Iraq Situation Report: March 18 - 24, 2020

Key Takeaway: U.S. forces began one of three planned withdrawals from small bases in Iraq, two of which have been targets of frequent Iranian-proxy mortar attacks. The Pentagon described the withdrawal as a planned consolidation of forces. Iran's political proxies are also organizing demonstrations and proxy militia attacks in reaction to the death of two Americans in a March 11 attack on Camp Taji. The U.S. launched retaliatory strikes on March 12.

1 Mar 17-18: Iraq’s Provinces and Other Shi'a Parties Declare Opposition to Prime Minister-designate. Nouri al-Maliki, the former prime minister (PM) and the current leader of the State of Law Coalition, hosted a meeting at his home in Baghdad with representatives of his party and three others: the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, a designated terror group led by Iranian proxy leader Hadi al-ameri, the National Contract bloc led by National Popular Mobilization Commission Chairman and Iraqi National Security Advisor Faleh al-Fayyadh, and the National Path bloc on behalf of the Islamic Virtue Party, a Shi'a Islamist party with a traditional power base in Basra that splintered from the Sadrist movement. The gathering issued a statement the following morning formally opposing PM-designate Adnan al-Zurfi and claiming that President Barham Salih unconstitutionally sidelined political parties when he unilaterally designated Zurfi.

2 Mar 18: U.S. State Department Issues New Sanctions on Iraqi Entities Funding Terror Attacks against the U.S. in Iraq. The U.S. State Department sanctioned nine entities and three individuals in the Iranian petrochemical industry. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that these individuals and entities provide revenue to Iran to fund acts of terror such as the recent attacks on Iraqi and U.S.-led Coalition forces at Camp Taji in Iraq.

3 Mar 18: Asa’ib Al-Haq Leader Says PM-designate of the Kurdistan Islamic Group (PM-designate Zurfi) “Endangers Civil Peace” and “Violates Religious Authority.” Qais al-Khazali, a U.S.-designated terrorist and the leader of Iran’s proxy militia Asa’ib Al-Haq (AAH), addressed a tweet to President Barham Salih condemning Salih’s unilaterally nominated PM-designate Zurfi. Khazali claimed that protesters and Shi’a forces openly reject Zurfi and warned that these groups will not allow Zurfi to become prime minister. AAH’s political wing, Sadigoun, is a component of the Conquest Alliance, which signed the formal statement rejecting Zurfi.

4 Mar 19: Pentagon Evaluating Options to Respond to Recent Iranian Proxy Attacks. Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said in a press release that the U.S. is still evaluating its options for a response to recent attacks by Iranian proxy militias. The U.S. launched retaliatory strikes on March 12 in response to the death of two Americans in a March 11 attack on Camp Taji. The U.S. has not yet retaliated for attacks on U.S.-led Coalition forces and U.S. personnel likely conducted by Iranian proxy militias on March 14, 16, and 17.

5 Mar 19: U.S. Presses Training and Begins “Planned” Drawdowns from Three Bases in Iraq by withdrawing from al-Qaim Base in Anbar. Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) officially transferred command of al-Qaim Base on the Iraqi-Syrian border in western Anbar Province to unidentified elements of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), leaving approximately 1 million worth of equipment for the ISF. CJTF-OIR also announced command handover of 13 bases. Meanwhile, CJTF-OIR announced a temporary suspension of training at the request of the ISF to prevent the spread of COVID-19. This suspension may lower the operational tempo of counter-ISIS raids, which depend on tactical Coalition enablers and assets. Neither group claimed responsibility for the attack.

6 Mar 19: Kata’ib Hezbollah Claims U.S. Withdrawal from Qaim “Beginning of Defeat” for the U.S. The de facto spokesperson for Iran’s proxy militias and U.S.-designated terrorist organization Kata’ib Hezbollah (KH), Abu Ali Al-Askari, declared the U.S. withdrawal from al-Qaim Base to be a “beginning of defeat.” Askari railed on anti-Western rhetoric and again called on the U.S. to stop conducting military operations against Iran in Iraq. The finger is on the trigger of the use of force in Iraq and Iran. Askari also called on the U.S. to withdraw from all bases inside Iraq. Ingmar’s chemical attack on the U.S. forces in Qaim Base. Askari also called on Iraq to stop the US and the anti-government forces in Iraq. The U.S. withdrawal is the first step of U.S. troops withdrawing from Iraq entirely.

