Iraq Situation Report: April 8-14, 2020

1 Mar 30: Sistani and Sadeh Refused to Meet with New IRGC-QF Commander Ghaani

An anonymous senior Shia cleric source in Najaf told Al-Monitor that Iraq’s highest Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has not agreed to a meeting requested by the new Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Ismail Ghaani during Ghaani’s March 30 visit to Baghdad. Nationalist Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr also canceled a pre-scheduled meeting with Ghaani, telling him that “there should be no foreign interference in Iraq’s affairs.” Both meetings likely would have taken place in Najaf. Ghaani also did not meet with Sunni or Kurdish politicians.

2 Apr 08: Prime Minister-designate Zurfi Steps Down, Restarting Government Formation Process

Adnan al-Zurfi, the prime minister (PM)-designate, rescinded his nomination for the premiership before Iraq’s Parliament held the vote of confidence for his proposed government. Anonymous sources told Iraqi outlet al-Hura that multiple unspecified Shi’a parties offered Zurfi a high-ranking position in the next government in exchange for stepping down. Zurfi failed to gain the momentum essential to bypass attempts by Iran’s political proxies to block his nomination.

3 Apr 08: New Iranian Proxy Militia Released Drone Footage of Base Housing US Troops

Ushat al-Din Province. AK distributed a video claiming the attack on April 9. AK signed its convoy travelling between Arbil and Baghdad Provinces on April 8 in Uswayat, Salah al-Din Province. AK distributed a video claiming the attack on April 9. AK signed its statement “Islamic Resistance in Iraq - Ashab al-Kahf” referencing the umbrella organization for Iran’s proxies in Iraq. AK also released a poster on April 11 featuring a cache of 122 mm Katyusha rockets and warning that US bases are not safe.

4 Apr 08-09: Another New Iranian Proxy Militia, Ashab al-Kahf, Claims Attack on US Convoy and Threatens US Bases

Ashab al-Kahf (AK), another new Iranian proxy militia that announced its existence on March 15, released a propaganda video featuring drone footage of an Iranian missile strike that United States military officials confirmed hit afootage of US forces in Arbil Province. The video warned that “our eyes monitor their movements.” The “Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) fired ballistic missiles at an US-led Air Base, which houses US troops in Arbil Province. The video warned that “our eyes monitor their movements.” According to reports, the video was released by Iranian officials.

5 Apr 09: President Barham Salih Selects Mustafa al-Kadhimi as New PM-designate

President Barham Salih selected Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS) Director, Mustafa al-Kadhimi as the new PM-designate and invited him to attempt to form a cabinet within the constitutionally mandated 30-day timeframe. Kadhimi’s Baghdad-based ceremony demonstrated wide political support for his candidacy. The ceremony was conducted by Salih and attended by prominent political leaders and officials, including Council of Representatives Speaker and Sunni Iraqi Forces Alliance leader Muqtada al-Halbusi, Windsor Trend Leader Ammar al-Hakim, Conquest Alliance and Iranian proxy leader Hadi al-Amiri, Victory Alliance leader and former PM Haidar al-Abadi, high-ranking Toward Reform representative Nasar al-Rubaye, President of the High Judicial Council al-Zaidan, and United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) head Jalilin Montazer al-Hasani. Shortly after his nomination, Kadhimi tweeted nationalist messages in English, Arabic, and Kurdish promising to put the long-serving former ISW's new podcast, "Iraq Watch," available on Spotify, Stitcher, iFruit, and all your favorite podcast apps.

Key Takeaway: The United States, Iran, and most of Iraq’s political elites agreed to support Iraq’s new prime minister (PM)-designate, Iraqi National Intelligence Director Mustafa al-Kadhimi, following Iran’s successful political proxy campaign to sink the PM-designation of Adnan al-Zurfi. Most of Iran’s political and militia proxies fell in line behind Kadhimi but conditioned their support on the rapid expulsion of US forces from Iraq. However, key proxy militia Kata’ib Hezbollah maintains its firm anti-Kadhimi stance and may escalate to violence if the government formation process does not favor Iran’s preferred outcomes, including key cabinet appointments and 2020 budget allotments. Iran’s proxies are now focusing on an information operation consisting of rhetorical threats to shape Kadhimi’s proposed cabinet and to increase Iraqi political support for ending the US force presence ahead of a US-Iraq strategic dialogue slated for June. Meanwhile, Iran’s proxy militias created a fourth new Shia militia group to increase rhetorical and kinetic pressure on US forces.