

Iran's Military Options Against Kurdish Independence

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Tehran has several means of putting military and economic pressure on the Iraqi Kurds following the independence referendum, but taking action on its recent warnings could widen Kurdish discontent at home.

The Kurdish independence referendum is only a few days away, and there are growing indications that Iran is considering drastic measures to stop the process. As Tehran increases diplomatic pressure on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), military measures could also be on the table, whether in the short or long term.

A HISTORY OF UPRISINGS

The lack of political coherence among the millions of Kurds scattered throughout the Middle East has prevented them from achieving their dream of independence and statehood. This dream in turn has led many of them to launch armed struggles against the governments under which they live. The only modern-day Kurdish state, the Mahabad Republic of 1946, was formed in parts of Iranian Kurdistan with direct Soviet support. This self-declared republic was the birthplace of the Peshmerga movement, but it soon ended after Soviet forces withdrew from Iran the next year.

Armed Kurdish insurgency against the central government in Tehran began in the 1960s, during which the Kurdish Barzani clan in Iraq initially sided with Iranian Kurdish rebels. This insurgency was eventually quelled with the help of American military advisors. Years later, Iranian and American military personnel came to the aid of Iraqi Kurds fighting for autonomy from the Baath government in Baghdad. This covert support continued until the March 1975 Algiers agreement between Iran and Iraq, bringing the insurgency to a temporary pause.

Iran's 1979 revolution and its 1980 border clashes with Iraq triggered a series of armed skirmishes and bloody urban fighting with Iranian Kurdish rebels, but the latter again failed to win autonomy. The Kurdish armed rebellion was further revived by the Iran-Iraq War, but U.S. intelligence assessments from the early 1980s judged that deep internal splits prevented the Kurds from seriously threatening the Iranian, Iraqi, or Turkish governments. Even so, several groups -- including the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), a branch of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) -- have continued to fight a low-intensity insurgency against the Iranian government since the early 2000s.

Meanwhile, the KRI achieved a great degree of autonomy following the 1991 Gulf War, and for the most part enjoyed neighborly relations with Iran even amid armed conflicts between Iraqi Kurdish parties. One of these parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), had developed close relations with Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War, when it partnered with elements of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to fight Saddam Hussein. Yet the PUK has put this relationship at risk by supporting the current KRI independence drive.

DOMESTIC COUNTERINSURGENCY

Iran's bloody history of Kurdish insurgency shows how Tehran is prepared to go to great lengths to prevent Kurdish autonomy on its own territory, let alone independence. Iran continues to maintain sizable military forces near Kurdish populations in the provinces of Kurdistan, West Azerbaijan, and Kermanshah. In recent years, these forces have witnessed a surge in armed clashes with Kurdish insurgents, resulting in heavy casualties on both sides.

The country's two main Kurdish opposition groups are the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KSZK) and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI). PJAK is also very active in the Kurdish regions. If a strong, independent Kurdistan emerges in Iraq, Iranian Kurdish unrest could become more vocal and forceful. Such concerns are the main driver behind Tehran's vehement opposition to the KRI referendum and calls for independence in general. As a result, Iran's intelligence services have been closely monitoring Kurdish communities for signs of discontent or separatist activities.

Tehran is also wary of perceived Israeli geopolitical designs on northern Iraq, probably seeing Israel's public support for the referendum as a response to years of Iranian/Hezbollah posturing on its northern borders. Iran will therefore continue to scrutinize Kurdish-Israeli relations.

IRAN'S MILITARY CAPABILITIES IN THE NORTHWEST

Iran has four command-and-control structures in place to handle threats ranging from cross-border incursions to street riots in the Kurdish regions. The IRGC's Hamzeh Sayyed al-Shohada headquarters in Urmia handles the northwest sector, while the Najaf Ashraf headquarters in Kermanshah handles the west. Together they oversee four corps, including the Beit al-Muqaddas Special Provincial Corps in Kurdistan; each corps has a division with two brigades.

Tehran has always feared that a punitive security operation against one Kurdish group or town could spur more widespread unrest in other regions. It has therefore tasked these local IRGC headquarters and their Basij affiliates, along with various intelligence services, to establish an urban control and containment system in Kurdish areas that is second only to that seen in Tehran province.

