Kurds in the long term, so Iran will continue to present itself to both parties as their key security partner. This approach serves Tehran's dual objective of expanding its influence in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government while attempting to displace the American role in both places.

Farzin Nadimi is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region. He has written previously for The Washington Institute regarding Tehran's asymmetric naval warfare strategy. ❖

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