7 Mar 19: Maliki’s State of Law Coalition Claims to Have Parliamentary Majority in Opposing PM-designate Zurfi’s Government. A spokesperson for former PM Nouri al-Maliki’s State of Law bloc, Bahaa al-Din al-Nuri, told the Iraqi outlet Shafaqaa that Ammar al-Hakim’s Wisdom Movement has agreed to join the Conquest Alliance, the State of Law Coalition, the National Path bloc, and the National Path bloc in rejecting PM-designate Adnan al-Zurfi. Nuri claimed that as many as 170 out of 329 members of parliament plan to reject Zurfi’s cabinet. If true, Zurfi will be unable to garner the 165 parliamentary votes necessary to form a government.

8 Mar 18-24: Shi’a Pilgrims Defy COVID-19 Curfews. Shi’a pilgrims gathered at the Kadhimi Shrine in northern Baghdad for several days to observe the anniversary of the death of the seventh Shi’a Imam Musa al-Kadhim in Twelver Shi’ism on March 21, thereby defying curfew and public gathering restrictions intended to control the spread of COVID-19. Shi’a pilgrims also visited the shrine of Abbas ibn Ali in Kerbala.

9 Mar 20: Caretaker PM Adel Abdul-Mehdi Bans All Gatherings and Inter-City Travel as Shi’a Violate COVID-19 Curfews. In a press release that the U.S. is still evaluating its options for a response to recent attacks by Iranian proxy militias. The U.S. launched retaliatory strikes on March 12 in response to the death of two Americans in a March 11 attack on Camp Taji. The U.S. has not yet retaliated for attacks on U.S.-led Coalition forces and U.S. personnel likely conducted by Iranian proxy militias on March 14, 16, and 17.

10 Mar 21: Shi’a Parties Close to Hadi al-Amri Discuss Alternative Candidates to Current PM-designate. Hadi al-Amri hosted an unspecific number of Shi’a political blocs at his home in Baghdad to discuss alternative PM candidates. The group discussed three alternative candidates from academic backgrounds according to the Kurdish outlet Rudaw.

11 Mar 22: Iranian Quds Force Plants Story to Undermine PM-designate Zurfi. The Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Jarida published an article wherein an anonymous source in the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) claimed that the U.S. and Iranian intelligence intercepted communications between Sunni and Kurdish Iraqi parties and Washington regarding “American plans.” The article is likely part of a disinformation operation to undermine current Iraqi PM-designate Zuri and frame his selection as an American conspiracy.

12 Mar 23: First Sunni Bloc Announces Support for Prime Minister-designate. Hadi al-Mulla, a spokesperson for Parliamentary Speaker Faleh al-Sudani’s Sunni Alliance of Iraqi Forces bloc, stated that the bloc supports PM-designate Zurfi. The party holds 32 seats in Parliament. Other Sunni blocs, such as the National Alliance, have not yet announced a position on Zurfi.

13 Mar 24: Ministry of Oil Announces New Contract with Chinese Company for Majnoon Oil Field in Basra. The Iraqi Ministry of Oil announced that the China Petroleum Engineering & Construction Corporation (CPEC) won a $203.5 million contract to build a processing facility for natural gas at Majnoon Oil Field in Basra. The contract’s provision for a new facility will allow for 3.49 million cubic meters of high-sulfur natural gas to be processed each day. Iraq produces approximately 27.6 million cubic meters of natural gas daily.

14 Mar 25: Shi’a Student Councils Mark Twelver Shi’a Martyrdom Anniversaries. Shi’a student councils marked the third martyrdom anniversary of the seventh Imam Musa al-Kadhim in Twelver Shi’ism on March 21, thereby defying curfew and public gathering restrictions intended to control the spread of COVID-19. Shi’a pilgrims visited the shrine of Abbas ibn Ali in Kerbala.

15 Mar 26: Iraqi Prime Minister and Cabinet Meet with Kurdistan Regional Government. Prime Minister-designate Adnan al-Zurfi met with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for the first time. The meeting was likely an attempt to secure support for Zurfi’s cabinet, as the KRG has been a key player in Iraq’s political landscape.

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