The national army (Artesh) complements these efforts with its own Northwest and West Regional Command Headquarters, also based in Urmia and Kermanshah. They each control three skeleton divisional headquarters whose subordinate units act as independent "operational brigades," reportedly with more firepower and mobility. These units are mainly oriented toward foreign threats; they include the 35th Brigade, a quick-response special forces unit in Kermanshah, usually the first Artesh force deployed in response to any border incident.

HARD STANCE AGAINST THE REFERENDUM

On September 17, Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, threatened to sever all military and security agreements with the KRI and close all border crossings if the Kurds proceed with their referendum, while parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani alluded to a possible economic blockade. Shamkhani also threatened to use "totally different measures" against Iranian Kurdish opposition groups allegedly based in Iraqi Kurdistan, which could mean more forceful and frequent military action against PJAK and other groups in the mountainous border areas. Such actions could gradually target KRI forces as well.

Likewise, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, chairman of the Armed Forces General Staff, has spent the past few months warning of the referendum's "dangerous consequences." In August, he surprised observers by visiting Turkey and meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his army chief of staff Gen. Hulusi Akar. Officials from both countries later spoke of possible joint military operations against Kurdish "separatist plans," not only along their shared border, but also in Syria and Iraq.

Going forward, Iran can be expected to throw its weight behind Baghdad's threat to use force against the Kurdish drive for independence, perhaps by offering more arms and special operatives to the Iraqi army and Shia militias. But Tehran is likely aware that any shipments of heavy weapons (e.g., large-caliber artillery, Fateh-110/Zolfagar missiles) to those parties are prohibited under UN Security Council Resolution 2231, even if rerouted through Syria. Iran may also try to exploit intra-Kurdish rivalries by wooing specific factions away from the independence movement with arms and other support.

In the longer term, Iran, Iraq, or Turkey could decide to counter the land-locked KRI with an "aerial unsafe zone," a no-fly zone, or even an air blockade, preventing international flights from landing at Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, or Kirkuk. Given the limited number of fighter aircraft at its northwestern air bases in Tabriz and Hamedan, Iran's participation in such efforts would likely be limited to forward-deploying air defense assets such as S-300 missile batteries. The KRI lacks a capable air force or air defense system, and no foreign air force is currently committed to protect it, so its oil facilities and military infrastructure remain very vulnerable. At the same time, Iran may be restrained by the possibility that tensions on its western and northwestern borders could affect the thousand-plus daily commercial overflights of those areas, for which it is paid a substantial surcharge by international airlines.

Moreover, for any blockade to be successful, Russian cooperation would be needed. Moscow's position on Kurdish independence has been ambiguous despite its warming relations with states bordering the KRI. Recently, the state-owned Russian energy company Rosneft signed a deal with the KRI to build a pipeline to Turkey, potentially allowing it to send as much as 30 billion cubic meters of gas per year to feed European demand. Turkey's large gas market would also benefit from this new initiative. With the help of major Russian investment, KRI oil exports are expected to grow as well, increasing from their current level of about 650,000 barrels per day to as high as 1 million. These economic factors could greatly complicate any Iranian plans to put military pressure on the KRI.

CONCLUSION

Tehran would likely perceive an independent KRI as a direct threat to its sovereignty and revolutionary ideology, so it may do whatever it can to prevent that outcome. Accordingly, the United States should prepare itself for escalation along the KRI's borders. Yet Washington should also realize that continued opposition to the independence movement [will weaken its leverage on the Kurds](#) and perhaps open further opportunities for Russia.

Tehran would not be immune to the consequences of opposing the KRI either. Any Iranian attempt to actively derail the Kurdish independence drive or supply other actors with arms would be a gift to the Trump administration, which has already set its sights on Iran's regional activities. And even if Tehran limits its interference to trade leverage, it would still risk becoming a common enemy to the Kurdish cause. Many Iranian Kurds are dependent on cross-border trade, so economic sanctions or blockades against the KRI could lead to further destabilization and discontent in western Iran -- the very outcome Tehran is striving to avoid.

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