

Crisis Brief: The Risk of an Iranian Military Response in Iraq

Overwatch Podcast Transcript

Featuring Jennifer Cafarella, Nicholas Carl, and Maseh Zarif



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Crisis Brief is a special edition of the *Overwatch* podcast series intended to provide timely updates on unfolding national security crises. Iran signaled it may send Iranian security forces to Iraq, ostensibly to secure the upcoming Arba'een pilgrimage. But Iran may alternatively be preparing these Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) to help suppress Iraqi protests. The LEF previously helped the Bashar al Assad regime attempt to suppress the Syrian rebellion as early as 2011. The Iranian Regime has used it more recently to quell domestic protests. The unit may assist Iran's proxies in Iraq to do the same. In this installment, ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and Critical Threats Project Iran Analyst Nicholas Carl discuss this possibility and its implications. Listen on our website [here](#).

Maseh Zarif

This is *Overwatch*, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif and I'm your host for this episode. It's 5:00 PM here in Washington D.C. on Tuesday, October 8, 2019. Iraq is in the midst of an unprecedented period of unrest. Against that backdrop, Iran may be preparing to send security personnel across the border into Iraq. The specific forces in question also have a history of intervening abroad, including in another theater that's been central to Tehran's bid for regional hegemony. Critical Threats Project Iran Analyst Nicholas Carl joins ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella to break down what we know.

Nicholas Carl

The Iranian regime is signaling that they are preparing a major intervention into Iraq in order to suppress the ongoing protests there. The Law Enforcement Forces, for context, are Iran's national police force and serve as a component of its armed forces. Its Special Forces Units have been heavily involved in protest suppression and anti-riot operations in Iran in the past. Today, a senior Iranian Law Enforcement Forces commander announced that Iran will deploy around 11,000 Special Forces Unit members from the Law Enforcement Forces in order to support the Arba'een pilgrimage to Iraq. Historically, the LEF's involvement in Arba'een security has been confined to the Iranian side of the border. So the LEF has never before deployed for Arba'een pilgrimage security to the extent that they are now doing. This commander, who is notably an IRGC member, did not specifically say to where these Special Forces would deploy. Some foreign media is misrepresenting the commander's statements, reporting that he said that the forces will go directly to Iraq, but he was not this explicit.

There does remain, however, a significant possibility that Iran will send these forces to Iraq if they feel the need to violently crack down on the Iraqi protests there. So based on the LEF's past experiences and deployments in Iran, they have been heavily involved in the violent protest suppression of Iranians during the Dey Protests as well as previous protests waves in 2009 and 1999. The Law Enforcement Forces have historically in Iran also leveraged nonlethal tactics there as well, using gas canisters and other things to avoid killing the Iranian protesters. However, Iran has in past instances gone so far as to do that, wherein they believe that type of force was necessary.

Jennifer Cafarella

So the LEF, then, is a riot police force that engages in the suppression of protest movements with non-lethal steps if possible but with violence when they perceive a requirement to escalate against the protesters to disperse them more rapidly or more decisively. When the Iranians deployed the LEF, what does that signal about the severity of the threat that they perceive?

Nicholas Carl

So notably, the first Iranian forces that deployed to Syria when the unrest began there in 2011 were the Law Enforcement Forces. This is not to suggest that they are preparing for a full-scale intervention into Iraq to the same degree that they have done so in Syria. But it nonetheless could be something in their playbook that they are actively considering, should they believe that that type of response is necessary.

Jennifer Cafarella

So the LEF has already cut its teeth, so to speak, in the suppression of protest movements outside of Iran, through its involvement advising and enabling the Syrian regime suppression through force of its own popular revolution. Therefore, the LEF may apply these lessons learned and similar tactics on the Iraqi side. So what would that entail? The LEF using the Syrian playbook in Iraq?

