

KURD REBELS SHRUG OFF TURKEY-IRAN THREATS

KOYSINJAQ: Plans for an independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan have angered Ankara and Tehran, but little has changed for Iranian Kurdish rebels at rear bases in the mountains of northern Iraq. A spokesman for the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) said reports of a joint Turkish-Iranian military operation against Kurdish rebels in Iraq were mainly intended to unsettle Iraqi Kurds.

Speaking in Koysinjaq, 60 kilometers east of the autonomous region's capital Arbil, Aso Hassan Zada said Iran and Turkey had only one shared interest—their opposition to the September 25 referendum. Both countries fear it could stir separatist aspirations among their own sizeable Kurdish minorities. “Neither country will help the other without something in return,” he said as armed, uniformed men and women trained outside in a courtyard plastered with portraits of their rebel movement's founders.

The central government in Baghdad has said the non-binding referendum violates Iraq's constitution. Coming as Iraqi forces backed by an international coalition battle Islamic State group jihadists in Iraq and Syria, it has also stoked opposition from Washington and Western countries. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said last month that a joint Turkish-Iranian operation against Iraq-based Kurdish rebels from the two countries was “always on the agenda”.

Turkey has battled the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) for decades, while Iranian security forces have fought the PDKI and a PKK affiliate, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK). Iran, while equally opposed to the referendum, swiftly denied Erdogan's claim of any planned operation inside Iraqi Kurdistan. But its elite Revolutionary Guards warned: “As always we will strongly confront any group, team or person who wants to penetrate into Iran's territory for anti-security or terrorist operations.”

'Impossible' co-operation

From another mountain base, Zelan Vejin, a leader of the PJAK whose fighters also operate along the border with Iran, shrugged off the threat of any joint operation. “It's impossible that Iran and Turkey operate together” because of their divergent political aims, she said. Besides, she added, “Iran always undertakes military actions in secret, never disclosing its intentions, whereas Turkey pre-announces its campaigns.”

The PDKI's Zada said Ankara prioritizes fighting the PKK inside Turkey and on Iraqi and Syrian territory, while Tehran's goal is to clear its Iraqi border of PDKI and PJAK militants. Ankara and Tehran have carried out a string of separate military operations against Kurdish rebel bases in the mountains of northern Iraq. “Our fighters have observed repeated incursions into Iraqi territory by Iranian forces,” Zada said, adding that Iran had deployed artillery units right along the border. If Iran and Turkey do launch operations, “we will step up our fight inside Iranian territory,” Vejin said. “Iran has forever occupied our land but it has never managed to defeat us through military means. War does not frighten us,” she said. — AFP

IRAN PREPARES AID FOR MYANMAR ROHINGYAS

TEHRAN: Iran's Red Crescent said yesterday it has prepared an aid package for Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims as they flee a crackdown by security forces, local media reported. “An emergency, food, life support and hygiene package has been prepared by the Red Crescent to be sent to Myanmar,” said head of the organization Morteza Salimi, according to the ISNA news agency.

The package would be “immediately sent to the oppressed people of this country if we receive authorization from Myanmar,” he said, adding it had been ordered by President Hassan Rouhani. It comprised of a plane-load of aid weighing 40 tons and worth around four billion rials (just over \$100,000), Salimi later told AFP.

Iranian officials have repeatedly condemned the massive security operations by the Myanmar army that followed a series of deadly ambushes by Rohingya militants on August 25. The United Nations says 164,000 refugees have so far fled to neighboring Bangladesh. Iran's ambassador to the UN, Gholam Ali Khoshrou, yesterday said he was working to bring together ministers and diplomats from several Islamic countries to discuss the issue.—AFP



Israeli soldiers maneuver a tank during a military exercise in the northern part of the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights yesterday. — AFP

ISRAEL HITS SYRIA SITE ALLEGEDLY USED FOR CHEMICAL WEAPONS

SYRIA'S ARMY WARNS OF SERIOUS REPERCUSSIONS

DAMASCUS: Syria's army accused Israeli warplanes of hitting one of its positions yesterday killing two people in an attack that a monitor said targeted a site where the regime allegedly produces chemical weapons. The site near the Syrian town of Masyaf, between the central city of Hama and a port used by the Russian navy, is reportedly used by forces from Syria's allies Iran and the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah. Israel has previously carried out strikes believed to be targeting the transfer of weapons to Hezbollah, which fought a deadly war with the Jewish state in 2006.

Yesterday's strike hit a training camp and a branch of the Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC), an institution that Washington and former Israeli officials accuse of helping develop the sarin gas used in a deadly attack on the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhun in April. President Bashar Al-Assad's government has blasted such accusations as “fabrications,” and Syria's army yesterday did not mention the SSRC in its statement on the Israeli strikes.

“Israeli warplanes at 2:42 am today fired a number of missiles from Lebanese air space, targeting one of our military positions near Masyaf, which led to material damage and the deaths of two members of the site,” the statement said. “Syria's army warns of the serious repercussions of such acts of aggression on the security and stability of the region,” it added.

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group confirmed that the strikes hit the SSRC, though it could not confirm what weaponry is produced there. It said

Hezbollah fighters and Iranian military personnel were known to use the site at Masyaf. “There are Iranian experts using the research centre there. Hezbollah also uses the facility,” said Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman. “The research centre was definitely damaged in the strikes. There is a huge fire emanating from a weapons warehouse where missiles were being stored,” he added.

'Produces chemical weapons'

Israel has long warned it would not allow the transfer of sophisticated weaponry to Hezbollah and has accused the group's sponsor Iran of building sites to produce “precision-guided missiles” in both Syria and Lebanon. “Iran is busy turning Syria into a base of military entrenchment,” Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said last month. Israeli officials declined to comment on the raids yesterday.

Former military intelligence head Amos Yadlin said the site “produces the chemical weapons and barrel bombs that have killed thousands of Syrian civilians.” He stopped short of saying Israel had carried out the raids, but said that if it did, they would show “Israel intends to enforce its redlines despite the fact that the great powers are ignoring them.” And Israel's former national security advisor Yaakov Amidror described the facility as a key centre for the research and development of arms including chemical weapons.

“It is the first time that the target which was attacked is a formal Syrian facility, not just a warehouse but a centre of R&D and... responsible for producing the chemical weapons in the

past and many other weapons systems,” he told journalists. “We will not allow Iran and Hezbollah to build the capabilities which allow them to attack Israel from Syria,” he added. “And we will not allow them to build the capabilities of Hezbollah under the chaotic umbrella of Syria.”

He said there should be an “assumption” that Syria would respond militarily. Earlier this week, Israel's military began a massive exercise simulating conflict with Hezbollah, the largest drill in nearly two decades. On Wednesday, United Nations war crimes investigators announced they had an “extensive body of information” indicating Syrian warplanes were behind the deadly April 4 attack on Khan Sheikhun. A fact-finding mission by the UN's chemical watchdog, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), concluded earlier this year that sarin gas was used in the attack but did not assign blame.

The attack killed at least 87 people and prompted the United States to launch a cruise missile strike on a Syrian military airport where it said the attack had originated. Weeks later, the US sanctioned 271 Syrian chemists and other officials affiliated with the SSRC, which it said was behind the Syrian government's efforts to develop chemical weapons. Syria's government claims it no longer possesses chemical weapons after a 2013 agreement under which it pledged to surrender its chemical arsenal. But in 2016, a UN-led investigative body said the Syrian government was behind at least three chemical attacks in northern Syria in the previous two years.—AFP