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Iranian Troops Attack Kurdish Camps in Iraq

Tuesday, 19 Jul 2011 07:53 AM
By Ken Timmerman

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Thousands of Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) troops crossed into northern Iraq over the weekend, bombarding Iraqi Kurdish villages.

The Iraqi government has quietly acknowledged the Iranian military operation on Iraqi soil, but has not called it an invasion.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the prime minister of the Kurdish regional government, Dr. Barham Salih, left for Beijing as the Iranian invasion began, for a long-planned trip aimed at encouraging Chinese investment in Iraq.

The Iranian military offensive is targeting bases controlled by the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), the largest and best-organized Iranian opposition group currently operating inside Iran.

Sherzad Kamangar, a PJAK spokesman in northern Iraq, told Newsmax that by Monday evening PJAK forces had pushed the Iranian troops out of Iraqi.

Kamangar said PJAK had confirmed the deaths of 108 Iranian revolutionary guards troops in the clashes, and wounded 200 more, while losing seven PJAK guerilla fighters.



Nouri al-Maliki

An Iranian Revolutionary Guards spokesman, Delavar Ranjbarzadeh, told Iran's state run news agency that "a large number" of rebels died in clashes near Sardasht, Iran, where the IRGC claims it has dismantled a PJAK base.

PJAK members claimed they had captured 40 IRGC troops who surrendered when the rebels attacked a Revolutionary Guards base near Sardasht, a Kurdish city and government outpost not far from Iran's northern border with Iraq.

The IRGC had been building up its forces along the northern border with Iraq for several weeks, reinforcing bases in Sardasht, Piranshahr, and Mariwan in Iranian Kurdistan.

In early July, PJAK fighters clashed with IRGC troops on the Iranian side of the Qandil Mountains where PJAK is based, and killed 18 IRGC officers.

But PJAK never announced the skirmish, or their success. "Our struggle is not a military struggle," PJAK Secretary General Rahman Haj Ahmadi told Newsmax in an interview. "It is primarily a political struggle to change the culture."

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PJAK sources claim that high-ranking Turkish officers and special forces teams are playing an active role in the Iranian army thrust into Iraq. Turkey and Iran have established a joint operational base to attack the Kurds in Urimyeh, in northwestern Iran, where Turkish anti-insurgency experts have been training their Iranian counterparts.

PJAK seized recently manufactured U.S. weapons from Iranian-backed counterinsurgency fighters in clashes two years ago, which they believe were supplied by the Turks to Iran.

The IRGC deployed heavy weaponry in their assault including tanks, katyusha rocket launchers, artillery, mortars, and U.S.-built Huey Cobra attack helicopters against PJAK guerillas.

PJAK's secretary general, Rahman Haj Ahmadi, believes that Iran is seeking to push PJAK fighters out of the border regions between Iran and Iraq to replace them with radical Islamic terrorists.

"We have been protecting the border from Iranian infiltration since 2003," he told Newsmax. "That's one reason Iran wants to push us out. They want to replace us with al-Qaida or Ansar al Islam," a radical al-Qaida offshoot that operated in Iraqi Kurdistan before the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

"If that happens, Suleymania will become another Fallujah," he warned. Suleymania is a major city in northeastern Iraq that many Iraqi Kurds consider their second capital.

Ahmadi said that PJAK was pro-Western, secular, and a "natural ally of the United States in the struggle against Islamic fundamentalism."

Leaked letters from the Kurdistan regional government representative in Tehran, Nazim Debagh, shows Iran repeatedly pressing the government to crack down on PJAK fighters over the past two years, and threatening to take matters in their own hands if it did not act.

In one letter, sent to Prime Minister Dr. Barham Salih on May 9, 2010, Debagh complains that "we have had no response from you about the promises you made to the Iranians" about taking strong steps against Iranian Kurds in the Qandil mountains.

The letter says that the Iranians were pressing for a response by May 13, and urged him "not to delay because in just one month, PJAK targeted four key areas inside Iran." (On the same day the letter was sent, Iran executed five Kurdish activists, including several PJAK sympathizers.)

Earlier this year, the Iranians again pressed Salih to crack down on the PJAK camps along the Iranian border.

After meeting with Iranian National Security General Secretary Saeed Jalili in January, Salih told Iran's Fars News Agency, "We are hopeful that greater efforts will be made to protect the prevailing stability and security."

Iran has been pressuring Iraq to crack down on the rebels for years. See "**Iran Pressures Iraq to Crack Down on Kurds.**"

U.S. Department of Treasury put PJAK on its list of "specially designated" terrorist organizations in February 2009, just as the Obama administration began quiet negotiations with the Iranian regime.

A Treasury Department internal memo, released under the Freedom of Information Act to PJAK's U.S. attorney, Morton Sklar, claimed the group is "controlled" by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a guerilla movement, but appeared to rely mainly on Turkish and Iranian government media reports to draw that conclusion.

PJAK rebels took me to bases they controlled near the site of the current clashes this February, but they were several hours by road from the areas controlled by the PKK.

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While the two groups are friendly, they do not operate in the same areas of Iraq and do not share joint command and control or even political structures.

A Freedom of Information Act request by the Foundation for Democracy in Iran to the Department of Justice found that the Justice Department was not consulted in designating PJAK as a terrorist organization, as required by U.S. law, giving weight to PJAK's allegation that the designation was politically motivated as a sop to the Iranian regime.

The move by Treasury was a boon to the Iranian regime, since it effectively discouraged other Iranian opposition groups from cooperating with PJAK when the June 2009 protests broke out in Iran and has isolated PJAK.

Iran initially tried to claim PJAK was a creation of the United States when the group first emerged from the more traditional Iranian Kurdish parties in 2003. Only later, as Iran grew closer to the Turkish government of Prime Minister Recep Erdogan, did the Iranian regime begin to claim that PJAK was a "branch" of the PKK.

Iran has also been active against the group using aggressive intelligence operations, most notably by hiring Iranian Kurdish hit squads to commit atrocities against civilians in PJAK's name.

"We track these attacks, but there are so many," said Amir Karimi, a senior PJAK leader I met in the Qandil mountains in February. "Their main goal is to discredit PJAK, and to frighten the Kurds by operating in both Iran and Iraq. They are directly under the control of the IRGC intelligence."

Over the past two years, these groups have killed 368 people in Iran and Iraq, dressed them in PJAK guerilla uniforms, then sold them to the IRGC for "kill fees" ranging up to \$45,000 apiece.

"Their scheme fell apart when they killed the son of the Friday prayer leader in Mariwan," Rahman Haj Ahmadi told me. "He demanded an investigation when his son's body turned up dressed as a PJAK fighter. He said that was impossible, and demanded that the intelligence ministry conduct an investigation."

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