

Iran Crisis Update, October 17

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The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) began a three-day military exercise along the Iran-Azerbaijan border on October 17 likely to threaten Azerbaijan for allegedly hosting Israeli intelligence agents.^[1] The IRGC is using this exercise to demonstrate its capability to attack Azerbaijan and strike targets in Azerbaijani territory. The exercise includes artillery, helicopters, tanks, and missiles.^[2] The IRGC announced plans to practice bridging the river that divides Iran and Azerbaijan for the first time during this exercise.^[3] The IRGC is using the *Fateh-360* short-range ballistic missile, which has a reported operational range of 120 kilometers, in this exercise.^[4] IRGC-affiliated media boasted that the IRGC has previously used these missiles for cross-border attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan.^[5] An IRGC-affiliated journalist tweeted that the exercise signals the readiness of the IRGC to confront Azerbaijan.^[6]

Iranian officials and state media assert that Israel is using Azerbaijan as an intelligence base to instigate protests.^[7] IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami attended the exercise and accused Israel of operating in countries north of Iran, implying Azerbaijan.^[8]

Tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan have flared over Armenia in recent months, which also likely informed the regime decision to conduct the exercise. Iran opposes Azerbaijani efforts to connect Azerbaijan proper to the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic by a land corridor, arguing that doing so would block Iranian economic access to European and Russian markets.^[9] The IRGC is likely conducting the exercise partly to signal its opposition to these Azerbaijani efforts.

Salami warned Saudi Arabia against using its media influence to stoke protests during the exercise.^[10] Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and senior Iranian political and security officials have repeatedly accused the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia of stoking and coopting the protests to undermine the Islamic Republic.^[11] The IRGC Quds Force could use the Houthis or Iranian proxies in Iraq to conduct drone and missile attacks into Saudi Arabia in retaliation for Riyadh's perceived role in fomenting the popular unrest.

The IRGC could redeploy the troops involved in the military exercise to violently suppress planned protests in northwestern Iran called for on October 20. Persian-language social media accounts have called for protests in the northwestern city of Tabriz and other nearby cities on October 20—the same day that the three-day military exercise ends.^[12] The main IRGC combat elements in the area are the 2nd Imam Zaman Mechanized Brigade and the 31st Ashoura Mechanized Division, which are likely participating in the exercise.^[13] The IRGC would likely use these units to apply extreme force against protests.

Key Takeaways

- The IRGC threatened Azerbaijan and Saudi Arabia for their alleged roles in stoking the ongoing, anti-regime protests.
- The IRGC could use the troops it mobilized for the military exercise to violently suppress planned protests in northwestern Iran on October 20.
- Anti-regime protests occurred in at least 10 cities in 9 provinces.
- The *New York Times* reported that the regime may have deployed special forces from the IRGC Ground Forces in recent days to suppress protests in Tehran and other major cities.
- Several reformist politicians proposed reforms to end the current crisis.
- The *Jerusalem Post* reported that the IRGC is using members of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi proxies to suppress protests in Iran, citing unidentified sources.

Anti-Regime Protests

Anti-regime protests occurred in at least 10 cities in 9 provinces on October 17. CTP assesses with moderate or high confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

- Ardabil, Ardabil Province (*At least 50 medical students protesting at a hospital; plainclothed regime forces beat and arrested protesters*)[14]
- Bushehr, Bushehr Province (*Dozens of Bushehr Persian Gulf University students chanting “students, workers, unity, strikes”*)[15]
- Shahr-e Kord, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province (*100–200 Islamic Azad University students chanting “freedom, freedom”*)[16]
- Najafabad, Esfahan Province (*100–200 Azad University of Najafabad students chanting “tank cannon explodes, mullahs must get lost”*)[17]
- Bandar Abbas, Hormozgan Province (*Several hundred protesters in Bandar Abbas streets*)[18]
- Sanandaj, Kurdistan Province (*100–200 high school students protesting in Sanandaj streets; undetermined number of protesters lighting fires in Sanandaj streets*)[19]
- Babol, Mazandaran Province (*Several hundred University of Mazandaran students protesting on campus*)[20]
- Tehran, Tehran Province (*Students protesting from Tehran Medical Sciences University and Shahid Beheshti University; Dozens of protesters in Tehran streets and near Evin prison*)[21]

CTP assesses with low confidence that protests occurred in the following locations:

- Tabriz, East Azerbaijan Province (*Undetermined number of high school students protesting inside a school*)[22]
- Esfahan, Esfahan Province (*Undetermined number of college students protesting possibly on campus; protesters burning down Fuladshahr seminary with Molotov cocktails*)[23]

NB: CTP has started to offer brief characterizations of major protest activities, including chants when audible and noteworthy, rough estimates of crowd size based on available videos, regime security force posture and activities, and other significant events. Actual crowd sizes may be larger, even considerably larger, depending on how much video evidence emerges and whether videos cover all protest activities in a given location or only some.



The *New York Times* reported on October 17 that the regime may have deployed special forces from the IRGC Ground Forces in recent days to suppress protests in Tehran and other major cities.[24] These special forces units are often called *Saberin* forces. They are highly trained military personnel who specialize in airborne and heliborne assault, hostage rescue, sniping, and raiding.[25] The IRGC has previously used its Saberin units for combat operations in Syria.[26] The use of the Saberin forces could indicate that regime security forces are either increasingly stretched, are preparing to use more extreme force against protesters, or both. The reporting on the deployment of Saberin personnel is consistent with CTP’s previous assessment that the IRGC Ground Forces has adopted a larger role in the crackdown.[27]

Several reformist politicians proposed reforms to end the current crisis on October 17.^[28] Mohammad Ali Abtahi, Ahmad Mazani, and Rasoul Montajab Nia gave interviews with the Iranian Students News Agency, wherein they called for improving the legal framework for Iranians to express grievances. They claimed the regime does not uphold Iranians' rights to peaceful protest and that Iranians want to reform the Islamic Republic but are driven to protest because they lack political channels to express criticism. Mazani called for the suspension of morality police patrols pending a parliamentary review of their conduct.^[29]

Neighborhood youth groups circulated instructions on how to confront and intimidate security forces and block roads on October 16.^[30] The instructional graphic resembled the graphic a neighborhood youth group published on how to ambush security forces on October 14.^[31]

Axis of Resistance and Regional Developments

The *Jerusalem Post* reported on October 16 that the IRGC is using members of Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi proxies to suppress protests in Iran, citing unidentified sources.^[32] The regime may be using these proxies to mitigate the security forces' bandwidth constraints. Incorporating foreign militias into the internal security forces likely serves two primary functions: reinforcing the security apparatus with additional manpower and mitigating the risk of widespread dissent among the state security services.^[33] Iranian leaders fear disloyalty and insubordination among security personnel asked to repress their fellow citizens. Foreign proxy fighters are less prone to insubordination because they lack the personal connections to Iran's neighborhoods that the native IRGC and LEC members have. CTP cannot verify this reporting and has not seen protest videos of security forces with Levantine or Iraqi accents in Iran.

Lebanese Hezbollah (LH)-owned Al Ahed News rebroadcasted regime threats against foreign interference in Iranian internal affairs. Al Ahed published an article that quoted Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani's warning to unspecified "foreign actors" that there will be consequences for instigating unrest in Iran.^[34]

[1] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/07/25/2789253>

[2] <https://twitter.com/IranDefense/status/1582085916193353730>

[3] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/07/25/2789253>

[4] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/07/25/2789526>

[5] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/07/25/2789526>

[6] <https://twitter.com/HosseinDalirian/status/1582085208123224064>

[7] <https://www.mashreghnews dot ir/news/1376411>

[8] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/07/25/2789417>

[9] www.imna dot ir/news/525950

[10] <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1401/07/25/2789417>

[11] <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-crisis-update-october-6>

[12] https://twitter.com/iran_javanan/status/1581988702019997697

[13] <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Irans-Reserve-of-Last-Resort.pdf>

[14] https://twitter.com/1500tasvir_en/status/1581966627595165696?s=20&t=sfrzvRVij37g0fMQXSO9cw

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