

PolicyWatch #1419

Kirkuk: The Land the Surge Forgot

By [Michael Knights](#)

October 30, 2008

Although recognized as a political flashpoint, the Iraqi province of Kirkuk is suffering from a largely overlooked security crisis that has improved little since the beginning of the 2007 U.S. military "surge." The decline in reported insurgent attacks in Kirkuk has been relatively small, dropping from a monthly average of 169 violent incidents in 2007 to 122 in 2008. This 28 percent decline compares with 91 percent in Baghdad during the same period, and the per capita number of attacks in Kirkuk city is actually twice that of Baghdad. Considering these statistics, providing security support for the political process in the tense months and years to come has become a critical priority.

Background

Kirkuk is the oldest and currently the second most significant oil-producing region in Iraq. Since the 1960s, the city of Kirkuk has seen waves of "Arabization" -- the import of Arab economic migrants -- and brutal ethnic cleansing that reduced the historically Kurdish and Turkmen character of the city and its surrounding oilfields. The 2005 Iraqi constitution established the principle that this social engineering (and related administrative boundary changes) should be reversed through a process called "normalization."

On September 24, UN special representative to Iraq Staffan de Mistura announced a plan to suspend the January 2009 provincial elections in Kirkuk until the Iraqi parliament passes legislation governing how expelled Kurds and Turkmen would return to their former Kirkuk homes; it would also establish procedures for provincial and district boundary changes that could allow some areas to join the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). This UN-administered process is a tentative political step forward, but its success relies on improving security conditions and a reduction of the province's ethnic tensions.

Enduring Insurgency in Kirkuk

Overshadowed by the political process are troubling signs that Kirkuk may require the urgent attention of the Multinational Forces (MNF), which still have a degree of influence over the province's security. Insurgent attacks in urban areas have remained remarkably stable, at around 70-80 per month throughout 2008, a fact not widely appreciated.

The vast majority of these incidents are concentrated in a five-kilometer-square area south of the city center. The attacks are mainly roadside bombings targeting Iraqi police patrols in urban residential neighborhoods. These areas are dominated by large Sunni and Shiite Arab populations who have an incentive to stay until they collect the promised relocation compensation of approximately \$15,000 per family (paid when they depart for their original place of residence).

These roadside bomb attacks are highly effective, with a 78 percent detonating compared to 24 percent nationwide during the same period (July-September 2008). The Iraqi government and MNF still face largely intact insurgent networks in Kirkuk, a situation that contrasts with many other areas of Iraq where such networks have been disrupted or destroyed since the surge began.

Problems with Security

The longevity of the region's predominantly Sunni Arab insurgency is largely attributed to the failure to create effective multiethnic security forces. Since 2005, the Kurds have dominated the provincial council, resulting in Kurdish control of the police forces. Consequently, the police are "occupiers" in the eyes of the Arab community, reducing the potential for intelligence tips or the wider formation of "Sons of Iraq" police auxiliary units. Baghdad has also hesitated to equip or train police elements that are perceived as KRG-controlled Peshmerga (Kurdish militiamen) in government uniforms. This, along with the lack of protective equipment and route clearance vehicles and techniques so successfully adopted by Iraqi security forces in other areas of the country, has left Kirkuk's police force poorly prepared to combat roadside bombs.

The political situation in Kirkuk has also prevented the Iraqi army and major MNF units from playing a significant role. The province is, in theory, under MNF operational command, since there has been no formal transition to Iraqi control, a reality that is likely to continue until the final status of Kirkuk is resolved. In practice, the Kurdish-led provincial government and police force handle the city's security, while the Iraqi army is restricted to rural areas and infrastructure security. Iraqi forces deploy to the city only during periods of friction between the federal government and the KRG. From June to September 2008, for instance, Baghdad sent an army battalion to man the city's police checkpoints as a warning against Kurdish threats of secession.

The surge has worked best when the U.S. military has been able to provide mentoring to multiethnic Iraqi forces operating with the full backing of Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. U.S. forces also have succeeded in areas where they were able to draw the Iraqi government and insurgent elements into local reconciliation and economic stimulus initiatives such as the Sahwa (Awakening) movement. The security effort has struggled in areas such as Mosul and Kirkuk precisely due to the lack of multiethnic government security forces and provincial leadership in those cities.

The Need to Surge in Kirkuk

Kirkuk was largely overlooked and bypassed by the surge. With the exception of U.S. special forces, American military presence in Kirkuk has thinned out since 2006 because of the lack of Iraqi army formations to support. The current U.S. deployment of three battalions in the province will draw down to two, or perhaps fewer, in 2009.

Since at least half of these forces will be in rural areas supporting counterinsurgency and pipeline protection missions, a single 800-man battalion will be left in a city of approximately 800,000 people. While the UN and NATO recommend a 1:50 peacekeeper to civilian ratio, and U.S.-Iraqi forces in Baghdad achieved a 1:130 ratio during the surge, Kirkuk will have a 1:1000 ratio during this tense historical period.

Battlefield geometry -- the spreading out and focusing of diminishing U.S. forces in Iraq -- requires trade-offs and tough calls. Even so, against the backdrop of general drawdown, the United States must not hesitate to increase force levels in areas that need it most. Kirkuk is one of the most economically significant regions in Iraq, particularly in terms of providing feedstock for refined oil products, and is arguably host to the most sensitive political issue in Iraqi national politics. At a minimum, the situation in Kirkuk justifies a temporary and local surge of U.S. efforts.

U.S. forces can have positive strategic impact in Kirkuk, as exemplified by the success of the "Sons of Iraq" movements in the province's rural and urban areas. As shown across Iraq, such U.S. security commitments force sectarian and ethnic leaders to rein in their excesses and allow anti-insurgent forces to reclaim neighborhoods without fear of retribution after a U.S. withdrawal. A U.S. presence would also keep a lid on political brinkmanship in the tense months ahead.

A key partner in Kirkuk will be the Iraqi National Police (INP), which has been designed to bridge the gap

between the regular police and the Iraqi army. In theory, the Ministry of Interior controls these forces, unlike the regular police who are under provincial council control. Although the INP must be well trained and well equipped, it is even more important that it is multiethnic and not perceived as another extension of the Peshmerga. This is arguably the last chance for the MNF to influence the Kirkuk's future, ensure access to the city with federally controlled security forces, and avoid making Kirkuk the land the surge forgot.

Michael Knights is a London-based Lafer international fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states.

Copyright 2008 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy