
IRAN SENDS TANKS TO BORDER WITH IRAQ'S KURDISH REGION, KURDISH OFFICIAL SAYS

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Iran deployed a dozen tanks supported by artillery at its border with Iraqs autonomous Kurdish region on Monday, a Kurdish official said, adding that the move was a dangerous escalation in the crisis triggered by Iraqi Kurdistans independence vote.

The tanks can be seen from the Kurdish side, an official from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) security council told Reuters, adding that the move was a dangerous escalation.

Iraqs Kurds overwhelmingly voted for independence in a referendum held one week ago, defying the central government in Baghdad as well as neighboring Turkey and Iran, which fear Kurdish separatism within their own borders.

The deployment at the Parviz Khan border point on Monday was part of joint military drills conducted by the Iranian and the Iraqi armed forces in response to the referendum, state media in Tehran said. The exercises began last Sunday, according to Irans Mehr news agency.

The KRG says it plans to use the referendums result as a mandate to negotiate the peaceful secession of the Kurdish region through talks with Baghdad.

KRG President Masoud Barzani said on Monday it was legitimate to hold the vote in the Kurdish areas, including in the multi-ethnic oil city of Kirkuk, also claimed by Baghdad.

Kirkuk is a Kurdistan city which should become an example for the coexistence of nations and religions, he said during a visit to Kirkuk.

But Baghdad has rejected any talks with the KRG over independence. It demanded that the KRG relinquish control over its external border crossings with Turkey, Iran and Syria. It also demanded the KRG hand over its airports to federal control.

When the KRG turned down those demands, Iraqs central government imposed a ban on international flights to and from the regions two international airports on Friday.

The interior ministry said on Monday foreigners stranded in the Kurdish region by the ban would be allowed to exit through Baghdads airport without having to wait for an Iraqi visa. Many nationalities, especially westerners, were allowed into the KRG without a visa.

Baghdad gained the support of Cairos al-Azhar, the highest seat of Sunni Muslim learning, on Monday. It issued a statement rejecting invitations to divide Iraq.

Al-Azhars position could help Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, a Shiite, rally some support among Iraqs large Sunni minority against the Kurds, who are also largely Sunni.

In another effort to present the government as inclusive for all Iraqis, including Kurds, state TV announced on Monday that it will be broadcasting a daily news bulletin in Kurdish.

Iraqs defense ministry said on Friday the Iraqi authorities planned to take control of the borders of its autonomous Kurdistan region in coordination with Iran and Turkey.

The statement did not give details. Nor did it indicate whether Iraqi forces would move toward the border posts controlled by the KRG from the Iranian and Turkish side, or set up checkpoints in the vicinity of these posts in order to control the crossings.

Iranian state television on Saturday quoted a military spokesman as saying Iran and Iraq agreed on measures to establish border security and receive Iraqi forces that are to be stationed at border posts.

We have always respected our borders with our neighbors and any (military) move will be in coordination with Baghdad and our allies, a senior Iranian official told Reuters on condition of

anonymity.

Iran has vowed to stand alongside Baghdad in the fallout following the referendum. Allowing Iraq to seize border posts from Kurdish control would further cement Irans stance to renounce dealings with the Kurdistan region in favor of the central government in Baghdad.

Backed by Ankara and Tehran, the Iraqi government has demanded that the Kurdish leadership cancel the result of the referendum or face the prospect of sanctions, international isolation and possibly a military intervention.

A small Iraqi force is also deployed on the Turkish side of the border as part of joint drills with the Turkish army.

Irans military chief, General Mohammad Baqeri, met Turkish Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar in Tehran on Monday.

Iran and Turkey share the same stance on the referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan and both insist on the sovereignty of Iraq, Baqeri was quoted as saying by state news agency IRNA after his meeting with Akar.

The armed forces of both countries will increase cooperation in training and war games, he was quoted as saying by Tasnim news agency.

Kaynak/Source: