Iraq Situational Report: March 25–31, 2020

Key Takeaway: Iran advanced multiple lines of effort in Iraq to compel the U.S. withdrawal from the country. Iran successfully organized political opposition from the most powerful Iraqi Shi'a blocs to the U.S. strategic imperative. Iran also successfully assured itself of a missile network to prepare for U.S. attacks, and a volunteer fundraiser network to support the Iraqi forces in the event of U.S. attack.

©2020 by the Institute for the Study of War

Graphic by Brandon Wallace and Katherine Lackey

To learn more about the situation in Iraq and other international issues, subscribe to ISW’s two podcasts. Overwatch is available on Spotify, Sticher, iTunes, and all your favorite podcast apps. And for an in-depth look at current issues and how to address them, join ISW’s new podcast, Irma.

1 Mar 24–27: Iraqi Joint Operations Command Deploys Troops to Enforce COVID-19 Curfew. Brigadier General Aged Ali al-Saadi, the commander of the 11th Iraqi Army Division, confirmed that Baghdad Operations Command dispatched at least 40 military vehicles to Baghdad’s Sadi City neighborhood to set up checkpoints and enforce the COVID-19 curfew on March 25. Journalists circulated videos on Twitter showing the streets of Sadi City packed with vehicles in the evening of March 24. The Joint Operations Command (JOC) later announced on March 27 that it will send further unspecified military reinforcements to Sadi City, east Baghdad, and “other governorates” to intensify preventative COVID-19 curfews on the orders of caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi.

2 Mar 25: European Members of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) Begin Withdrawing Troops from Iraq Due to COVID-19. Several European members of the EU-led anti-ISIS Coalition announced military withdrawals from Iraq due to COVID-19. France, the Czech Republic, and Portugal announced complete withdrawals, while the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, and Germany announced partial troop withdrawals. The British Ministry of Defence committed to retaining “key military personnel” in Iraq. The Netherlands will withdraw 35 of its 40 soldiers. Spain will withdraw a majority of its 550 soldiers. Italy will withdraw 200 of its 800 soldiers. CJTF-OIR has temporarily suspended training Iraqi forces since March 19 to limit the spread of COVID-19.

3 Mar 25: Hadi al-Bassa’s Sunni Alliance of Iraqi Forces Will Commit to Any Prime Minister Candidate with Consensus. His Support, The Alliance of Iraqi Forces, the largest Sunni bloc led by Iraqi Parliamentary Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi, called on his bloc in Parliament to reach an agreement on a prime minister as soon as possible for the sake of the public health and economic crises in the country. Zaitoun al-Dulaimi, a Shi’a member and parliamentarian, said that the Alliance of Iraqi Forces will support any person that “Shi’a agree upon.”


5 Mar 25: Kata’ib Hezbollah Accuses U.S. of Planning Attacks Against Pro-Iraq Militias, ISIS. PMF Kata’ib Hezbollah’s (KH) US-designated terror group and key Iraqi pro-military militia, posted a statement to its official website claiming that it is monitoring “suspicous” U.S. troop movements. KH asserted that the U.S. is planning attacks on the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and the “Islamic Resistance” – the network of Iraqi-backed Shi’a militia groups. KH also accused Iraq’s security apparatus of assisting the U.S.in this “so-called” scheme. KH called on its followers to prepare to confront the U.S. with “full force.”

6 Mar 26: Two Rockets Fall in Green Zone, Baghdad. Unidentified militants fired two Katyusha rockets from the al-Nada neighborhood in eastern Baghdad, striking two locations belonging to the Baghdad Operations Command and Joint Operations Command in Baghdad’s Green Zone. An anonymous Iraqi security official told AFP that the target appeared to be the U.S. Embassy, 1.5 km to the east. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.

7 Mar 26: U.S. Forces Officially Withdraw from Qayyarah West Base near Mosul. The Iraqi Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) officially transferred full command of the Qayyarah West Base south of Mosul to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Brigadier General Vincent Barker reiterated that the U.S. mission remains the same despite Coalition consolidations. The move leaves approximately $1.7 million of equipment to Iraqi security forces and relocates 800 U.S. personnel. Qayyarah West marks the second of a series of three planned U.S. base withdrawals announced on March 15.

8 Mar 26: U.S. Treasury Designates Several Iran- and Iraq-based Companies and Individuals as Sponsors of Terrorist Organizations. The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) designated 20 Iran- and Iraq-based companies and individuals as financiers of terrorist organisations. These companies and individuals specifically supported the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps - Quds Force (IRGC-QF) or transferred aid to Iranian-backed U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as KH or Asaib Ahl al Haq (AAH).

9 Mar 26: U.S. Extends Iranian Electricity Sanctions Waiver for Iraq. The U.S. State Department again extended a waiver allowing Iraq to import Iranian electricity and natural gas despite U.S. Army Forces Central Command’s directive to withdraw American forces from Iraq over COVID-19 concerns. The extension usually ranges from 45-120 days. This is the seventh waiver the U.S. has given since the U.S. intensified sanctions on Iran energy exports in November 2018.

10 Mar 26: Kata’ib Hezbollah Completes Training Operation “Hunting Crows” in Jurf al-Sukhar to Prepare for U.S. Attacks. Ismael al-Humeini, a KH spokesman, announced that “thousands” participated in a large, live-fire training exercise “to prepare for U.S. air landing assaults” on KH positions in Jurf al-Sukhar. He claimed that the operation included urban and forested combat areas in Jurf al-Sukhar, 60 km southwest of Baghdad. Humeini said that the tactical exercise is a warning against the consequences of taking action against the group.

11 Mar 27: 30-70% Considering More Aggressive Strike Options against Iranian Proxies in Iraq. New York Times exclusive published March 27 revealed CENTCOM military planners to develop a strategy to counter the current anti-ISIS mission of CJTF-OIR. Iraqi Caïdat Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mehdi released a statement on March 30 condemning “acts of war” within Iraq and in response to the U.S. actions.

12 Mar 29-30: U.S. Forces Officially Leave K1 Airbase in Kirkuk, CJTF-OIR officially withdrew all U.S. personnel and transferred full command of Kirkuk Air Base to the ISF. KH killed an American contractor and wounded 11 soldiers in a rocket attack on K1 on December 27. U.S. forces also transferred K1’s military equipment to the Iraqi government, including generators and above-ground water tanks. The consolidation of areas from K1 is the third and final pre-planned U.S. consolidation away from smaller Iraqi military bases announced on March 1. CJTF-OIR also vacated a U.S. camp that served as an advisory cell in Kirkuk and transferred operations to Operations Command (NOC) in Mosul, Nineveh Province, on March 30.

13 Mar 30: U.S. Deploys Patriot Missile Batteries to Two Bases. Anonymous U.S. and Iraqi officials told AFP that the U.S. deployed Patriot missile batteries in March to bases targeted by Iranian missile strikes in January. The batteries arrived at An Nawwar Air Base in western Anbar Province and Harir Air Base in Arbil Province in northern Iraq. The U.S. will deploy two more batteries to unspecified locations. The two additional batteries are still in Kuwait, and it is unclear whether the U.S. government received approval from the Iraqi government for these missiles.

14 Mar 30: Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Announce Operations to Clear ISIS Following Prison Breakout Attempt in Syria. The PMF launched clearing operations targeting ISIS prisoners from K1 is the third and final pre-planned U.S. consolidation away from smaller Iraqi military bases announced on March 1.

15 Mar 30-31: IRGC-QF Commander Ghaani Insists on Iraq Government Formation, despite USA's pressure. Ismael Ghaani, the commander of the IRGC-QF, arrived at Baghdad International Airport on March 30. Ghaani met with the leaders of the most important Shi’a blocs, including Hadi al-Amiri, the leader of the Conquest Alliance bloc; Nouri al-Maliki, the former PM and head of the State of Law bloc; Ammar al-Hakim, the head of the National Iraqi Alliance. On March 31, Iranian media reported that Ghaani may have also met with nationalist Shi’a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Toward Reform bloc. This trip represents Ghaani’s first visit to Iraq since the U.S. killed his predecessor, Qassem Soleimani, in a strike on January 3. Ghaani likely lobbied those he met to reject PMF-designate Zurfi.

To more about the situation in Iraq and other international issues, see ISW’s two podcasts. Overwatch is available on Spotify, Sticher, iTunes, and all your favorite podcast apps.