Nicholas Carl

These Law Enforcement Forces could serve as an augmentation to the Popular Mobilization Forces there in Iraq if they believe that the PMF are not sufficiently suppressing the protests and that there does remain a very real possibility for a popular uprising that could threaten the stability of the Iraqi state.

Jennifer Cafarella

So despite the fact that many reports indicate the protests have temporarily died down, the Iranians are behaving as if the situation in Iraq is continuing to escalate in a way that has caused them to start preparing even more drastic measures, to take direct action within Iraq to further suppress this protest movement. Which means it seems the Iranians think this crisis is far from over and that far more bloodshed may be necessary. Have the LEF deployed to Iraq before?

Nicholas Carl

The Iranian military intervention in Iraq has been primarily confined to the IRGC-Quds Force, which has then through the Popular Mobilization Forces advanced Iranian objectives in Iraq.

Jennifer Cafarella

Iran knows that there is a significant nationalist movement within Shi'a Iraq to retain Iraqi independence and uphold Iraqi sovereignty, and therefore to resist Iranian attempts to subjugate the Iraqi state or to co-opt it through covert means to serve Iranian interests.

Nicholas Carl

The fact that the Iranians are seriously considering a military intervention into Iraq at this level underscores how gravely the Iranian regime perceives this threat. The collapse of the Iraqi state, or any type of civil unrest there that could instigate insurgency or civil war, could be an existential threat to the Iranian regime for a variety of reasons. Among them, this could destabilize the border region and very easily spread over into Iran itself. As well as, we've discussed previously, instigate further protest movements in Iran that they've experienced for years now.

Jennifer Cafarella

The Iranians are certainly demonstrating a continued willingness to consider even greater escalation. In this case, as we've discussed previously on this podcast, the senior Shi'a religious authority within Iraq, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has sided with the protesters against the Iraqi Government in a notable departure from his past involvement, which had focused on calming the situation and deescalating rising tensions. If the Iranians overtly send military forces in, even under the guise of providing security that Iraq doesn't need for the Ar-

ba'een pilgrimage, the Iranians are accepting the risk that Sistani will mobilize his Shi'a supporters against the Iranians. That's a significant escalation for Iran.

Nicholas Carl

The Islamic Republic of Iran perceives itself as a natural leader, not only within the Shi'a community but also the broader Muslim one across the world. So for there to be a prominent Iraqi Shi'a cleric speaking out against an Iranian military intervention into Iraq could serve to de-legitimize Iran's framing of itself as the rightful leader within the larger Muslim community.

Jennifer Cafarella

So we have a risk, therefore, that if Iran sends military forces into Iraq, the consequences could include a regional intra-Shi'a war. Are the Iranians prepared for that?

Nicholas Carl

The Iranians, as demonstrated through their intervention into Syria, will deploy their IRGC as well as their conventional military abroad for sustained deployments if they believe that there is an existential threat that directly challenges the Axis of Resistance, and, as they've argued before, they believe that this protest movement is backed by the United States. If they actually believe this argumentation, they could perceive this as just another manifestation of the U.S. maximum pressure campaign against Iran and its maligned influence throughout the region.

Jennifer Cafarella

So we should not underestimate the lengths to which the Islamic Republic will go to address what they perceive to be an existential threat emerging from Iraq, which means they may have become willing to take risks that they have not been willing to take in the past, in terms of alienating the Shi'a religious authority in Iraq even further, and thereby provoking potentially more backlash against Iran throughout the region and a renewed ideological confrontation for leadership of the Shi'a community.

There are two additional consequences of this potential Iranian deployment into Iraq. First, it would mean that direct Iranian forces, not covert forces, would now outnumber American forces in Iraq. Second, the LEF would most likely co-locate on military bases with the Popular Mobilization Forces. They may take the opportunity to send in weapons systems or additional covert assets that Israel would perceive as a direct threat, and thereby could trigger greater Israeli intervention into Iraq, which could further accelerate this crisis.

Maseh Zarif

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